Introductory

Nature has made man and woman partners in life. Together they both play vital roles, in their respective ways, in providing continuity and progressive development of the entire civilizational and cultural fabric of the society. Nonetheless, history has it that women have been treated as subservient to men and that the biological distinction between them is being carried out to a point of male dominance and servitude of women folk. It is a historical fact that women have been regarded as inferior in status, and have been debarred from political activity and denied any degree of initiative in the economic field; they have been largely destined to attend to family chores, and in the economic field their role is that of helpers to the men-folk in carrying out their traditional occupations, be it farming or other home-based small industries. Thus, since patriarchal times women have, in general, been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities, inspite of the fact that women constitute numerically atleast half of the human race. Thus the two genders have seldom shared the world equally.

Status of Women in the Prehistoric Age

In the prehistoric society the major thrust was on survival against the hostile nature, such as wild animals, storms, rain, floods, etc. Life in those days differed from area to area according to the terrain and physical feature of the
land. People living in the jungles were dependent on the wild animals and the
wild vegetation for food, at the same time this very jungle with its wild animals
along with nature's calamities in the form of rains, storms, etc. were their
enemies; people living in the valleys along the rivers were dependent on the
river for almost everything and at the same time the river was their enemy
during floods and storms; similarly people living in cold places and those living
in deserts had their own ways of life, problems and enemies. Thus, people
living in different areas led their lives according to the demands of nature, but in
all the areas the societies were basically simple - they were based either on
hunting or fishing, gathering of food and rudimentary cultivation. In all these
varied patterns of life one thing was common: in their struggle for survival men
proved to be physically more sturdy than women. As a result there came up the
division of work based on physical strength. So, men took up the outside work,
such as hunting, fighting, making shelter, etc., which required more physical
strength, and women took up the domestic work. In this way in general men's
contribution to the economy of the family lay in those tasks which required not
only strength but also absence from home, while women did the daily chores of
home, like nursing children, fetching wood and water, and they also participated
in the family work of cultivation.\(^1\) This division of work between men and
women was merely one of necessity and to facilitate life. It was not a rigid
distinction of roles of men and women as it evolved later on with the progress of
civilization, as there were instances of women joining men in outside work, such

\(^1\) E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Position of the Women in Primitive Societies and
as hunting, fighting, etc. Thus, at the initial stage of human civilization there
seems to be a relationship of partnership between the two genders and gender
discrimination *per se* or domination of either male or female over the other was
not so pronounced as it became in the later stages.

The most fundamental feature of women's work in this period was its
familial base. The family was the key economic unit and each of its member
was employed. Survival outside the family, for both men and women, was
almost impossible.² It is true that the predominantly manual and physical labour
required by the land placed restraints on the work roles of women, but this did
not lessen their importance. Women's work was equally vital, thus giving them
importance, if not primacy, in the family. However, ultimately, the fact was
that although women's work and role was crucial, it was not equal to that of men
nor was it pleasant or as rewarding. As the work was physically demanding,
women's lot greatly depended on their health and energy and, only those who
had the physical strength survived.

Women also participated in the simple and uninstitutionalised politics of
the tribe, informally and indirectly through their menfolk by manipulating and
influencing them. Women influenced and manipulated their menfolk either by
forcing domestic disputes into public domain or by simply threatening to shame
their menfolk in this way. Another way was by playing on men's fears of their
supposed supernatural powers. But the greatest source of women's influence in
the political and public affairs was their role as structural links between kinship

p.17.
groups in the society, as the family and kinship were the fundamental basic institutions of everyday life. This role of their’s enabled the women to mediate in marriages which often led to political alliances and also gave them access to an invaluable information network which could further strengthen their role.3

During this period, both men and women led independent social lives outside the home: both men and women could go about their own affairs, there was no need for a husband and a wife to be constantly present together. Men invariably held the authority in the society, but in actual practice the husband’s authority was limited by customs and conventions, and women had many means of influencing and having their own way. Besides, the demarcation of work between the sexes provided protection for the women in the sense that men did not interfere in that sphere or seek to compete with them in these activities, thus leaving women free to pursue their own social and public activities.

Thus, although women’s lot was a very hard one in the primitive society and there was no great effort made to compensate for the cruel disadvantages that handicapped them, women were not suppressed or bullied as happened later under paternalistic auspices, and there was no institutions that ratified the inequal treatment and status of the two genders during this period.

Status of Women in the Ancient Period

In the ancient period the societies had developed greatly and were highly civilised. In this period women in almost all societies throughout the world were

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treated equal with men and were held in high esteem. Since there were no taboos and restrictions, women participated in the various religious, social and cultural ceremonies along with men; education was common among both men and women and there were many women holding high positions in literature and they also participated freely in the public affairs. Examples of such a life can be found in the various societies of that period.

