

September 2020 Speaker
Dr. Sheila Ager
Topic: Status of Women/Antiquity vs. Today

Sheila Ager, professor of Classical Studies and dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo, kicked off our new season with a thought-provoking talk on whether women today are better off than in antiquity two millenniums ago. Her catchy title was “You’ve come a long way baby – Or have you?” Her conclusion—Yes...and No.

“The ancient view was that women were inferior to men: weak, flawed, unable to learn and reason; only good at leading men astray,” she started off. She wryly added, “If this sounds familiar, it should.”

She drove home her theme through describing practices in Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. As she proceeded the famous saying “Plus ça change plus c’est la même chose” (The more things change, the more they stay the same) popped up in my mind and maybe in yours, too. Athens, she said, “had an extremely radical democracy” except regarding women. “They were seen as simply the receptacle of the seed of life from a man. Female sexuality must be controlled by men, a view that still holds in some places today. That is why women then and now were/are confined from the outside world through seclusion at home and a veil, “a form of seclusion,” when permitted out in public. She emphasized that “while Islamist extremism regarding women is often touched on these days, *all* major religions regard women as lesser beings. Cultural beliefs are adopted and ossified in religion.

“There is a romantic modern tendency to believe that there were once Amazonian female warriors [like the fictional ‘Wonder Woman’], equal to men, an ancient matriarchy. But it’s a myth. All cultures viewed women as inferior.”

Education was for men only in ancient Athens, she noted, citing this memorably chauvinistic quote from then: “Giving an education to a woman is like giving venom to a viper,” This view still exists in parts of the world, Sheila said, pointing to the fury directed at Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai (in 2014, at age 23, the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize recipient) when she advocated for women’s education in places where there deliberately was none. There was child marriage in ancient times at 14 or 15 when girls reached puberty and still today. A dowry was required then and still is because girls had/have “no intrinsic or labour value.” Women should be under male authority, “guardians” -father, husband, son (minimum age, 18)- all their life even if adults. So, in all these areas women have not come a long way.

But in other areas they have made gains. Women couldn’t inherit then, have a profession and be in politics. They can now. But have women “come a long way?” Only somewhat, Sheila believes. “Canada should not be complacent.” She pointed out that in the most recent United Nations Gender Inequality Index, Canada ranked only #18 in providing equality. 31.7 percent of Canadian federal MPs are women but in Rwanda, Cuba and Zimbabwe, where it could be thought the percentage of women in politics is less, it actually is substantially more.

Susan Goldenberg