

The status of women in ancient Rome underwent a long process of change resulting in greater liberty for women, but the goals of modern day feminists, political freedom and complete equality before the law, were beyond the reach, probably beyond the dreams of the women of Rome. They struggled to gain a measure of personal freedom and control over their own lives while their political power and influence, if they achieved any, was always indirect and was exercised only through the position of their husbands or sons.

In early Rome, the father was head of the household and had complete control over all members of his family. He had the power of life and death over his wife and children and could sell his sons into slavery, even after they were grown men. When she married, a girl passed from her father's control into that of her husband or his father. Marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom with little or no consideration given to the wishes of the young couple, and children were regularly married off at a much younger age than is normal today. Girls were considered marriageable at the age of twelve, boys when they were a few years older, but even then weddings sometimes occurred with a bride as young as eleven. Thus a girl had little opportunity to assert herself or her individuality.

Gradually the absolute authority of the father over his wife and children weakened. Women were now allowed to own their own property, although it was usually administered by a husband or guardian, and a legal technicality allowed a wife to remain under her father's control rather than that of her husband by simply staying away from her husband's house for three consecutive nights each year. The rights of a husband to punish his wife were also limited. A woman suspected of a domestic crime was usually tried by a family council of her male relations: crimes worthy of capital punishment ranged from adultery to excessive wine drinking. (The Romans seem to have abhorred the idea of a drunk woman. It was rumoured that the custom of having women kiss their male relatives whenever they met stemmed from the desire of the men to check for the smell of wine on their breath!) However society forgave a husband for killing his wife if he caught her in the act of adultery.

Gradually the older forms of marriage, which demanded the complete submission of women and which only the husband could end by divorce, were replaced by a new form which treated marriage as a contract between two individuals and which required their mutual consent. In such a marriage, the wife remained under the legal control either of her father or of a guardian appointed by the city praetor. This situation was not as constraining as it might appear since a woman who did not like her guardian could always ask the praetor for a more accommodating one. More importantly, either the wife or the husband could decide to terminate the marriage by divorce. A woman now had the option of leaving an unhappy or unsatisfactory marriage and finding a more suitable union for herself. But, in a striking contrast to modern custom, the children of a divorced couple always remained in the custody of their father.

Finally, the emperor Augustus, in order to encourage a higher birthrate among Roman citizens, gave Roman women who had three children, and freedwomen or women in the provinces who had four children complete legal independence. This meant that they no longer needed a guardian and had total control of their own property. Sympathetic emperors could sometimes be persuaded to give these same privileges to deserving women who, for one reason or another, did not have the required number of children.

Legal independence was the most that a Roman matron could hope for in terms of official status. Unofficially women often used their influence over their husbands and sons to gain considerable political and social power. The hand that rocked the cradle may have rocked the world, but the source of feminine power remained indirect and dependent on the status and influence of one's male relations.