

## FEMALE SLAVERY: THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY IN MESOPOTAMIA AND THE ANCIENT EGYPT

Furkan YILDIZ<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Slavery has been one of the oldest institution that is still alive in modern world. From the first urban societies to the modern world, the institution of slavery has been evolved by societies' needs, traditions and interaction among other societies. At first practices, war captives and indebted persons were taken into slavery. However, in later practices, we can notice that indebted persons, without any pressure, choose a being slave in order to pay their debts with their consent. Some societies such as Sumer and Babylonia have utilized specific legal norms to regulate slaves' rights. Despite the fact that there were no certain differences among gender at first slavery practices, missions of female slaves have been dramatically transformed from servant to concubine. The reason of this is the transformation in perception and practice which mean evolution from household or "patriarchal" slavery within pre-class societies to "commodity" slavery within well-developed societies. In short, this study analyses differences in the gender-based practices of slavery in pre-class societies which are Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt and evaluates the reflections of them not only in general practices of slavery but also in societies that adopt slavery into their daily life.*

**Keywords:** *The Institution of Slavery, Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, Female Slavery, Slavery and Law*

## KADIN KÖLELİĞİ: MEZOPOTAMYA'DA VE ANTİK MİSİR'DA KÖLELİK SİSTEMİ İÇERİSİNDEKİ KADININ DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

### Özet

*Kölelik, modern dünyada da hala varolan en eski kurumlardan biridir. İlk yerleşik toplumlardan, günümüze kadar, kölelik kurumu, toplumların ihtiyaçları, kültürleri ve diğer toplumlarla olan münasebetleriyle şekillenmiştir. İlk örneklerinde, savaş esirleri ve borçlu kişiler köle olarak alınır. Fakat daha sonraki uygulamaya ilişkin örneklerde, kişilerin borçlarını ödeyemediği durumlarda borçlarına karşılık olarak kasıtlı bir şekilde köleliği seçtiğini görmekteyiz. Sümerler ve Babiller gibi toplumlarda kölelerin sahip olduğu hakları düzenleyen yasal kuralları vardır. Köleliğin ilk örneklerinde cinsiyet farkına dair belli bir uygulama olmamasına rağmen, kadın kölelerin görev tanımları hizmetçilikten cariyeliğe doğru ciddi bir şekilde kaymıştır. Bu değişimin sebebi orta sınıf toplumdaki ataerkil veya ev işlerine yönelik kölelikten daha gelişmiş toplumdaki 'mal' anlayışı ile yürütülen köleliğe dönüşümün kölelik algısına ve uygulamasına etkisidir. Kısacası, bu çalışma Mesopotamya ve Antik Mısır medeniyetlerinde ki cinsiyetler arası uygulama farklarını analiz edip, bu farkların kölelik uygulamalarına yansımaları ve köleliği günlük hayata adapte eden toplumları değerlendirecektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Kölelik, Mesopotamya, Antik Mısır, Kadın Köleliği, Kölelik ve Hukuk*

<sup>1</sup> Arş. Gör. Dr., Erzinçan Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi, furkanyildiz1985@hotmail.com

## **Introduction**

The institution of slavery has existed throughout almost all of human history from urbanization to modern times (Bahar, 2009). To provide understandable and realistic inferences, we should understand the formations within the slavery system, the social approaches for/against slavery, the economic triggers that affect the entire slavery system, and the gender based approaches to enslavement.

The study will demonstrate the historical evolution and milestones of slavery and female slaves from early urban civilizations. As a first important point, the examples of slavery cannot be found in hunter-gatherer societies. As a main reason of this, it can be easily said that the appearance of the institution of slavery has been caused by the social stratification (Wanzola, 2012). Also, it has a significant role to play in highlighting how the institution of slavery showed differences between genders, how the formation of administrative and legal approaches influenced the gap between the sexes and how male dominated societies began to exploit the female's body and rights for their own desires.

The main aim of this study is to provide an analytical overview of the changing role of woman slaves in society and the slavery system in Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. The study considers that social and cultural formation points or rules affect the changing role of women. Women in slavery worked as farmers in the early period of the institution, in later times they worked as domestic servants, a title which includes many duties from nursery nurse to prostitution, and in the later period the role of woman slaves was completely changed. Most female slaves worked not only as domestic housekeeping servants but also as prostitutes, meeting the sexual desires of their masters.

