

# The Ages of Women

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## Abstract

The present paper examined whether there was any relationship between the development of feminism within individuals, and the societal development of cultural feminism across time. Some interesting trends were observed.

## Keywords

Ages of Woman, Millennium

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My goal in the present paper was to combine both the developmental and historical connotations of the word “ages”, with a focus on feminism. Was it possible that there might be some relation between the development of individual feminism and its development across societies over time? If so, what would this relation be like?

Possibly relevant was the concept that “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”, initially elaborated by G. Stanley Hall (1923). According to Hall, an individual’s development followed the same course as the evolutionary development of the human species. There seemed no reason why such evolution could not be cultural as well as biological. Thus, my working hypothesis was that the psychological development of feminism in the individual recapitulates the history of how societies have treated women over the past three millennia.

There were, then, three steps needed to evaluate this undoubtedly outlandish thesis. The first was to examine the major milestones in the development of individual feminism; the second was to explore the history of women’s treatment over time; and the third was to compare the two.

The first step was the most straightforward. There have been many theories of how feminist identity develops in college students (e.g. [Downing & Roush, 1985](#); [Bargad & Hyde, 1991](#)), but this starting point seemed two decades too late. Children are exposed to sex-role socialization from birth, (and before, in terms of their environment) and thus, any account of how feminism develops needs to

explore these early gender concepts and attitudes.

My colleagues and I have been involved in such research for many years. Research both from our own laboratory and from others suggests that there are six stages in this development, as shown in **Figure 1**.

The first stage begins in early infancy. While gender cues may not be very salient to preverbal infants, they are very salient to their caretakers. A study by Seavey and Katz (1975) demonstrated that adults chose sex-typed toys for infants to play with, depending on whether they thought they were interacting with a boy or a girl (it was actually the same child, given a different name). Moreover, when gender labels were not given (the Baby X condition), adults were at a loss. Research demonstrates by six months of age, most infants can distinguish male and female faces, and demonstrate some awareness of gender categories (Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Leinbach & Fagot, 1993).

In the second stage, late infancy and the toddler period, children continue to differentiate gender cues and to elaborate their rudimentary concepts of gender. They learn gender-related words, and begin to establish gender identities. They do not, however, treat males and females differently, nor do most yet show preferences for same-sex peers. It is not until 36 months that two-thirds exhibit same-sex toy choices (Katz & Boswell, 1986). These first two stages, then, could be construed as forms of native feminism, the first because gender cues, while present, are not very salient, and the second because of the child's perceived gender equality and relative lack of sex-typing.

Sadly, these early feminist attributes do not last long. The third stage (preschool) involves the active learning and enactment of gender-role stereotypes, the development of same-gender peer and activity preferences, and the development of gender identity. Gender-related toy preferences become very pronounced during this period (Leaper & Bigler, 2018). Stereotypes developmentally precede attitude development, and may lead to prejudice and discrimination towards groups other than one's own (Katz & Winiarski, 2013). Our research finds that girls are more precocious in this learning, and exhibit stronger same-gender bias than boys do. Most of the five-year-old girls in our study thought that they were very superior to boys. As in the previous stages, male and female adults are treated similarly by preschool children. When differential status is perceived, it is women who are seen as more powerful. Thus, this third stage also has some feminist elements in that, girls and women are highly valued. This too does not last long.

The fourth stage, beginning with formal school entry, involves an increase in sex-stereotyped activities (particularly for boys), more gender segregation in play activities, and the recognition that society confers higher status on males than on females. Feminism is definitely on the decline.

