

Domestic Life

You are in an ancient Egyptian's home, where a nobleman and his wife are watching their grandchildren at play.

Most ancient Egyptians had a strong sense of family and married someone within their own social class or extended family. However, there was no formal legal or religious ceremony for marriage. A marriage existed when a man and a woman set up a household together. Divorce was possible and occurred when couples who had been living together separated. Divorced couples were allowed to remarry.

In Egyptian society, a woman's social position depended first on her father's social status, and later on her husband's. The lives of women in the upper classes of society were very different from the lives of those in the lower classes. Wives of the nobility and important government officials were responsible for raising children, running the household, and overseeing servants. They did little or no manual work. Women from the lower classes were responsible for raising children, too, but were also expected to cook, clean the house, and make the family's clothes. In addition, during busy seasons, they worked with their husbands in the fields.

Women of all classes had certain individual rights. They could own or rent property and were entitled to share equally in any inheritance left by a deceased father or husband. In addition, women were equal to men in the eyes of the law. They were entitled to bring charges against someone in court. They were also responsible for their own actions and had to answer for them in court.

Ancient Egyptians often married at a very young age—12 for girls and 14 for boys. Until that time, children who did not attend school were allowed to play and take part in daily family activities. Children played such games as leapfrog, tug-of-war, and a popular board game called *senet*. In this game, which adults also played, players battled against the forces of evil to try to reach the underworld kingdom of a God called *Osiris*. Children also played with balls, dolls, and toy animals; boys pretended to be soldiers, and girls played games involving dances. Many Egyptian children died at a very young age, often before turning five years old. Because of this, children were only gradually accepted as full members of society, usually when they reached puberty.

Discussion Question: How were women and children treated in ancient Egyptian society?