### **Women and Slavery in Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt**

The concept of slavery developed in parallel with the rise of urbanization (Perry, 2012). Pre-urban societies were mainly divided into two, hunter-gatherers and mobile crop-managers; because non-urban societies had no farms on which to base cheap labour or extra manpower, there was no incentive to make people slaves. When these societies began to adopt settled urbanism by setting up towns and cities, such civilised societies started to demand cheap labour to reduce costs. This social transformation could be seen as the birth of slavery (Malay, 1990).

In the urban societies, taking someone into slavery was mainly performed in two different ways. Slaves were generally either prisoners (domestic crimes) and prisoners of war due to rising interactions between people or indebtedness (History of World). In other words, the institution of slavery was fed by both internal and external sources. These societies used slaves for building work, agriculture and mining, as well as for farm and housework (Bales, 1999). Generally, in these societies, taking someone into slavery involved no gender differences. Usually all inhabitants of a defeated town were taken into slavery so that their manpower could be exploited on the farms and in houses, and to sell to make money; the rest were killed (Padgug, 1976).

Before looking at women and slavery in antiquity, the study will set out the types of slavery within historical socio-economic formations. According to Robert A. Padgug (1976), there were two types of slavery: the first being household or "patriarchal" slavery within pre-class societies, and the second, "commodity" slavery within well-developed societies. In contrast to commodity slavery which is about for direct use only, patriarchal slavery is directly engaged in production (Marx, 1973). Both of these forms coexisted in many societies that have had significant roles in history.

According to Westbrook (Leick, 2007), the status of the slave woman in ancient Near Eastern law (Near East used in order to define inclusively the region which contains Mesopotamia and Egypt) was sometimes dominated by owners' seeing her as property and sometimes as a marriageable woman. In these respect, female slaves were treated as a sexual

object different from male slaves. Female slave's legal personality was split between her owner and her husband, if those were different people (Snell, 2011).

Within these perspectives and practices, the study will analyse the role of female slavery in the two ancient civilizations which are Mesopotamia and Egypt. The reason of why these two regions were important is both regions are an indicator in order to see the transformation for female slavery in early civilizations. While the study draws a general picture of the institution of slavery, the later parts of the study will focus on the different practices with regard to women for both forms of slavery in antiquity, and they emphasise the role of women within the formation of the socio-economic structure.

### **Mesopotamia and female slavery**

Prisoners of war and indebted persons were the main sources of slaves in Mesopotamia, as in the other ancient civilizations. While methods of enslavement were the same, social views and rules on slavery varied from civilization to civilization (Bozkurt, 1981). The Mesopotamian slavery system did not generally distinguish between slaves based upon gender or age. Nevertheless, in certain situations, women had not only some additional problems because of their gender, but also some additional rights in specific circumstances that will be described below. In the Mesopotamian institution of slavery, slaves were generally treated as personal property or commodities (Mendelsohn, 1978).

Ancient Sumer persisted in southern Mesopotamia from the beginning of the 4,000s BCE until 2,000 BCE. There were two common methods for obtaining slaves: war and debt bondage. These captives were used as domestic servants and as irrigation construction workers. In Sumerian society, slaves were treated as personal property or commodities. Despite this systemic exploitation of slaves, the first abolitionist moves in history were made by King Urukagina, from the first Lagash Dynasty in 2,350 BCE, and King Gudea, from the second Lagash Dynasty in the 2,100s BCE (Tosun, 1973). In the context of this general framework for slavery, the Laws of Ur-Namma (2,100 BCE), Laws of Lipit-Ishtar (1,930 BCE) and the Sumerian Exercise Tablet (1,800 BCE) establish some special rules for women; for instance, that women and girls could be enslaved, because of the debts of their husbands or fathers. These slaves were called *neptitum* and were put in bondage for three years, not more; and if a free woman married a male slave who worked for the King or the nobles in the government, her children would be free like herself (Woolley, 1965). In addition to all of these practices, perhaps the most important principle was that, even if a child was born of a slave mother, if its father was a free man, it had its father's rights. Also, a woman was free after her master's death, though she did not become his inheritor (Tosun and Yalvaç, 1975).

In Babylonia, slavery was implemented significantly differently from other Mesopotamian civilizations, despite being situated in the same landscape. Hammurabi's rules divided people into three main groups: *amelu* (noble and rich people), *mushkinu* (a status between being enslaved and being rich), and slaves (Woolley, 1965). These categorizations did not form a caste system of permanent social stratification; switching was possible between social classes (Driver and Miles, 1960).