*In India during the period, which is known as the Vedic Period the position of women was equal to that of men. During this period the position of daughters was better than it was in later centuries. Although a daughter was not as welcomed as a son, yet, there was no sharp discrimination between the two with regard to the question of education and movement in society. Both girls and boys, at their early age, underwent the same ritual of upanayana (thread ceremony) at the start of their schooling. Thus, education was given to both boys and girls. Females had access to the same kind of education given to men, they were allowed to study the Vedas and Sastras also. The women of the Brahmana and Kshatriya castes were proficient in poetics too. These women received education of not only a general nature but in diplomacy and state-craft as well. There were no religious taboos and restrictions on them and since women were equally well-versed in the scriptures they were able to, and were allowed to, perform sacrifices alone even without their husbands being present.

* The status of women in India through the ages have been analysed in more detail in Chapter V.

4. Vedic Age roughly covered the period from 2500 to 1500 B.C. till the 6th century.

Widows too were not regarded as degraded persons; they were treated with respect. Remarriage of widows, especially to the younger brother of the deceased husband, was very common. The Rig Veda gives evidences along with other Vedic Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the Sastras, that the wife of the dead person is not to be immolated but to be brought to the world of the living. Thus the sati system which developed in later centuries was unheard of during the ancient period.

In ancient Egypt too, women held considerable prestige and rights. In fact, sociologists believe that the ancient Egyptian family was based on the matriarchal system and as a result all fixed property belonged to the women, and the home and the land were inherited by daughters through the mother. But as in other matriarchal descent systems, men often controlled the actual management of the property: the husband often had legal rights over his wife's property. Nevertheless if a woman could read and write, she could sell and make transactions and manage her property without her husband's consent since she was the actual owner. The kingdom also, like other forms of property, descended in the female line during most of the dynasties. Records indicate that at least under the first four dynasties women were allowed to rule, and in the later dynasties the queen governed the kingdom along with the king. Marriage during this period was more like a business relationship than a religious rite, and it did not make a woman subservient to the husband and his family. Wives were

6. For details see Gulati n.5, pp 99-108.


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regarded as equal to their husbands and they accompanied their husbands to all social functions. Besides, women had equal divorce rights as men; even after the spread of Christianity in the two centuries after the death of Christ, marriage could easily be ended by either partner through divorce or annulment. Women also had the freedom to engage in business and commerce, and they also took on religious functions and were even elected head priestesses.

In Africa, from the ancient times till colonialism, the societies were simple and women enjoyed social rank and prerogatives. Women held the highest position, e.g. among the Mende tribe in Sierra Leone, women were the paramount chiefs; in the West African villages the tribes were ruled by women with outstanding leadership qualities and wealth acquired through trade; and in the area west of Niger River, where the Igbo tribe lived, there was a woman monarch known as the *Omu* who ruled along with the male monarch known as the *Obi*; even in the inter-lacustrine kingdom of East Africa, where women were ordinarily expected to know nothing about politics, there existed institutions by which women could rise above the subordinate status assigned to them. Thus both men and women participated freely in the political life and for both, public status was, to a great extent, achieved and not ascribed. Women also participated in the economic functions like trade and commerce. In married life also women had equal rights. In almost all societies of traditional Africa, marriage entailed a loose relationship resembling a business partnership. The

8. Ibid.

payment of bride-price and the completion of the prescribed rituals, established for both partners a series of rights and duties. When either partner did not meet those obligations, the other could withdraw from the union. Thus women had just as much right as men to initiate divorce. Remarriage of widows and divorcees were also common. In this way, although norms defining women's place in society differed among the indigenous communities of traditional Africa, women in general had considerable independence and economic power among all the groups, and despite male political predominance, women held significant social and political status and were equal to men in all respects.

Similarly in ancient Japan too, women occupied a high position and status, and in fact between 572 A.D. and 770 A.D. half the rulers of Japan were women. Well into the feudal period, which dates from the 12th century, women had property rights, rights of inheritance, and much higher status in the family system than was accorded them in later centuries.

Thus in most societies women held high status and position during the ancient period, and although women's participation in the various fields of life might not have been equal to that of men, they were not regarded as inferior to men.

In sharp contrast to this situation was the situation in the ancient Roman and Greek societies, where women were regarded as inferior to men and treated as second-class citizens. In Rome women were discriminated against from the time they were born: Roman custom permitted a father to expose to death an

infant daughter. Throughout their lives Roman women were under the tutelage of man - father, brother, husband, son or a guardian - without whose consent they could not do anything. Women also lived under a great deal of legal disabilities. They could not own property, could not appear in courts even as witnesses, had no divorce rights and widows had no right in husband's estates. Besides all this, women were excluded from public affairs and all masculine professions were forbidden for them. The status of Roman women can be deduced clearly from the fact that, as the Roman historian Livy noted, the basic rule was that "women's servitude is never terminated while their males survive." Inspite of this situation Roman society witnessed the first recorded protest in as early as 195 B.C., when Roman women gathered demanding the repeal of the Uppian Law which had confiscated much of their wealth and also forbade them to use the remaining of this wealth in dress or carriage. The women won this battle and the law was repealed but a number of senators issued warnings about the consequences of giving into women.