Despite the heavy emphasis on sex-stereotyped play during grade school, it should be noted that individual variation exists (beginning in the preschool period) along this dimension. Some children exhibit more flexibility than others

<u>Childhood Stages</u>	<u>Salient Features</u>
1. Early infancy (birth - 6 months)	Preverbal beginnings of gender categorization Some more positive behavior to female adults
2. Late infancy /Toddler (six months - three years)	Differentiation of gender cues No differential status accorded males and females
3. Preschool (three - six years)	Correct gender labels for self, then others Learn same-sex stereotypes first, then other-sex Some gender bias; stronger in girls Females perceived as more powerful Same-sex toy preferences
4. Childhood (six - twelve years)	Gender segregation increases Boys more stereotyped than girls Higher status associated with males
5. Adolescence	Pubertal Development Lessening of gender segregation More sophisticated thought processes Divergence into more or less stereotyped patterns
6. Youth adulthood	Development of feminist identity Enactment of feminist beliefs
 <u>Adult Stages*</u>	
Stage I	Passive acceptance of sexism
Stage II	Revelation: Questioning of traditional sex roles; anger towards men
Stage III	Embeddedness: Connection to other women; development of relativistic perspective
Stage IV	Synthesis: positive feminist identity; transcendence of traditional gender roles
Stage V	Active commitment to social change

\* From Downy & Roush, 1985

**Figure 1.** Summary of stages in feminist development.

(Katz & Boswell, 1986). Girls are typically more flexible than boys. Moreover, children whose parents deemphasize gender (i.e. by not having sex-typed rooms) are also more flexible. Extreme sex-role stereotyping has been shown to be associated with “acting out” symptoms in grade school boys and greater anxiety in their female counterparts (Silvern & Katz, 1986).

Two important developmental milestones occur during adolescence (the fifth stage): a) the onset of puberty, and b) a greater capacity for abstract thought. These factors have contradictory effects on feminism. Physical development (greater prominence of both primary and secondary sex characteristics) may lead to the strengthening of sex-role stereotyped behaviors, whereas more sophisticated cognitive development favors more gender-role flexibility. This flexibility increases in early adolescence, but declines for many (not all) in late adolescence (Katz & Ksansak, 1994), perhaps because many adolescents believe that stereotyped masculine or feminine behavior will appeal more to the opposite sex. Unlike their younger counterparts, most adolescent girls no longer believe that

they are better than boys. Traditional modes of sex-role socialization tend to diminish feminism in adolescence. They might be revitalized again in Stage 6, however, as the adult developmental theorists suggest. Thus, child development research suggests that some aspects of feminism occur very early in life, but are typically lost along the way, and may or may not be developed after adolescence.

These trends are reasonably well known. I knew much less, however, about the cultural history part of the question. In one of my first forays to the library, I found the most amazing thing. Behind “The Second Sex” by Simone de Beauvoir was a compact disc labeled “Letter from Sadie to Feminist Scholars”.

We have encountered Sadie before (Katz, 1996). She was King Solomon’s favorite wife, who provided him with wise counsel. For example, she asked him not to do the violent scenario associated with his “wisdom” (threatening to cut the baby in half to ascertain the ‘real’ mother). Instead, she suggested that it was implausible that a mother would not know her child and that they were actual stand-ins for the fathers. Her recommendation was that the fathers be put in a small unventilated room and the one who ultimately changed the baby’s diaper would be the “true” father. Solomon liked this idea until his other advisers pointed out that neither man might ultimately change the diaper.

I was so happy to hear from her again. Her saga was so unbelievable that I have to share it with you in its entirety.

Letter from Sadie

To: A feminist scholar, hopefully,

From: Sadie, the 3000 year old woman.

I am certain that your first response will be disbelief. How can anyone be 3000 years old? Well, I am, and, to be quite frank, I resent Methuselah, that male interloper, for taking all the credit for the longevity record. I’ve been around a long time, I’ve traveled a great deal, and I’ve seen how women were treated in different places. The study of history has long been the province of men who have basically ignored us. That is why I decided to tell my story. I can only pray to Aphrodite that it has fallen into good hands.