Hammurabi's rules conferred some rights on women slaves. The foremost right was accorded to concubine slaves. In Babylonia, one duty of a woman slave was to be a concubine, satisfying the sexual desires of her master. Yet, if there was a restriction in a woman slave's sale contract, such as 'this slave cannot be a concubine, and should be married with a freeman or a slave', she could not be made a concubine, even after the death of her husband (Saggs, 1968). Another rule for a slave woman required that, if she had a son from a free man and he recognized the boy as such, the slave woman took her liberty either immediately after delivery, or after the death of her master (Abadan, 1943). In addition to these directives, in the event of 'misconduct' such as disobedience or disloyalty, married women lost their liberty and their

husbands turned them into slaves. By contrast, if men ‘misbehaved’ in the same way, they did not lose their liberty (Hasting, 1911). In an Old Babylonian text, a free man took a slave woman in marriage but was warned that if she asserted her freedom to her mistress, the mistress could simply sell her and keep what property the slave had. The husband would be left with no rights (Snell, 2011). This shows that there was a serious difference among genders from the view of society’s tradition and perception.

In Assyria, as in Sumerian society, people were divided into two categories: masters and slaves (Bozkurt, 1981). Like the other civilizations, the Assyrians took war prisoners and indebted persons into slavery. They also, purchased others on the market, but debt bondage was the most common way to take a slave (Kınal, 1987). In this society, trade was a major occupation in which there were no restrictions, so everyone could easily engage. Women, too, invested their time, money, and power in trade. Thus, women could become indebted and because of this, could become enslaved. There was a gendered pricing principle in the slavery system: because of the generally greater physical strength of male slaves, female slaves’ prices were lower (Darga, 1984).

Female slave prices were differed from each civilization. The cost of a female slave depends on the society’s perception for her. For example, in Old Babylonia, a slave woman or slave girl was cheaper than a male slave. The price of a male slave varied from fourteen shekels (a weight of about 8.33 grams) of silver to twenty (Nikol’skii, 1908). However, we can find the price of a female slave from the Old Babylonian letter as: “...We bought two slave girls for a third mana three shekels [23 shekels or 11.5 each]. ...” (Kraus, 1964).

Mesopotamian civilizations are good examples indicating different practices for slavery. Their emerging legal structures and development of civilization levels helped with the coexistence of both forms of slavery (Mendelsohn, 1978). These three civilizations used different codes to regulate all social and legal institutions. Also, these codes included regulations to determine the ownership of slaves, and slaves’ rights, responsibilities and standards. In my view, Mesopotamian slavery can be referred to as an ‘intermediate transverse form of slavery’, because it reflects not only the features of primitive societies, but also characteristics of more developed societies. We can see that Mesopotamian slavery was both household, or ‘patriarchal’ slavery, and ‘commodity’ slavery.

### **Ancient Egypt and Female Slavery**

Ancient Egypt was one of the most influential and durable civilizations in antiquity. In Egypt, society was mainly divided into three: free men, free women and slaves. Also, the free population was divided into three: the lower class (farmers), the middle class (artists and craftsmen) and the upper class (scribes and officials) (Billard, 1978; Bozkurt, 1981).

Unlike other ancient civilizations, in Egypt, slaves were counted as merchandise like ornaments and jewellery (Engin, 1998) and there were large numbers of slaves. Also, this perception of slaves is a sign of cultural differences. Probably, Egyptian slavery was the first pure example of ‘commodity’ slavery. In other words, slaves could be sold, given as presents or bequeathed in wills. The four Canaanites in the following testament had been left to Wah as family dependants in his brother's will. Whether they were slaves or just servants, tradition required their master to take care of them.

Year 2, Month 2 of the Inundation Season, day 18. Will made by the Priest in Charge of the Duty-shifts (of priests) of (the god) Sopdu, Lord of the East, Wah

I am making a will for my wife, a lady of the town of Gesiabab, Sheftu, nick-named Teti, daughter of Sit-Sopdu, concerning all the property that my brother Ankh-renef, the Trustworthy Sealer of the Controller of Works, gave to me along with all the goods belonging to his estate that he gave to me. She may give these things as she pleases to any children of mine she may bear.

