Colonial Women Essay, Research Paper

Colonial Women

Women did not have an easy life during the American Colonial period. Before a woman reached 25 years of age, she was expected to be married with at least one child. Most, if not all, domestic tasks were performed by women, and most domestic goods and food were prepared and created by women. Women performed these tasks without having any legal acknowledgment. Although women had to endure many hardships, their legal and personal lives were becoming less restricted, although the change was occurring at a snail s pace. Life for the colonial woman was a mix of imprisonment and freedom in their marriages, homes, and in the American Colonial legal system. Women who chose to come to the American Colonies had a 100 percent chance of finding a husband. Women outnumbered men almost six to one. Any woman could be choosy when finding a husband, for countless men tried to woo her into marriage. Because women could choose their husbands, they could marry those men who would give her the most benefits. A woman did not have to marry a man who would treat her poorly. In most New England colonies, a woman could sue her husband for a divorce if her treated her without respect and abused or neglected her. Although women had the legal privilege to divorce a bad husband, she did not have any legal rights under the law. As soon as she married her husband, she lost all legal existence. For a woman to have any place in the legal system it was better to remain single. Single women, or Feme Sole

had more legal rights than a married woman. She could own property, retain control of her earnings, and sign contracts. Feme Sole was a better legal status, but it was a socially unacceptable status. Unmarried women were looked down upon as being infertile. Women could either marry, have children, and loose all legal rights or remain single, bear no children (or have children out of wedlock), and retain her own independent legal status. A woman had a busy domestic life. A woman played the role of wife, mother, teacher and manager. She had to please her husband, bear and raise children, educate her children, and manage all daily household activities. In the home, the woman was the jack of all trades. Part of the role of the female was to take raw goods, and turn them into useful items, such as food, candles, and clothing. Women had to clean, butcher and prepare all game brought home to the family. A woman was a household factory. Many items in the home were created by women. All clothing was made by spinning, weaving and stitching. All cloth was washed by hand without the aid of any machines. Candles were made at home by weaving a wick and pouring hot wax into a mold. A woman had to be educated enough to teach her sons and daughters the skills of life. Women spent the majority of their time performing daily tasks, but still were able to have leisure activities such as painting, embroidery, and charity work. Women had very few legal rights. In the majority of colonies, women had no legal control over their lives. It was the consensus among society that a female was best represented by her father, brothers, and husbands. A woman could only own property if there was no men in her private life. If she was married, a woman s husband held claim over her property due to the Feme Covert laws. Single women had more legal rights, but were looked down upon by society. Widowhood offered the opportunities of the single woman to a once married woman. The widow was able to take over her husband s business, trade and property. Many widows ran farms and plantations, became shopkeepers, merchants, blacksmiths and tavern owners. Some women ran schools within her home. Other women were paid money to quarter prisoners in their homes. Married women s rights were legally limited, but her rights in the home depended on her husband. Women were treated as property, and her husband s attitude on his wife s role in the home decided her rights. A man who believed women were separate (but equal) to men would give his wife more freedom than a man who believed that women were inferior to men. Women could have more legal rights depending on their marital status and attitudes of her husband if she was married. Women s life was both freedom and imprisonment. She was expected to marry and loose all legal rights, but she did have the freedom to choose whether to marry or not. Even without legal status, a woman s husband would decide how free his wife s life would be. Husbands who treated their wives as equals bestowed more domestic rights and privileges to his wife and family. Many years would pass before women and men would be total equals legally and domestically. Although it appears that women were chattel of men, they still had come a long way from being total slaves of men. Slowly but surely, society s expectations and ideas of what a woman s role was to be was changing. As time passed, more choices were being added to how a woman could live her life. Colonial women had few choices – but more were coming along the way. References: The Woman and the American Experience, Nancy Woloch, McGraw-Hill, 1994 Inventing the American Woman, An Inclusive History, Glenda Riley, Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1995

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