Israel and Pre-History

To begin, I was born in Canaan (now part of Israel) in the year 2780 of the Hebrew calendar. This translates to about 980 B.C.E. I am not yet 3000, but I only have a few years to go. About 1000 years before I was born, Abraham migrated into Canaan with a semi-nomadic tribe of sheep herders called Hebrews. Their tradition was completely patriarchal. The male heads of families had absolute authority over their wives and children, and we were taught that this was God’s will. As a child, however, I kept finding funny statues of fat or pregnant ladies, showing that there were obviously other cultures who worshipped a mother goddess. Between 8000 and 14,000 years ago, there was a shift from the earlier male dominance of the hunting groups to more organized agricultural societies. Women then became the primary suppliers of food and clothing (Cantarella, 1987). This was a time when women wielded great power because their economic clout was combined with their already formidable power of procrea-

tion. When the societies that followed became more involved in wars, however, they substituted a male deity for the mother goddess. By the time I was born, there was no doubt about who had the most power. Although we had a few heroines, men were in charge and the rabbis regarded women as social and religious inferiors.

My main goal as an adolescent (like all my friends) was to marry well and have children. I was most fortunate in achieving these goals, and became one of the King Solomon's wives. He was smart and rich, but he did have a few faults. He never met a woman he could resist, so he wound up having almost 700 wives and concubines. One could get sexually frustrated in that environment.

At that time, an adulterous wife could be legally killed by her husband. Fortunately for Solomon, the reverse was not true.

Sadly, Solomon died when I was in my thirties, but he left me pretty well off. When I was in my mid-forties, I began to notice that all the other wives were aging, but I was not. Soon some of the older wives were becoming ill and dying, but I stayed pretty much the same. I was in amazing health. When people began looking at me peculiarly, I decided that it was time to leave for Egypt where they had the most famous doctors.

#### Ancient Egypt

When I arrived there, I learned that amazingly, women were permitted to attend medical school. So I consulted Dr. N. Titti, and told her about my amazing good health, youthfulness and boundless energy. She spent a great deal of time examining me, and finally told me that I had simply stopped aging.

I was floored by this diagnosis. The good news was that with care, I could probably live forever. The bad news was that I had to do it in a perimenopausal state. Dr. Titti suggested that I hibernate every few hundred years to keep my brain and nervous system in good condition. Thus, my account of history will have some gaps for naps.

I soon realized that wherever I went, people would view my lack of aging as peculiar, and I would never be able to stay in one place for too long. Fortunately, I liked to travel.

As it turned out, Egypt at that time was a fairly good place for women. Women had the same legal and economic rights that men did and they played important social and religious roles, helping to promote scientific and cultural knowledge; they also had great jewelry. They could point with pride to important female rulers in their history. The first female Pharaoh, Hatshepat I died in 1469B.C.E. Her twenty year reign was marked mostly by peace and prosperity. When there were occasional battles, she fought along with her soldiers wearing male clothing and a false beard, the signs of royalty. While drawings and statues show her as clearly female (Watterson, 1991), she was buried in the Valley of the Kings, not the Valley of the Queens.

The rights of women in Egypt at that time were extensive. They could manage and dispose of private property, work for salary, enter into contacts, and use the courts to redress grievances. Socially, they were free to go where they wanted to

and wear what they wished. Penalties for adultery were the same for both sexes, and were not enforced. Divorce could be initiated by either the husband or the wife, and women were entitled to good financial settlements.

I was surprised at how much I liked Egypt since the Egyptians were always considered the enemies of the Jews. Nevertheless, women fared much better in Egypt than in Israel. Egyptian husbands even needed their wife's permission to have concubines, which had certainly not been true in Israel. The position of Egyptian women was unique in the ancient world.

Alas, I found out later that this did not last. When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, in 322 B.C., women's status and freedoms changed for the worst.

#### Ancient Greece

It soon came time to leave this relatively gender-idyllic place (which did have a few peculiarities like brothers and sisters marrying), and try other societies. Since Athens was a very "in" place, I decided to see what fate held in store for me there.

My arrival coincided with what you now call the Golden Age of Greece, revered as the cradle of democracy, and the source of much Western thought. History books mention (almost parenthetically) that there were slaves in this supposedly wonderful place, but they do not note that it was not a very golden age for women.