I also give to her the four Canaanites that my brother Ankh-renef, the Trustworthy Sealer of Works, gave to me. She may give (them) as she please to her children

..... (Papyrus Kahun I, 1 (ca. 1900 BCE))

As in other ancient civilizations, the sources of slaves were mainly categorized under three subheadings - war, debt, and the slave trade. War was the biggest and most efficient source for meeting Egyptian society's demand for slaves (Fynn-Paul, 2009). Especially after the conquest of Abyssinia, Libya, Syria, Palestine and Nubia during the New Kingdom, the number of war captives dramatically increased (Walvin, 2006). They were generally women and children, who belonged to the pharaohs and worked to meet the needs of the Egyptian state (Black, 2011). People sold themselves either to escape poverty, or to provide money for their families, or to pay their debts. Also, if they committed a serious crime, they were taken into slavery. In the Late Dynastic Period, debt slavery was abolished (Langer, 1948). The other common source was the slave trade. The chattel was bought from abroad, brought to the Kingdom and sold in Egypt by slave traders. Thutmose III from the New Kingdom conquered Palestine and Syria, and brought back approximately 90,000 slaves; slave traders sold them on to neighbouring civilizations (Kovalev and Diakov, 2010).

In addition to all general practices in the institution of slavery, ancient Egypt is a good example of how practices varied from period to period rather than civilization to civilization. For example, in the Old Kingdom period of Egypt, only Pharaohs owned slaves, but in the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom, some officers and priests started to obtain slaves as domestic servants and, eventually, even their subjects had them (Kovalev and Diakov, 2010). In this respect, it was obvious that the slaves filled a wide range of positions, from lowly labourers to government administrators. On temple estates they performed many non-clerical tasks:

I appointed slaves as watchmen in thy harbour, in order to watch the harbour of the Heliopolitan canal in thy splendid place. I made door-keepers of the slaves, manned with people, in order to watch and protect thy court. I made slaves as watchmen of the canal-administration, and the watchmen of the pure barley, for thee likewise (Breasted, 1906).

Like Mesopotamian slavery, in Egypt, the tasks of slaves were not gender-defined. In other words, there was equality between genders in slavery. Slaves worked in royal mines owned by the state, as domestic servants in the houses of the pharaoh and the nobles, and also as priests' assistants in temples. When pharaohs, priests and nobles died, their slaves were entombed with them to accompany their masters to the afterlife (Rives, 1995). The significant difference between Mesopotamia and Egypt was problems arose when the master had sex with his female slaves which could threaten the relationships between the family members, above all when children were born. They seem to have inherited their mothers' social status (Slavery, 2011). Another difference is the prices of slaves. In contrast to the Mesopotamia, for example in the New Kingdom, while a male slave's price was 2 dbn (a weight) of silver, or about forty shekels of silver, a female slave cost more, 4 dbn or eighty shekels (Helck 1984). According to Snell (2011), the reason of this difference was female slaves were valued for the children they might bear.

There was a significant point about Egyptian slavery. After the Middle Kingdom, members of the lower class could obtain slaves because, during this period, conquests increased and many of the populations of conquered lands were transported to the kingdom. The number of slaves dramatically increased, and members of the lower classes could easily obtain females. The reason for this was that most of the male population had been killed during the conquests (Kovalev and Diakov, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

A woman was not a significant actor of the institution of slavery at the beginning of urbanisation. However, with the development of urbanisation and settled societies, women became important for slave trade. In Mesopotamia, there were no significant differences between male and female slaves - they had nearly the same rights. The main reason for this situation was culture because in this period women were a symbol of fertility. So practices were almost the same for men and women, but there was an obvious difference between the genders in that woman slaves could gain their liberty by giving birth to the child of a free man. In parallel with this, Mendelsohn (1978) stated that the highest position a female slave could achieve was to become a child-bearing concubine to her master, and the lowest, to be used as a professional prostitute. In Egypt, despite the various practices in different periods, in general meaning, female slaves in Egypt had almost same task with male slaves. In other words, there were no significant gender-based differences in practice.

Mesopotamian slavery was a good example for ‘patriarchal slavery’ and ‘commodity slavery’. The reason of this assessment is that slaves were a part of production and were an asset of their masters. In Egypt, slaves also a part of production process, but the masters were treated slaves as commodity. Because of that, slavery in Egypt was a good example of appearance of ‘commodity’ slavery. This study shows that needs are perception of societies alter the usage of slaves in different roles as a summary. In short, the evolution of societies in time shapes the fate of slaves in general, female slaves in particular.

In practice, the institution of slavery still exists. This old phenomenon and its practices occur as modern-day slavery and trafficking in human beings in modern world. Almost nine-thousand years after the occurrence of the very first examples of slavery, persons can be sold for domestic servitude, forced labour and prostitute in modern-day (Free the Slaves: 2004: Bales, 2004). As an example, the most current and comprehensive legally binding source of the problem of the trafficking in human beings is the United Nations’ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons as part of the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. While the article 3(a) defines the meaning of trafficking in human beings, the Protocol uses “slavery or practices similar to slavery” as a part of exploitation. This means that one of the oldest institutions still exist. In addition, despite this long history, women in the practice still suffer same treatment which is sexual exploitation.