The ancient Greek society too treated women as subordinate to men. Even the great Greek philosophers and thinkers like Aristotle believed that women were inferior and so, subordinate to men. Aristotle wrote, "The courage of man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying". Similarly, Plato stated that "the gifts of nature are alike diffused in both (sexes), all the pursuits

11. The lex Vocania forbade any Roman who owned 100,000 sestences ($15000) or more to bequeath any part of his estate to a woman.
of men are the pursuits of women also, but in all of them a woman is inferior to a man”.  

Greek women were excluded from business, education, scholarships and public affairs. They were shut up in their quarters, held under severe constraints by law and watched over by special magistrates. All their lives they were under the control of their male guardian, be it father, husband, son or, in the absence of all these, the State represented by public officials. The guardian was in control of the woman as well as her property and he could transfer his rights at will. However, Greek law did give dowry to the wife, which was used for her maintenance and was to be restored in full if the marriage was dissolved; the law also gave the wife, in certain cases, the right to ask for divorce. But these rights were the only guarantees granted to women by the society otherwise Greek women were virtual prisoners in their homes, their only value being in bearing children and providing heirs to the family.

**Status of Women in the Medieval Period uptil the 18th Century**

The role and status of women began to undergo changes as population increased and society became more complex. The medieval period was a period of feudalism. This period was dominated by theology and religion, and people accepted whatever was said by their religious institutions without any question; man lost all rationality. In such a situation the period became one of the darkest periods of civilisation, and as usual, women suffered the most. They were regarded as inferior in every field. Although they still played an important role in production, in other spheres of life they were treated as second-class citizens.

Agriculture was the main occupation and women worked along with men in this, they also shared the work of their menfolk in other productive work carried on by the family, yet they did not get equal remuneration as men did for their work, nor did they have any right over their own earnings. To discuss her ministrations in terms of money and compensation would have been sacrilege. Thus, in spite of their vital and important role in production, women were economically and socially very much dependent on men. At the same time they were isolated from each other in their separate homes and divided by class, race and ethnic background. As a result they could not get together and fight for their rights, but had to quietly bear every injustice.

In India the status and position of women became very low from the 6th century onwards. Women were debarred from education, married off at a low age and debarred from most of the social, cultural, religious and political activities. The awful practices of female infanticide, female seclusion, child-marriage, widow-burning and suppression of widows began to be followed and accepted as the custom and norms of society. A woman was considered incapable of exercising her independent will and could be given away or loaned as any other item of property. In the law books, women and Sudras were represented as life-long slaves from birth to death. Once a woman was married, she became the property of her husband, she was to regard him as her god and obey him at all times, she could not leave her husband in distress and even when abandoned by him, she could not remarry. Since it was held that there should not be any partition between the wealth of a husband and wife, wives had no separate property rights. Although a wife had the authority over her stridhana it was only after she became a widow because as long as the husband was alive,
his consent was required regarding this property also. Thus women became merely the property of men and were under the subjugation of men at all stages of life.

Looking into the medieval Egyptian society, especially once Egypt came under the rule of the Turks in 1517,\textsuperscript{15} we find that here too, women suffered a loss of their traditional rights and freedom. The Turks promulgated edicts based on a very conservative interpretation of the verses in the scripture relating to women, which forced women into the pattern of seclusion in the house. As in India, in Egypt too, seclusion of women first started among the powerful and the rich classes as a status symbol which soon spread among all the people. During this period all schools in Egypt were religious oriented and, therefore, catered primarily only to boys. Girls were admitted only to the \textit{kuttabs} which were attached to the local mosques and were taught the Quran by rote and sometimes the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. The \textit{madrasah} and \textit{Al Azhar}, the mosque university, did not accept female students. Although girls from upper-class families frequently had private tutors at home, the prevailing cultural atmosphere dictated that their studies be confined to those subjects that prepared them to be wives and mothers.\textsuperscript{16} Egyptian women, like Indian women, remained under the subjugation of men throughout their lives, be it their father, brother, husband, son or some other relative. They had no say in any sphere of life, they were just to serve and obey the men. They had no independent lives of their own.

\textsuperscript{15}. Giele and Smock, n.7, p.40.
\textsuperscript{16}. Ibid.
In Japan too, from the 7th and 8th centuries when the country started to be influenced by the Chinese religious and ethical systems till the end of the feudal system, i.e. the 1860s, the status of women suffered a major decline. By the period between the 15th and 16th centuries when feudalism is considered to have reached its peak, the subjugation of women also reached its peak in practice. Women’s legal position during this period put her wholly at the mercy of her husband. Primogeniture became the rule, so women lost all rights to inherit property in favour of their sons. Women had no right to divorce. Husbands had the right to kill the wife for adultery, while for men, adultery was socially approved. Women were debarred from education and they were not allowed to attend social, religious and political functions also. They were just slaves of men with no say in any matter.

Similarly in China also, women were bound by the feudal and male-imposed restrictions. A girl was discriminated against from the moment of her birth - peasant families solved their economic problems by killing-off female infants or by selling the daughters. There was no concept of education for girls. Women were completely under the subjugation of men - they could be bought, sold, beaten, raped, sacrificed to the gods, have their feet bound and mutilated, and their children stolen from them. As Broyelle writes, "Their whole life echoed with the rule of three obediences : obedience to the father when young, obedience to their husbands when married, obedience to their eldest son when widowed".