It came as quite a shock after Egypt to find that the Athenian women had practically no rights at all (Mason, 1901). In this marvelous democracy, women could not vote, were not considered citizens, could not hold public office, and could not own property. Marriages were arranged, and husbands had total responsibility for their wives. Women were not even permitted to go out in public very often. Female slaves were treated worse than anyone since they had to service the men's sexual needs in addition to doing the domestic work. Athenian free men, on the other hand, had it all. In addition to their male lovers, they had access to interaction with three categories of women: their wives (for the production of legitimate children), their concubines (for sex) and the hetaera, (for companionship and pleasure). A hetaera was better educated than most women and could accompany men where wives and concubines could not go. So, it was much more interesting to be a hetaera than a wife. Just in case the men were not getting enough sex, there were also prostitutes.

The demographics of classical Athens were strange. The birth rate was quite low, possibly because most husbands preferred their male lovers. There were twice as many men as women (Pomeroy, 1995), and women lived, on average, five to ten years less than men did. This was due both to childbirth deaths, and to the practice of "exposing" female infants to the elements. More than 20% of all female infants died in this way (Golden, 1981), so it was dangerous to be born female. Of course, the Athenians were far from the only ones to engage in these practices. Even today, there are about 100 million women missing in India and China who should have been alive but for female infanticide (Kristoff, 1991).

I could not figure out why women were held in such low esteem, and asked

about it. I was told some silly story about a dispute long ago between the god Poseidon and the goddess Athena over the naming of the city. Poseidon wanted it named after him, and Athena wanted it named after her. So they had a vote. At that time, both men and women were citizens and could vote. All the men voted for Poseidon and all the women voted for Athena. The women won because there was one more female vote. Poseidon and the male citizens were apparently very poor losers. They were so angry that they took away women's citizenship. This explanation seemed to satisfy all of these very rational men. By the way, the goddess Athena was the only female who received men's complete admiration, perhaps because she never married and was born from a man (Zeus). Certainly a unique characteristic.

In Greece, I dressed like a man. That way, I could have access to the philosophers' interesting discussions, as they pondered issues related to the origin of life and the reproductive process. These old Greek philosophers came to be revered by future generations. I guess it must be because nobody ever heard them discussing women. Actually, Socrates was not so bad. His student, Plato, initially recommended equal education for boys and girls in his early writing, but concluded later that even with that, women would be less competent. Plato also had some interesting and unique ideas about life's origins. He thought that there were originally three sexes: man, woman and androgyne, the union of the two. Each of these forms originally had four legs, but Zeus, in a moment of anger, split them into two-legged creatures, with each half searching for its mate. As a result, only the androgynes look for opposite sex mates, whereas the males and females looked for same sex ones, an explanation that makes homosexual and heterosexual relationships equally natural, but not equivalent. For Plato, the pure homosexual forms were better, and of the two, the male was clearly superior.

It was Aristotle who held the most negative views of women, and these, unfortunately, would be influential for the next 2000 years. In his favor, Aristotle was pro-choice and for birth control, noting that "neglect of an effective birth control policy is a never failing source of poverty which in turn is the parent of revolution and crime" (Aristotle, 335 B.C.). Yet, he also believed that females were inferior because they were smaller and unable to produce semen. He attributed male superiority to a larger brain (forgetting to notice the ratio of brain to body size). Not even women's breasts were considered better (although usually larger) because he reasoned they were less solid (Sissa, 1992). Aristotle maintained that only the father had an active role in reproduction; the mother's role was limited to providing material (thickened menstrual blood) and a place for the fetus to grow (Cantarella, 1987). His theory was that male blood turned into sperm, but menstrual blood could not. It was through the sperm that the father transmitted the soul to the embryo. In an interesting turnaround of the nature-nurture debate, maternal resemblance was attributed to children living in the same household as the mother. These biological errors were not so terrible given their state of knowledge, but these theories were used for centuries to jus-



tify the social and legal subordination of women.