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## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Kölelik, özellikle yerleşik hayata geçildikten sonra kendini göstermeye başlayan bir sistemdir. Yerleşik hayata geçilmeden önce köleliğin görülmemesinin sebepleri o dönemde üretim amaçlı ucuz işgücü veya fazladan insan gücüne ihtiyaç duyulmamasıdır. Yerleşik hayata geçildikten sonra, kölelik sistemi kendini belirgin bir şekilde göstermeye başlamıştır. Bu dönemde köle edinme yolları mahkumların sisteme alınması ve borçluların köle olması olarak ikiye ayrılır. Ayrıca bu dönemde artan toplumsal ilişkiler sonucu ortaya çıkan savaşlar neticesinde de savaş esirleri köle olarak alınabiliyordu fakat bu durum literatürde genel olarak mahkumların köleliğe alınması olarak değerlendirilir.

Yerleşik hayata geçildikten sonra kölelik iki farklı türde incelenebilir. Daha çok ev işlerine ve tarımsal üretime yönelik köle edinmeyi anlatan ‘household/ patriarchal’ kölelik ve kölelerin tamamen mal olarak görüldüğü ‘commodity’ sistemidir. Bu çalışmada, genel olarak Mezopotamya medeniyetleri ve Antik Mısır, gibi toplumlarda köleliğin uygulandığı ve bu uygulamalarda kadın figürünün yeri çalışılmıştır. Mezopotamya medeniyetlerinde genel olarak kadın ve erkek kölelere yönelik tutumlar için küçük farklar göz ardı edilirse eşit denilebilir. Örneğin, Babil de, kadın kölelerin satış sözleşmesinde bir sınırlama varsa belirtilen görevler dışında her hangi başka bir görevde kullanılması yasaktır. Fakat cinsiyetçi ayırım evli kadınlar ve erkekler arasında ortaya çıkmaktadır. Örneğin evli bir kadın kocasına karşı saygısızlık veya sadakatsizlik yaptığında köleleştirilebilirken bu durum erkekler için geçerli değildir. Asurlar da ise, sosyal hayatın her basamağında kadınlar aktif bir şekilde bulunmaktadır. Bu durum, kadınların yaptıkları ticaret sonucu veya başa bir işlem sonucu doğan borçlarından ötürü köleleştirilmesi sonucunu doğurur. Bu eşitlik unsurunun yanı sıra, kölelik sistemi içindeki kadınların fiziksel güçlerinin erkek kölelere göre daha az olması sonucunda kadın kölelerin fiyatları daha ucuzdur. Özetle, Mezopotamya medeniyetlerinde görülen kölelik yukarıda bahsetmiş olduğum iki tür kölelikten izler barındırmaktadır ve genel olarak kadın köleler ile erkek köleler arasında ciddi bir ayırım yoktur. Antik Mısır, kölelerin mal olarak görüldüğü ‘commodity’ sisteminin en net örneğidir. Uygulamada, herhangi belirgin bir cinsiyetçi tutum bulunmamaktadır.

Görüldüğü üzere, toplumların ilk yerleşik hayata geçmeye başladıkları dönem ile daha karmaşık ve kalıcı medeniyetler oldukları dönem arasında kölelik sistemi içindeki uygulamalar bağlamında ciddi değişimler yaşanmıştır. Özellikle, köleler alınıp satılabilen veya kullanılabilen bir mal olarak görülmeye başladığından kölelere yönelik uygulamalarda köle sahipleri sınırsız hak sahibi durumuna gelmiştir. Bu sistem içerisinde, kadınlar giderek dezavantajlı konuma itilmiştir. Gerek erkekler kadar fiziki güce sahip olmamalarından gerekse toplumsal normların geçirdiği evrimden ötürü kadınların kölelik sistemi içerisindeki görev tanımlamaları giderek efendilerinin cinsel ihtiyaçlarını karşılamaya dönüşmüştür.

Uygulamada ve bakış açısında değişimler yaşansa bile, günümüzde halen kölelik ve köleliğe benzer uygulamalar kendilerini literatürdeki başka suçlar kapsamında göstermeye devam etmektedirler. Bu bağlamda, köleliğin ve kölelik içindeki kadının durumu açısından uygulamada benzerlikler dikkat çekici düzeydedir.