

Do you agree that women of today have it better than their predecessors?

By Jaime Niam (16A11)

Women are often seen as the inferior gender when compared to their male counterparts, and this is natural considering that stereotypes of the domesticated, submissive and frail housewife have been perpetuated throughout the ages. Due to this traditional mindset that a woman's place is in the household and that her duties are confined to the domestic, women have been deprived of many opportunities fundamental in securing a financially stable lifestyle. Instead, women are often defined in relation to their husbands, and become almost fully dependent on them since they are unable to earn their own living. In today's day and age, it cannot be denied that such issues have been greatly reduced, and have almost become a thing of the past. That being said, I disagree that the women of today have it better than their predecessors as the negative portrayals and stereotypes of women still persist, albeit in different forms. Women still face stereotypes such as that of a damsel in distress or are still being sexualised in the media, seemingly being defined as a domesticated object of men, just like they were in the past. In addition, only women in developed countries seem to have been given greater access to fundamental rights that men enjoy, and the oppression of women is still a real and prevalent issue in developing third-world countries

Women today do not have it better than their predecessors, as their confining role as domesticated objects of men is still perpetuated today, just in a different way - the commonly seen sexualisation of women in media. Countless advertisements sell the image of scantily-clad women in revealing clothes, even when the product that is being marketed has no relation whatsoever to a woman's physical beauty and attractiveness. Such examples include advertisements for products like fresh mints, where the satisfaction brought about by the product is measured by a woman's ability to attract a man after consuming the mints. The sexualisation and objectification of women serves the fundamental purpose of making her come across as attractive to men as possible, which indirectly reinforces her role as a mere object and toy to men. Women in the past were obsessed with portraying the most alluring and attractive image of themselves, so that men would find them desirable and hopefully marry them. The same concept is being sold today, as women seem to be portrayed as sexualised objects to garner the positive attraction of the male audience, reducing themselves to mere pawns of men since their image and identity seem to be contingent on men's desires. Therefore, the women of today do not have it better than their predecessors, as they still face pressure from societal ideals that their entire existence and physical image should be based on men's desires. They are effectively still confined to the stereotype that they are mere pleasers of men, stripping them of their individuality.

In addition, women are still portrayed as damsels in distress in the media today, as if they are incapable of independence and are defined in relation to men. In the past, married women seemed to be solely dependent on their spouses for financial stability, as their roles were confined merely to the domestic. Yet this stereotype of dependence and fragility has not been removed from society and is still prevalent in society today. From the early ages of childhood, children are introduced to fairytales such as 'Snow White' or 'The Sleeping Beauty', that almost always feature a weak damsel in distress falling prey to a fragile twist of fate, and can only be saved by a literal knight-in-shining-armour. This means that from a young age, little girls are already influenced by the idea that men are the superior gender, and any women's misfortunes can be easily resolved by the presence of a strong, invincible male figure. Even in popular movies and novels today, this image of a weak spineless woman still persists, such as Bella Swan in the 'Twilight' Saga who seems almost

incapable of self-defence or decision-making, having to always rely on her love interest Edward to help her. Therefore, the idea of a woman having to depend on her male counterpart in order to attain security and comfort is still a prevalent stereotype circulating in society today and they are still being seen as the weaker gender even though, in reality, they are fully capable of taking care of themselves. Hence, the women of today do not have it better than their predecessors as they are still perceived as the weaker gender.

Of course, it cannot be denied that women's rights have drastically improved as compared to before, especially in developed nations which are already politically and economically stable, and have the privilege to start considering social rights and equality amongst their people. While women in the past were typically uneducated, since their duties were solely confined to the household, it seems almost a given today that women receive formal education. Their goal in life has evolved from being a mere obedient housewife, to being a well-educated individual who can hopefully secure good employment opportunities, just like their male counterparts. Such equality in educational and employment opportunities can be seen in the rise of prominent female figures today. Examples include female politicians Aung San Suu Kyi and Hillary Clinton, who were only able to get so far in life due to their right to formal education, which is often seen as the basis of a successful career. Moreover, female voices are becoming increasingly heard in society today, due to the emergence of feminist movements and organisations such as the UN Women's Charter and Singapore's AWARE. Emphasis on women's rights give women a place in society, by highlighting that their welfare is important and valued. The emergence of feminist historians in the 19th century has also introduced female perspectives in history, and this is significant considering that history is an important factor in shaping society and its values. Therefore, the women of today do have it better, as they are not only offered an equal element of choice and ownership of their individual lives, but their opinions and perspectives are also voiced actively in society.

Yet, this has only been the case in developed nations, as women in developing countries still face violent oppression. For example, arranged marriages are still a common occurrence in less developed countries (LDCs), and women are effectively deprived of the element of choice, since their job is to find a husband and get married out of the family as soon as possible. This is perpetuated by the caste system in India, where everyone is defined according to their social class. Women face double the oppression since they are thus also defined in relation to their husbands, stripping them of their individuality. In countries like Saudi Arabia, women are even banned from driving and have to sit in private cubicles in restaurants, a clear and explicit indication of how women's lifestyles are still unfairly restricted simply due to their gender. Also, domestic abuse is a common issue in these LDCs. However, the worst part is not the actual violence itself, but rather the frequent nonchalance of the law and easy dismissal of the severity of such crimes, leaving women doomed to a fate of violence and abuse. This problem is further compounded when there are no social welfare services available to provide assistance or emotional support for these women. Hence, it is not accurate to say that the women today are better off than their predecessors as a vast number of them, especially in LDCs, still face immense oppression and are not only deprived of what seem like fundamental rights, but are effectively muted since they have no outlet to voice their problems.

In conclusion, while I do acknowledge that the women of today are granted more rights and have a say in society, this can hardly be a generalisation considering the vast difference in the lives of women across developed and less-developed nations, where women are still violently oppressed and could even be worse off compared to their predecessors. Even in developed nations where the oppression of women may not be as explicit, there are still countless underlying stereotypes that

negatively characterise women as sexual objects or weak damsels in distress, undercutting their abilities and individuality as they are always being defined in relation to men. The fact that such stereotypes are so common, and still permeate society, means that mindsets towards women have not changed enough, and the perception that women are inferior to men reflects a lack of change from the times of their predecessors.

Comments:

A small degree of repetition of ideas across paragraphs. Otherwise, overall, a consistently argued piece.