#### Ancient Rome

Well, as we know, nothing (except possibly me) lasts forever. Greece was conquered by Philip II, king of Macedonia in 359 B.C. You're probably more familiar with his son, Alexander the Great. There were so many wars at that time that I decided to leave Greece and go to Italy, where the food was better. I arrived in Rome in 200 B.C., and was surprised to discover how wealthy it was.

Women were far from equal, however. Roman law (which was not always obeyed) reflected a rigidly patriarchal society. Only male citizen heads of families had full legal rights. The father (pater) was the undisputed and absolute lord who had power over all in his household (Cantarella, 1987). At birth, the father was given the choice of recognizing his newborn or withholding recognition, thus leaving it to die of starvation. As was true in Greece, these exposed children were more likely to be girls than boys. There were many other gender inequities. Men were considered independent at puberty, whereas women were under male guardianship for life. Women had no right to own property, no choice in marriage, and no legal recourse against cruelty. They could not apply for a divorce even though their husbands could. They were not secluded, however, and were more respected than Grecian women.

When I arrived there, towards the end of the Republic, women's rights were increasing. Although fathers could still expose their children, once they decided to keep them, they no longer had the power to kill them or sell them into slavery. Both members of a marriage now had the same rights of divorce. Some women controlled considerable financial assets, and they could no longer be coerced into marriage.

As is usually true, it was better to be rich than poor. Well-to-do Roman women were much more affluent and better educated than their counterparts in Classical Athens, and had many more slaves. Thus, they were freed from household routines, and could go visiting, shopping, attend festivals and do what they wanted. Life was harsher for the poor, but still better than Greece.

#### Rome and Cleopatra

I left Rome to hibernate for a little while. When I returned in the middle of the first century B.C.E, there were some very interesting things going on. Rome was emerging as an empire, and the emperor Julius Caesar had this incredible girlfriend who was a queen of Egypt. Her name was Cleopatra VII. She was born in the Year 69 B.C.E, was extremely attractive and spoke nine languages fluently. When she was 17, she ruled Egypt jointly with her ten-year-old brother Ptolemy XII, who she soon married. She then married her other brother, Ptolemy XIV. These families had a great deal of sibling rivalry, particularly when it came to throne sharing. Caesar visited Egypt shortly after Cleopatra came to the throne and fell in love with her. Caesar helped her get rid of her brothers, and regain control of Egypt, and they lived together in Rome with their son, Caesarian. Unfortunately, Julius Caesar didn't listen to his Roman wife, Calpurnia, who warned him not to go to the Senate on the ides of March, (Greenspan, 1994),



and he was assassinated there in 44 B.C. After Caesar's assassination, Cleopatra and her son returned to Egypt. She next took up with Mark Antony, who she thought was going to be the next ruler. They had twins in 40 B.C. Antony married Cleopatra in 37 B.C. and their son (yet another Ptolemy) was born in 36 B.C.

Cleopatra and Antony had great times. They even fought battles together, at first, successfully. They were disastrously defeated, however, in their last naval battle off the coast of Greece at Actium. Of course historians managed to blame Cleopatra for this loss (Watterson, 1991) even though Antony was the general. After being defeated, Antony committed suicide and died in Cleopatra's arms. Rather than March in Octavian's victory parade, Cleopatra killed herself by allowing an asp to bite her.

Well, as I said before, one thing you learn after being alive for 3000 years is that civilizations come and go. And ancient Rome, elegant as it was, did not last forever. In 410 A.D. the Visigoths sacked Rome. I wasn't entirely sorry because the Romans treated my people very badly. They destroyed the beautiful temple that my husband Solomon built, and banished the Jews from Jerusalem. They were even worse to the followers of Christ. In ancient Rome women were just as likely to become lion feed as the men.

So, the age of antiquity wasn't all it was cracked up to be when looked at through the eyes of a woman.

#### The Dark Ages

Things got really boring after the fall of Rome, in what you now call the Dark Ages.