17. Pharr, n.10, p. 223.
In Russia, too, from the 9th century till the 13th century, women's status was very low. Although Russian women had the right to own property, that property consisted mainly of what was given to them in the form of dowry or as gifts. A woman had no inheritance rights to her husband's estate beyond what was specifically willed to her. Daughters had no rights of inheritance unless there were no sons, and even then only the unmarried daughters of the upper class could inherit. From the 13th century till the end of the 17th century, Russian women's plight was worse. Seclusion of women started during this period - for the first time separate quarters for women, the tenem, appeared in the houses of the upper class. As the influence of the Church grew, women's status became worse. Women were considered not only physically weak but also mentally inferior. A woman was to devote herself entirely to domestic duties and was to follow the instructions of her husband in all matters. She was even allowed to go to Church only when her husband deemed it appropriate. The husband had the right to physically discipline his wife if she disregarded his orders or wishes. A woman's place in the social hierarchy was defined by her husband's position. Although women did have some legal rights, like the right to initiate suits, they had to be represented by a male representative. Though women had the right to own property as individuals and were legally free to sell or bequeath their property

19. This period is known as the Kevian Period in Russian history.
20. This period is the Medieval Period of Russia.
independently, in reality it was the husband who disposed of their wives' property even without their consent.

The plight of women in medieval Europe was also the same. Education in those days, was provided chiefly by religious institutions and by some charitable institutions, where only boys were allowed admission. Girls were not allowed formal education, not even primary education. They were only taught domestic work, for their place was strictly in the home. Girls of richer and higher families were taught decorative skills and social graces. There was much concern about the proper role of women - with what was suitable education and appropriate work. Thus girls were only taught and trained to be good house-wives and mothers. The lot of married women was even worse: they were completely under the control of their husbands, had no legal identity, had little or no control over their children or household, they were merely to look after the young children and to do the household chores while husbands were actually in full control of everything.

In England a married woman could not sue or be sued, or be called as a witness. She had no legal rights of property ownership - anything she owned, earned or inherited belonged to her husband. She had no control over the children also, as only the father could determine where the children could live and how they would be educated. English women of this period had no divorce rights while men could divorce their wives on grounds of adultery alone. Thus as J.S. Mill wrote, "marriage conferred excessive power on the husband" and women were made servants of men.


23. Travis & Wade n.12, p.12.
In France, married women could protect certain kinds of property by a marriage contract, but as regards the earnings or other acquisitions subsequent to the marriage, they faced the same type of disabilities as existed in England. Since the Napoleonic Code required a wife to obey her husband in return for his "protection", a wife had to reside wherever the husband determined. She could not buy or sell goods or enter into any contract without the husband's permission. The husband had full control over the children. Even a widow seeking remarriage had to submit the question of child-custody to a family council composed of her dead husband's relatives. Although French law made divorce illegal for both partners, men still had the upperhand because a woman found guilty of adultery could be sentenced for two years imprisonment, while the husband was held liable only if he actively maintained a concubine in the conjugal home, and even then he was only fined.24

In America the same conditions as that in England were prevalent. Although women had played an active part along with men when the pioneers were settling and had also tackled every problem of settling in a new land side by side with men, their legal status was nil as the law followed was the common law of England. A woman was only regarded as a part of her husband; she had no right to property nor any political rights since this was based on property ownership. The status of women in England and America can be gauged from Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* published between 1756 and

1769 which made clear that a wife did not even own the clothes she wore and would be guilty of theft if she ran away from a wife-beating husband.\textsuperscript{25}

There was a sharp drop in women's political influence and participation also. Women hardly had any say in the policies and decisions. It was unthinkable for a woman to come out and take active part in politics or public affairs. As it is, during this period, common people - both men and women - hardly had any say in the political affairs, as it was the period of absolute monarchy. But even in cases where people were allowed some political participation, however insignificant and small, there was no question of allowing women to participate.

This feudal period, dominated by theology and religion, continued for quite some time. Then slowly things began to change as people began to be more rational. This change was brought about by many famous scholars and philosophers like John Wycliffe, Machiavelli, Martin Luther and many others, who taught the people rationalism. Due to this trend, the later half of the 18th century saw some great developments and inventions, thus bringing about the industrial revolution. With the beginning of the industrial revolution, agriculture became more advanced and the factory system started leading to urbanisation. The agricultural revolution brought about the separation of the production and consumption areas into "man's sphere" and "woman's sphere" respectively. This changed the woman's work situation; they lost their place in production. Besides, the conditions of scarcity faced by the society during that time led to the

\textsuperscript{25} Tara Ali Baig, \textit{India's Women Power} (New Delhi : S. Chand & Co. (Pvt.) Ltd., 1976), p.34.
male productive elements being highly valued, resulting in a sharp drop in women's status.\textsuperscript{26} Men were regarded as the superior authority in all spheres of employment, public, economic, political and military affairs.

