

The Lives of Women in Ancient Rome



The rights of women changed a lot over the Roman period.

For hundreds of years, women could not own property, inherit goods, sign a contract, work outside the home, or run a business. They could not defend themselves in court as they had no rights. A woman had to obey her husband's head of his family (oldest male) and had no legal say in anything.

However, things began to change after Rome became an empire. Women gained the right to conduct business. They could own land, free slaves and even get a paid job. While they were still considered to "belong" to their father or husband, they had many more rights than they previously had. Despite this, they still could not vote or hold a political position such as emperor.

Family Life

Roman women were considered equal to their male siblings by their parents. They had to obey their fathers, called 'pater familias', just like their brothers.

After Rome became an empire, daughters had the right to receive share of inheritance equal to that of sons. After marriage most women did not change their family names and were expected to remain loyal to their 'pater familias'.

Married Roman women were given the responsibility to run and care for the household. Many women married to important Roman men managed everything around the house when their husbands were away with the army or travelling around the empire.

Daily Life

Roman women were responsible for looking after their homes. The richer women were expected to use slaves to help keep their homes clean and well maintained. They were also responsible for entertaining guests and visitors. They had to make clothes for their families, which was a very important aspect of their duties. If they had a female child, they had to teach them these skills as well.

Women regularly gathered in streets to meet each other and visited markets for purchasing supplies. They also frequently visited public baths and socialised there. Roman women particularly enjoyed fashion and groomed themselves for social gatherings by applying makeup!

Politics

Roman women were not allowed to vote or hold a political position, such as becoming the emperor. However, many women indirectly played an important role in political matters. They influenced decision making through their relationships with ruling men. Livia Drusilla Augusta, wife of Emperor Augustus, was a very powerful and influential woman, and is remembered in history for her role as an advisor of her husband.

Religion

Roman women actively participated in the religious ceremonies and festivals. However, there were a lot more male clerics (vicars and priests) than female ones.

Women were also not allowed to carry out the all important ritual of sacrifice during these religious ceremonies.