Actually, they weren't any darker, just stupider, since most of the earlier cultural artifacts were destroyed. The situation for women in Europe during this period can best be described as one of total subjection. They were typically uneducated, could be forced to marry, and had to obey their husbands. The most interesting thing for a woman to be was a nun. It was only in convents that women were free from the demands of child rearing and housekeeping (Green-span, 1994). Always adaptable, I converted to Christianity for a while. I became a nun, and worked myself up to being an abbess. I never understood why virginity became the ideal state for women, but if you agreed to not having sex with a man, you could gain your freedom in other areas. I was free to run the place, to read, learn languages, contemplate philosophy, write books, and play musical instruments.

It was hard to travel, but we did get news of other places. In the 6th century, we learned about Mohammed who founded the religion of Islam. His early ideas were favorable to women, just as Christ's were. Unfortunately, just like Christianity, as Islam developed, it became more discriminatory towards women. We heard about very faraway lands like Japan and Tibet, where women were treated better. We also heard about faraway places that were much worse, like China where girls were crippled by foot binding, and India where widows were burned alive when their husbands died. I would have liked to have seen how very well

taken care of the Indian husbands must have been.

#### The Middle Ages

In fact, the Middle Ages (11th through 15th centuries) were not much better. The Crusades began in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and the power of the church grew. I hibernated in time to avoid that very nasty bubonic plague. I also slept through the beginnings of Western Europe's colonization of Africa and the Americas which was disastrous for women. The European conquest of the Americas after 1492 brought indigenous women the loss of their property rights and their liberty, epidemic diseases, enslavement, and rape (Hughes & Hughes, 1997). It also brought millions of African women and men across the Atlantic Ocean to American slavery, with all of its horrors.

#### Sixteenth Century England

About 100 years after my long Middle Ages nap, I decided to go to England in the sixteenth century. Women's status and rights diminished when the Normans conquered Anglo-Saxon England in 1066, which coincided with new church laws (Gregorian reform) that further deprived women of freedom and education.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, to discover that in 1558 England was being ruled by a 25-year-old woman called Elizabeth Tudor. She was young, striking-looking, and determined. Her strength may have been a consequence of her rather traumatic childhood. Her father, jolly old King Henry VIII, had her mother, Ann Boleyn, beheaded when Elizabeth was only three. She then had four stepmothers over the next ten years. Two died, one by her father's edict (Catherine Howard). We see once again how faulty biological thinking adversely affects women. Henry blamed his wives for not producing a male heir, but as we know today it was really all his fault. Sex is determined by sperm cells. Even the wife that finally gave birth to a boy (the future Edward VI) died at an early age. King Henry died when Elizabeth was 14, and she had to leave the court because her Protestant brother Edward and her Catholic sister Mary were antagonistic to her. Her brother, Edward VI died on the throne when she was 19, and she was imprisoned in the Tower of London when her Catholic sister Mary took over. This was clearly a very dysfunctional family. When Mary died in 1558, Elizabeth became queen, initially, there were many opposed to another female monarch. John Knox called it repugnant to nature" (Fraser, 1988), but she won everyone over.

It always surprised me in later years to hear Elizabeth described as ruthless. She was certainly no more so than the men around her. Elizabeth not only survived, she thrived, reigning for 45 years, defeating the Spanish armada, and ruling over a country whose great cultural traditions remain with us. What fun old William S. was when you got to know him. Kind of a letch, but cute. And Sir Walter R. was, indeed, chivalrous. Also a letch.

Given all the pressures put upon her, I always admired Elizabeth's decision not to marry. What really tickled me, however, was how she became known as the Virgin Queen, while having a very active sex life. Even though she was not

very nice to her cousin Mary of Scotland, she was a woman of great energy and intelligence.