As the factory system began, employment opportunities for women began reducing. Work in the factories were mostly given only to men. Their physical disabilities put women in a disadvantageous position as it was regarded that greater strength was required for factory work. Tradition also inhibited the expansion of women's work in the factory - it was regarded that it was not a woman's job to wield machines, and women themselves were skeptical about factory work due to tradition, as such they entered only those areas in which they had worked earlier in their villages, such as, weaving and spinning in the textile factories and, later on, in the food processing factories. Later, as more factories came up and more labour was required, more women began to get employment in the factories, but they got only low status jobs with meagre pay. This made the women economically dependent on men.

The male monopoly in education also continued and even the governments and their laws and policies of recruitment and admission inhibited women. Similarly, despite great social injustices faced by married women, the governments did nothing to change the laws regarding the rights of these women, as marriage was regarded as essentially private. Women were entirely dependent on men socially as well as economically.

Thus from the 7th century through the medieval period right till the 18th century women's status in society all over the world was very low. Although

\textsuperscript{26} Branca, n.2, p.33.
even in this period there were some voices raised for the equality of women, for example, Christine de Pizan of France, who in the 14th century wrote numerous poems and essays on women's role in France emphasizing the importance for women's education, economic security and civil rights, the society of the period, both men and women, accepted the view that even the best women are lesser men. J.J. Rousseau's words in his Emile - that a women must learn to be passive and docile, modest and chaste, "to submit to injustice and to suffer the wrongs inflicted on her by her husband without complaint"²⁷ aptly describes society's view on women during this period. The great developments in science and technology did not dispel the prevailing concept of female inferiority. Instead now, scientists and white men, after their research, concluded that women and blacks had lesser brains and more instincts and so they were inferior, thus justifying their subordinate position in society.

Status of Women from the 19th century till 1945

By the beginning of the 19th century the world had become an urbanised world with factories and industries coming up all over. With the increase in factories and industries the demand for labour grew, resulting in women workers flooding the various jobs in factories as well as in offices. At the same time people were becoming more aware of their rights. It was realised, by men as well as women, that women were deprived of a lot of the basic rights which a human being should have to live a decent and respectable life, and to develop themselves. Women wanted and needed more than what had supposedly

satisfied them throughout history. They wanted equal opportunity with men in education; wanted legal, economic, and political rights due to them; wanted meaningful work and to be paid adequately for it; wanted to be self-supportive. This awareness led to the starting of the feminist movement - it first started in England and soon spread all over Europe and America\textsuperscript{28}, and still later it spread to the colonial countries of Asia and Africa also.

In England famous writers like J.S. Mill and George Bernard Shaw advocated the equal rights of women in their works. Mill in his \textit{The Subjection of Women} (1861) wrote that the biological distinction between men and women did not mean that women were subordinate but that society had given women such roles that made them servants of men. Similarly, Shaw too favoured women to be independent, giving his views in his plays and essays. As he wrote in an essay in 1891, "If we think that the nursery and the kitchen are the natural sphere of a woman, we have done so exactly as English children come to think that a cage is the natural sphere of a parrot - because they have never seen one anywhere else".\textsuperscript{29}

Besides these men there were many others who advocated and championed the rights of women. On the other hand, there was tremendous opposition from the society. But despite considerable opposition, women began to organise themselves in order to fight against the disabilities imposed on them. Some of the first organisations to be established were for social welfare

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\textsuperscript{28} America's independence became a reality by 1776 and it was at this time that Abigail Adams brought to head the first real feminist movement on the American continent - Baig, n.25, p.34.

\textsuperscript{29} Travis and Wade, n.12, p.13.
\end{flushright}
purposes, and these operated with particular success. By the mid-19th century the feminist movement had gained a lot of focus and numbers. Women had started to come out of the four walls of their homes to take part in the public demonstrations. They played a role in the revolutions of 1848. In countries like Italy and Hungary this was mainly supportive, as noble women organised nursing brigades and cheered troops on. But in Berlin and even more so in Paris, women organised their own associations and studied the various problems they faced, ranging from the difficulties of domestic service to the need for direct political expression through extension of the vote to women. Thus the feminist movement paved the way for a lot of changes for the better in the status of women, first in Europe and America, then later in other countries.

In Europe and America women workers from the later half of the 19th century gradually began to be given equal rights as men. In England a law limiting the hours of work to ten hours per day for women and children workers was passed in 1847, and in the 1850s laws regulating the sanitary conditions and safety of female workers were passed. Similarly, in France laws limiting the hours of work for women workers was passed in 1848 but durable and effective legislation in this area started only from the 1870s. In Denmark and Germany such laws were passed in the same period, i.e. the 1870s and, in Belgium, Holland and the Scandinavian countries such laws were passed within the next two decades.30

Slowly, with the concept of welfare state, the married working women too began to get some special privileges in order to lessen their burden, as this

concept led to the starting of State supervision of women as mothers and home-makers. The State, through health authorities, social workers and even school teachers helped these women workers in looking after their homes and their children, while they worked. Provisions for maternity leave, specially within the public sector, also started. Thus the hours of work and conditions of work for women workers were improved a lot. But discrimination in pay and choice of work still remained. It was only in the 20th century, that too, in the later half, that laws for equal pay started to be adopted as demands for this grew steadily.

