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Colonial and Later US Laws and Customs Treated Women the Same as Men

US customs and laws, in the colonial period, treated women differently than men. Native American women were the first American women. Prior to the coming of the Europeans, Native women held great roles like those of men politically, socially, and economically in their communities. “Bearing and raising children and mourning the dead rounded out the range of female duties. All were spiritually united by life-giving and its association with earth and agricultural production, sexuality, and reproduction. Lineage, wealth, and political power passed through the female line. Among certain peoples, women may also have had the power to determine the fate of captives, the nugget of truth in the much-embellished tale of Pocahontas’s intervention on behalf of Captain John Smith” (Kerber et al. 4). After the arrival of the Europeans, gender differences were shown in ideals of conduct, social identities and ownership of property. In the late 1600s and early 1700s in Colonial US women roles followed stricter guidelines than those of men. Women had no legal identities as individuals. Experiences of women varied among ethnic groups and from colony to colony. In this essay I will show how US laws and customs treated women differently than men.

Women only worked inside their homes managing servants and running the household. They included baking, sewing, making candles, and educating children. “If we were to draw a line around the housewife’s domain, it would extend from the kitchen and its appendages, the cellars, pantries, brewhouses, millhouses, washhouses, and butteries which appear in various combinations in household inventories, to the exterior of the house, where, even in the city, a mélange of animal and vegetable life flourished among the straw, husks, clutter, and muck” (Kerber et al. 27). Though white children learned to read, girls were exempted from knowing how to write. Girls were taught household skills while boys learned business and trading skills.

Due to hard living conditions in colonial America both men and women were forced to work. Women were viewed as subordinate creatures, they were deprived of education, individual rights, they could neither hold public office nor vote. “And although men had long served on juries in England and the United States even if they were not qualified to vote, women were barred from juries. Even in places where women had or won the right to vote, it did not automatically follow that they could serve on juries or hold office” (Kerber et al. 98). Women were expected to obey their husbands without question. While women were considered intellectually and spiritually inferior to men, they took part in women’s rights and religious reforms. Women fought for social rulings concerning them to be on the basis of reason and critical thinking rather than their gender. Women were unable to access higher education and were prevented from occupying higher professions. Women in the colonial period were required to be submissive to their fathers until marriage which then became duteous to their husbands.

Women in Puritan society were thought to have weaker physiques, hence more likely to be possessed by the devil and thus they were more susceptible to suspicions of witchcraft. Without male heirs, women were charged with witchcraft after their fathers or husbands had passed on. “It was not unusual for women in families without male heirs to be accused of witchcraft shortly after the deaths of fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons” (Kerber et al. 70). Women in marriages were not permitted to own property and no legal decisions would be made without their husbands’ permission. Wages made by such women belonged to their husbands. Colonialists considered women essential for the perpetuation of the race. For the colonialists’ gender was a basic determinant of their role in society. As women were subservient to men, men that were impotent were thought of as women. “In a sexual belief system that hypothesized that women were inferior men, any inferior man—that is, one who could not function adequately in sexual terms—was a woman” (Kerber et al. 45). Middle aged women with few or no children, constantly involved in squabbles with members of her family, had previous records of forceful speech or slander, were found usually in the medical profession as midwives or nurses with contentious personalities and were difficult to keep down when adversity struck and were considered witches.

As I bring this article to a close, there’s a lot of evidence to show the unfair treatment women experienced during and even after the colonial period. Women suffered in the hands of men through physical abuse, violation of their human rights, lack of access to education and how they were prevented from either voting or owning property. As history has been written through the hands of men, it can be concluded that the atrocities that women suffered through the centuries might have been a lot worse. As we move to the future, let us move to a US whose laws and customs treat women equivalently to men.

Works Cited

Kerber, Linda, et al. Women’s America: Refocusing the Past. 9th ed., Oxford University Press, 2019.