#### France-Eighteenth Century

I slept for 200 years after Elizabeth died. I then went to Paris, where the food was better, although in short supply at that time. Everything was in turmoil in 1787, but it was a very exciting time for women. They were players. There was ferment everywhere, and women were organizing. There were a number of women's political clubs, and prominent women were active in leadership roles. In 1789, a large group of women got very angry when they could not find affordable bread. They marched to Versailles, where the unresponsive King Louis XVI and his queen Marie Antoinette lived. Their fury was something to behold. They looted shops and taverns, and stormed the national assembly. They overran the palace, killed the guards, and wrecked the royal apartments, searching for their hated Austrian queen—the one reputed to have said “Let them eat cake” in response to their demands for bread. The storming of the Bastille was also led by a woman (Theroigne de Mericourt, Miles, 1990), dressed as an Amazon. Women were upset both about general conditions, and their own situation since men earned about twice as much as they did for the same work. At the outset of the French revolution, the Assembly of France proclaimed the Rights of Man, as you probably learned in school. Did you also learn, however, about Olympe de Gouges, who, in 1791, published, her “Declaration of the Rights of Woman”? In this she stated:

*“Woman is born free and her rights are the same as those of a man. The law must be an expression of the general will: all citizens, men and women alike, must participate in making it ... it must be the same for all ... All citizens, be they men or women, being equal in its eyes, must be equally eligible for all public offices, positions and jobs, according to their capacity and without any other criteria than those of their virtues and talents .... (From Miles, 1990: p. 152-153)*

For a few years, women had some successes, earning the rights to civil marriages and divorce (Hughes & Hughes, 1997). Unfortunately, the male revolutionaries had no intention of subscribing to feminist issues. For various reasons, all the outspoken women were guillotined in 1793, all victims of the Terror. After the revolution, universal suffrage was introduced, but women were specifically excluded. The women's political clubs were suppressed. Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité was a ringing slogan, but one which applied only to men. Things became even worse for women in 1804 when Napoleon created the French Empire, and instituted the Napoleonic Code. This reinforced women's political inferiority and mandated submission to their husbands. Women were no longer allowed to control their own property, to testify in court or to get divorced (Hughes & Hughes, 1997). Twentieth Century, U.S.

Well, I went into such a depression at that point that I slept another 200 years. When I woke up 20 years ago, I was truly delighted to learn about the successful feminist struggles of the previous two centuries, and that women finally won the right to vote in most countries (Stanton, Anthony, & Faye, 1881). I should have

gotten up earlier so that I could have met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Sanger and all these wonderful women who helped secure our rights.

When I found that we not only had the vote, but also birth control, civil rights laws guaranteeing equal pay and non-discrimination, and equal access to all levels of education, I thought I could finally rest easy. I decided to come to the United States, anticipating a golden age of feminism, one where women and men shared power equally.

How unpleasant to discover that this was not the case at all. With all these fine laws, women were still being underpaid (with white women earning only 76% of what men did, and Black and Hispanic women 63% and 53%, U.S. Census Bureau, as reported by [Erbe, 2000](#)). I was shocked to learn that even highly paid female movie stars earned much less than men. For example, Leonard Dicaprio earned 20 million for Titanic, but his co-star, Kate Winslet, earned only 3 million ([McDowell, 1999](#)). Why were there so few women among high-ranking corporate executives? Why were women still fighting for reproductive rights, for access to health care, and for freedom from gender-based violence and abuse? All this made so little sense that I'm even more depressed now than I was 200 years ago. And I know that Susan B. [Anthony \(1897\)](#) had it exactly right when she said "... there never will be complete equality until women themselves help to make laws and elect lawmakers.". There's an important lesson to be learned here, but I am getting very tired, so goodbye friends, for now.

Best Regards, Sadie

Well, the letter ended abruptly, but here was a first-hand account of how women fared in many of our major civilizations over the past 3000 years—just what I was looking for. So I pored over her letter, trying to assess what it taught us about the evolution of feminism as a cultural phenomenon. What are the parallels, if any, to individual development? There are a few.

Let's go back to the earlier stage formulation. There are no cultural parallels to Stage 1, since there has not been any society discovered where gender cues are not salient.