In the educational field too, women advanced steadily from the 19th century onwards. The concept of education for girls first started in the late 18th century in England and America and it gained momentum and intensity in the 19th century. There was all-round agreement that girls should have access to proper and formal education, as a result the national governments began to take more interest in the education of girls. In America girls were allowed primary education from the 1830s. In England, at the insistence of the Taunton Commission of 1864, more schools were opened to give sound basic education to girls. Similarly, in France, Ferry's reforms in the 1880 led to a steady increase of educational opportunities for girls at the primary level. Very soon several day-schools were established all over Europe and America to provide

32. Ibid., p.117.
33. Branca, n.2; p.173.
children of both sexes with primary education. Thus by 1900 there were about as many literate women as men in countries like England, France and America.

But the aim of the feminists was not only to get primary education, but more importantly, to gain access to higher education and professions also. Due to their ceaseless efforts women began to get access to higher education by the 1880s. In England, secondary education for girls started with the opening of the North London Collegiate School of Chelternham in the 1880s. In France also secondary schools were opened for girls and in the 1880s the Sorborne University was opened to women. Similar developments took place in other European countries also: women in Sweden were allowed to take matriculation examination for university education by the 1870s; in Norway women got higher education from much earlier, i.e. from 1837, when the Oberlin College began to admit girls; and in America by the 1890s women could graduate from Radcliffe College, Yale and the University of Chicago.\(^\text{34}\)

However, the professional schools and colleges were still very reluctant to admit women. The struggle in this area took longer and was more difficult. But finally, by the early 20th century women did succeed in getting the basic legal rights of gaining admittance to the various professional schools and colleges. This naturally resulted in women gaining access to the professional jobs, such as medical, legal, engineering etc.

Changes for the better came about in the lives of married women also as marriage laws became steadily less harsh due to the movements for the rights of mothers over their children, the rights of divorce for women, and the economic

\[^{\text{34}}\text{ Ibid. p.174.}\]
and property rights of married women. Major reforms came about in the later half of the 19th century as the national governments started to pass various laws either improving or giving these rights to married women.

Reforms in divorce laws started in England with the passing of the Matrimonial Clause Bill in 1857, which gave the wife the right to plea for divorce on grounds of misconduct plus adultery by the husband. Later, this Act was further reformed and finally a new Matrimonial Clause Act was passed in 1923 setting down the same grounds for divorce for both the partners. In France divorce on grounds of incompatibility or mutual consent had been introduced in as early as 1792 but the Napoleonic Code had restricted the grounds and finally it had been completely abolished in 1816. But due to the pressure of the reformist movement, divorce on grounds of cruelty or injury was re-established in 1884. Other European countries also followed suit gradually and, in America also the 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave the wives the right to sue their husbands for divorce. In England the Guardianship of Infants Act was passed in 1886 giving women the right of custody over their children after divorce or after the father's death. In America reforms in this area started from as early as the 1830s.

The movement for reforms regarding the economic rights of married women was first started in England in 1855 by Barbara Bodichon through her pamphlet entitled A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women. The efforts of this movement led to the passing of the Married Women's Property Act in 1882 in England which gave married women the legal right over the property they brought into the marriage. In France,
although women could make traditional marriage contracts protecting the property they brought into the marriage, they had no legal economic rights. Due to the reformist movement, a law granting separate pension dues and benefits of employed wives was passed in 1886 and, in 1891 a law allowing women to manage their own property was also passed. In Norway wives were recognised as equal partners in marriage and were given equal legal and economic rights by 1888 and, this was further widened in 1927. In Sweden laws granting married women the right to dispose of their own property and earnings was passed in 1874. Similar reforms were introduced in other European countries also. In America the Married Women's Property Right was passed in the later half of the 19th century.35

But despite all these reforms, married women still faced other inequalities. Wives still had no share in, or right of, the property acquired during marriage, and they still had no protection against violent husbands.36 They also had no control over their own fertility as information on birth control and abortions was not allowed. Reform in these areas set in only in the 20th century.

About the middle of the 19th century women also wanted a voice in the public affairs of their cities, states and country. They wanted to be a part in the making of the laws and creeds by which they were governed and in interpreting

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35. For details see Branca n.2 and Randall n.3.
36. Even in England wives were not allowed a share in the property acquired during marriage until the 1970s. Besides, wives started to get some limited protection against violent husbands only from 1976 when the Matrimonial Proceedings Act was passed. In America also wives were economically dependent on their husbands till the 1970s.
them. Thus started the struggle for their franchisement right and other political rights. This began with the creation of thousands of voluntary organisations through which women could express their new ideas, find new roles, nurture new aspirations and thus in the process creating the basic institutions and ideas of social welfare. Such organisations sprang up in many countries for their leaders believed that to achieve political rights would constitute a first step towards winning recognition of rights in other areas. They took active part in the general revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries and also in other political and social struggles. This stirred up strong interest among the women as well as some men about women's political rights, as such various movements demanding women's suffrage started in the early 19th century. This struggle was taken up by many individuals\(^{37}\) and organisations. In their long years of struggle for the vote, women learned the political skills that were crucial weapons in their struggle for equality, skills of organising on their own behalf, skills of pamphleteering, public speaking and lobbying. But inspite of such an early start and the efforts of exceptional women who worked indefatigably as pioneers, aided sometimes by men filled with a sense of justice and belief in equality, progress was extremely slow. It was only in the 20th century, that the movement for political emancipation of women really gained momentum and the countries started to extend women the franchisement-rights.

\(^{37}\) One of the earliest persons to take up the cause of women's right to vote was Victor Considerant, who demanded a vote for all adults of both sexes.
In Europe women started to get this right from the early 20th century. Till 1900 only New Zealand had given the women the right to vote. In Finland women got this right in 1907 and Norway gave this right to the women in 1913 although Norwegian women had got the right to vote in municipal elections in 1902. Then with the outbreak of World War I many women, especially in England and United States of America, came out of their houses and joined the nursing and ambulances service. This gave women more chance to take active part in affairs beyond their homes. Not only this, the war shook the foundations of the old orders and, the public attitudes and morals underwent a change. Added to this, the Russian Revolution and the resulting Communist rule in the Soviet Union which transformed the Soviet society, further gave a boost to women's rights, making both men and women stronger in their struggle for equality of women, in which the political rights of women became the fore-most goal.

As a result in England after several bills to this effect had been introduced and rejected in the Parliament many times, women finally got the right to franchise in 1919, and in the same year Germany and Sweden also followed suit. American women got this right in 1920 and in France and Italy the women got this right only in 1945. Enfranchisement gave a new role to women in politics. They could now participate in, and influence, politics and public affairs directly. Due to women now being included in the constituents, the male politicians began to be more concerned about women's needs and as a result many social reforms and laws were passed in order to appeal to the

38. Women in New Zealand got the right to vote in 1893.
women constituents. But, although women got the right to vote they did not, and were not allowed to, enter politics directly in a substantial number. They did not vote as frequently as men, and there were very few women politicians. But this trend also started to change gradually as women too began to take almost equal interest and part in politics.

In Russia some reformative measures to improve the social status of women were incepted from the beginning of the 18th century: a reform of the family law had abolished the dowry system legally; in 1720 the requirement that a wife follow her husband into exile was abolished; in 1769 Peter the Great had reiterated women's right to property\(^{39}\), and he had also abolished the system of seclusion of women. The influence of western literature in the later half of the 18th century led to new perceptions about the images of women and this laid the groundwork for a re-appraisal of the relation between men and women. So, from the beginning of the 19th century men in Russia started to take active part in promoting equality between the two genders. As a proper starting place, fresh attention was paid to the education of females. It was Catherine the Great who made the first efforts to provide schooling for girls and her successors intensified this effort. By the later half of the 19th century and early 20th century substantial progress was made in this field. In 1912 major reforms of the inheritance law increased the share of the daughters, providing that all property was to be divided equally among sons and daughters. Widows were

\(^{39}\) This law reiterated the long-standing legal principle that the wife's movable or immovable property was to be considered her personal property separate from that of her husband's. The law specified that a wife could sell, mortgage or bequeath her property independently of her husband.
also given the right of inheritance. The property rights of Russian women extended beyond the economic and social sphere, as property rights were linked with political rights. Electoral rights were based on property qualifications, so only women with sufficient property - and this was very rare - had the right to vote. But they had to cast their votes through a male relative and in the absence of such a relation they were defranchised.

Once the Communist Party came to power in the country in 1919 the society was completely transformed in every sphere of life - social, economic and political - at least theoretical. No difference was made between the two genders regarding opportunities in any area, thus giving a new concept of equality to women. As a result in the Soviet Union women finally came out of the four walls of their homes and went to work in the factories and fields and began to qualify for every technological development. The country became the first country in the world where equal partnership between men and women was a State directive.

In the colonial countries the first spate of changes and reforms in the lives of women was brought about by colonisation, although at the same time colonisation also brought about new forms of suppression of, and discrimination against, women. Colonisation introduced western education which paved the way for giving rise to many great reformers. Inspired by western education and ideas, especially the ideology of equality, these people fought for women's rights and equality. Besides, some of the practices of these societies were against the principles and laws of the colonial powers and as such these governments took steps to abolish such practices.
In India western education introduced by the British spread the western ideology of equality. This made the educated people conscious of the miserable plight of the Indian women. Numerous social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Mrs. Annie Besant, etc. fought for the equal right of women. Various social reform movements such as the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj were also started for this and at the same time several women's associations sprang up in different parts of the country. Due to the ceaseless efforts of the reformers, the practices of female infanticide, sati and child marriage were abolished, widows were given the legal right to remarry, marriage age was increased, women were granted educational rights, and were also allowed to vote in the assemblies and provincial councils as well as made eligible for seats in the provincial legislatures although the franchise was based mainly on property qualifications and since under the existing laws of inheritance a large majority of women never owned property, only a few women could exercise their right to vote.