The learning about gender and stereotypes in Stage 2 is probably true in all societies studied. None seem gender-blind with regard to perceived equality of men and women, nevertheless, the importance of gender varies as a function of location, history, and culture ([Katz & Winiarski, 2013](#)). Ancient Egypt came closest to perceived equality.

The matrilineal societies that Sadie talked about seem to correspond to some characteristics of Stage 3, the preschool period. Women often appear the more powerful gender to children because they control things that are of direct relevance to them. In societal terms, women's control of the birth process was viewed as powerful and magical, leading to worship of a mother goddess.

There are also some interesting cultural parallels to Stage 4 where there is a comparable transition from female to male power. Just as school age children begin to recognize that the male sphere of power is greater within our society,

societies formed after the advent of agriculture became more male-dominated. Worship of female goddesses was stopped and increased gender segregation began. Archaeologists attribute this shift from female to male power structure to intergroup competition and warfare, which favored the larger and stronger males (Greenspan, 1994). Whatever the reason, the three great ancient civilizations—the Hebrews, the Greeks and the Romans—all systematically diminished the power of women, and subordinated them.

Perhaps the most interesting question is why women's role was so diminished both by these cultures and subsequent historians. It goes against everything now being discovered, which suggests the centrality of the female. The DNA fingerprint common to the whole human race has been traced to a female in Africa 200,000 years ago, so we may all be the children of Eve (Miles, 1990). Anthropologists now suggest that the importance of hunting may have been overemphasized relative to the skills needed for gathering food and rearing children. It was probably the woman and her children who always constituted the core of social organization. Some have even argued that the development of menstruation, as opposed to estrus, preserved the human species. Estrus in primates produces one infant every five or six years, whereas menstruation increased the odds to one out of twelve each year—so early human females had a possible success rate 60 times greater than their primate sisters. How, then, did it come to be viewed as a “curse”? Moreover, in calculating the menstrual cycle, it may well have been women who developed counting and calendar organization (Miles, 1990).

In contrast, the early classic cultures that our educational systems have so exalted turned these gender facts upside down. They accomplished with myths what could not be accomplished in reality that the male alone was the progenitor. In the case of the Jews, (and Christians) it was a male God who created all life forms, with the human female deriving from the male. The Greeks also had myths of male gods like Apollo who took over from the goddesses, and Zeus, who gave birth from his head. These stories were reinforced by philosophers who assured them that it was only the male's role in the reproductive process that mattered.

The analogies between ontogeny and history break down past grade school, however. In contrast to Stage 5, where early adolescence is associated with greater gender-role flexibility, the historical sequence appears to go in the opposite direction, at least through the twentieth century. The more feminist-oriented cultures such as ancient Egypt antedated the more stereotyped ones. All the conquests we learned about in history increased male domination. Even in modern times, historical periods of great progress for men, such as the French Revolution and the Renaissance, have often involved losses and setbacks for women. The learned physicians and philosophers always found scientific arguments to buttress their belief in female inferiority. According to Sadie, blatant sexism has been alive and well for at least three millennia.

But maybe it is time to be more optimistic. Perhaps we are just beginning our

cultural adolescence with regard to feminism in this new millennium. Hopefully it won't take another 3000 years to evolve into a society that espouses an Active Commitment to Feminism stage. Unfortunately, Sadie missed the recent Me-Too movement, and women's very active responses to sexual harassment and unequal treatment in the workplace. Let us hope that these are harbingers of better things to come.

Oh, by the way, there was this P.S. on Sadie's letter:

P.S. Don't be surprised when you read about the disappearance of the spaceship bound for Mars. I have decided to hijack it and take it to Venus, where they'll never think to look for it. If that is where women are supposed to come from, I'd like to take a first-hand look at our origins. If I find anything of interest, I'll be back to report on it.

I do not know what the communication facilities are like there, but if you need to reach me, try reaching me at [Sadie@Beammeup.com](mailto:Sadie@Beammeup.com), or [Venuslink.com](http://Venuslink.com).

Warmest regards to all my feminist sisters. May their tribe increase.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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