In Egypt too, the status of women began to change for the better. As early as 1832, Mohammad Ali, the ruler of Egypt who is regarded as the initiator of modernisation of the country, founded a vocational school for training female mid-wives. Schools for formal education for girls were also introduced by the foreign missionaries in the middle of the century. At the beginning these schools were attended only by the daughters of the foreign communities, mostly Greek and Italian. However, indigenous counterparts soon opened their doors and drew girls from certain strata of the Egyptian community. The Coptis Societies opened the first school for girls in 1860, and
in 1873 and 1875 the government instituted two public elementary schools fashioned on a European curriculum. But it was not until 1900 that girls attending these institutions were allowed to sit for their final examinations. The right of women to education was granted formally in the Constitution of 1923.\textsuperscript{40} In 1933 primary education was made compulsory for both girls and boys. Although this law was never enforced and female education remained a very sporadic practice, it did prompt the construction of additional primary schools where girls were taught in the morning and boys in the afternoon. By the early and mid 20th century Egyptian women also got higher professional education. The Cairo University admitted women to the Faculty of Arts in early 20th century and the first batch of women graduated in 1933. In 1929 women were accepted to the Faculty of Law, in 1936 to Commerce and in 1945 to Engineering and Agronomy.\textsuperscript{41}

Women soon started to become more aware of their rights and started to actively participate in the public life. They first came out to take active part in the public life during the 1919 up-rising in the country that sought to expel the British. That same year Madam Huda Sha'Mavi founded the Arab Feminist Union which became affiliated to the International Alliance for Women's Suffrage. The feminist movement through this organisation demanded the extension of suffrage to women.

\textsuperscript{40} The Constitution included Art. (19) that made elementary education a minimum requirement for Egyptian children of both sexes from six to twelve years of age.

\textsuperscript{41} Smock and Giele, n.7. p.42.
In Japan the status of women changed slightly from the middle of the 19th century with the start of the Meiji Period from the 1860s. By then education became somewhat more accessible to women. The New Meiji school system provided for public education for women. A number of post-secondary training programmes in teaching, nursing, dentistry etc. were also opened. But there were no universities for women and, women seeking higher education either had to go to one of the sixty private girls’ colleges established before the World War II or in a few cases were allowed to audit courses but not to take examinations. Thus although modernisation efforts during this period made new education available to women, the degree and type of education available to them was not the same and equal with those available to men. In work and employment also women still faced a lot of discrimination, exploitation and oppression. In family life too, there were no major changes. Women still had no divorce rights. Similarly, in the political sphere also women were untouched by the changes; when universal suffrage was declared in 1925 it was applied only to males over 25 years of age, thus women before the World War II were wholly excluded from the political process.

Changes for the better in the lives of the Chinese women began only in the 20th century once the proletariat appeared in the scene. Although schooling for women started from the late 19th century, which was started by the missionaries, the rate of illiteracy among women till 1933 was very high. Chinese women started to take up employment in factories from the early 20th century and they faced a lot of exploitation and discrimination: their wages were very low, and it was cut for even petty infringements of the factory rules such
as, over-staying their lunch period even for a minute or yawning or resting during working hours; they had to work long hours - roughly 12 to 15 hours a day; they had no pre-natal or post-natal leave even if a woman became sick after giving birth.42

It was only once the proletariat appeared on the scene that the Chinese women's situation began to change for the better. Finally women and peasants saw new hope. For the first time women started to get equal rights as that of men and, could envisage a new role for themselves in society and the possibility of doing something other than merely serving the men.

Besides these steps taken by the national governments, the various international forums and organisations also took measures to alleviate the status of women and emancipate them from the centuries'-old life of servitude by dealing with some specific concerns of women. In 1902 the International Convention at The Hague dealt with the conflicts of national law concerning marriage, divorce and the guardianship of minors. Again in 1904 and 1910 the International Convention dealt with the suppression of traffic in women and children. The League of Nations took more firmer steps in this direction by declaring in its Covenant in Art. 23(c) that members of the League would "entrust the League with the general supervision over the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children". The League also sponsored the adoption of a convention in 1921 to take firmer measures in stopping traffic in women. Besides this, the League also set up a Secretariat to Women to deal specially with women's issues. In 1935 the League decided to

consider the question of the status of women in its political and civil aspects also. Although the League was not able to do much in this regard, still it helped in bringing women's issues in the fore and making the national governments and other organisations take more interest in this matter.

**Summary Observations**

Going through the history of mankind it can be seen that the status of women in society has not been the same all the time. In the first stage, i.e. the pre-historic period, women although definitely were not equal to men, were not regarded as inferior either. It was only as society progressed and became more complex that the distinction between men's role and women's role became pronounced, with women being accorded a secondary status. This "secondary standing" of women is imposed not by the "natural feminine characteristics" but by "environmental forces of education and social tradition under the purposeful control of men".43 Women's position and status thus began to deteriorate in each new stage of mankind's development, until in the medieval period they faced their darkest period in history. Then gradually from the 19th century things began to change for the better. This was especially due to the efforts of the feminist movement of the period, which fought some of the grossest forms of inequalities and discrimination practiced against women. It was due to this movement that women once began to get their rightful place in society gradually and although it could not attain the full goal, the beginnings towards the right direction was made.