WOMEN, ROLES OF

[Two articles appear under this entry and reflect the evolving nature of women’s roles in the context of Church doctrine and culture:]

Historical and Sociological Development

Gospel Principles and the Roles of Women

The first article discusses the roles of women as they emerged during significant periods of the Church. The second article describes the impact of gospel principles on the roles, and eventually, the lives of women in the Church.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

LDS beliefs create a unique feminine identity that encourages women to develop their abilities as potentially Godlike individuals, while at the same time asserting that the most important activities for both men and women center around the creation and maintenance of family relationships.

The eternal potential for women has always been based on doctrinal canon, which has remained essentially unaltered since the Church was organized. However, women’s temporal roles have taken different forms depending on the situations confronting the Church at various times in its history. Across all the historical periods, the application of the LDS theological perspective on women to pragmatic circumstances has meant that the Church’s female membership always played a central role in ensuring the success of Mormonism as a religion and as a society.

WOMEN’S ROLES IN THE CHURCH’S FORMATIVE PERIOD (1830–1847). Typical of most adherents to newly formed and struggling religions, the early Latter-day Saints reacted to stresses by emphasizing an intensely spiritual orientation to everyday living. Although the authority to administer most ordinances and preside over most gatherings was restricted to a male PRIESTHOOD, the gifts of the Spirit were not considered to belong to men alone. Women received personal revelation, healed the sick, prophesied future events, and performed various other actions that required spiritual gifts. The faith of these women and their ability to develop spiritual qualities were essential for keeping the Church alive during its difficult first years. They voted on Church matters, assisted in temple ceremonies, and contributed to welfare activities. As a group, women obtained an ecclesiastical identity through the formation of the Relief Society, viewed by the Prophet Joseph Smith as an integral and essential part of the Church. Additionally, the women provided much of the physical labor, doctored the sick and injured, assisted in reestablishing a succession of new communities, and cared for the needs of members whose families had faced hardships.

WOMEN’S ROLES IN THE CONSOLIDATION PERIOD (1847–1920). The broad-scale migration of the Latter-day Saints from the Midwest of the United States to the sparsely populated Great Basin region of the West marked the beginning of the consolidation of the LDS religion. Separated from the larger Anglo-American civilization by hundreds of miles of forbidding and unsettled terrain, the Latter-day Saints were able to set up their community under guidelines dictated by their religion. Among the social practices that became prominent after the migration to the West, and that significantly influenced women’s lives, were PLURAL MARRIAGE and the assignment of adult men to extensive tours of duty as Church missionaries. A woman whose husband divided his time between multiple wives and/or missionary service was often obliged to provide single-handedly both material and emotional support for herself and her children.

The growth of the population and its socialization in the Church were important factors in consolidating and strengthening the LDS organization; and much of this responsibility fell to the women. Because of the absence of their husbands, women enlarged their role as “mothers in Zion” with aspects not generally associated with nineteenth-century feminine domesticity. President Brigham Young encouraged the education of both girls and boys in “the manners and customs of distant kingdoms and nations, with their laws, religions, geographical location, . . . their climate, natural productions, the extent of their commerce, and the nature of their political organization” (JD 9:188–89; Widtsoe, p. 211). He also suggested that women should “keep books and sell goods” (JD 12:374–75; Widtsoe, p. 218), and exhorted them to “vote . . . because women are the characters that rule the ballot box” (JD 1:218; Widtsoe, p. 367).

Some LDS women participated in political action concerning their gender, as evidenced by their being the second female population, after that of Wyoming, to vote in a national election.

The admonitions of President Young reflect an image of female responsibility drawn both from the belief that women and men are eligible for the
same “eternal progression” and from the dependency of the early Utah Church on maintaining a capable and resourceful female membership. The women’s response to the necessity of developing broad practical abilities and to an intense devotion to family forged the image of LDS women that emerged from practical as well as religious factors during this period.

**Women’s Roles in the Expansionist Era (1920–Present).** Throughout the early 1900s, the ideal of LDS converts flocking to Utah from all corners of the globe to build up an isolated “Zion” was gradually transformed into one of establishing the Church in many different countries and cultures. This change, accompanied by the encroachment of non-LDS settlers into “Mormon country,” confronted the Church with the social issues of integrating its membership into non-LDS societies. Delimiting and articulating the position of LDS women was one of those issues; however, the role of women was not a topic that aroused much controversy.

The centrality of the family in LDS culture and doctrine fit easily into the popular nineteenth-century Victorian ideal of a highly, not to say exclusively, domestic role for women. The necessity of consolidating the Church as a community and as an organization was replaced by the desire to form a stable population that could fit comfortably into ambient cultures, particularly the culture of the United States.

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the traditional role of women presented few obstacles to achieving this goal. As industrialization pushed the sphere of American males progressively out of the home, and that of females increasingly into it, most Latter-day Saints simply followed the pattern of secular society. In accordance with its family-centered doctrines, the Church readily endorsed the ideal of women as homemakers, wives, and mothers. The popularization of feminism in the 1970s presented LDS women with a complex set of expectations and competing priorities. Secular analyses set the attainment of an individual’s personal goals or advancement in opposition to dedication to the family; LDS belief defines the two as inextricably intertwined.

The divergence of LDS religious beliefs from the theoretical basis of secular society presents modern-day LDS women with a perplexing set of role dilemmas. In the first place, they are inculcated by LDS doctrine and the historical examples of other LDS women with the twin beliefs of developing their personal abilities and centering their lives in their families. On the other hand, like all women, they operate in the larger societal context of legal, political, and economic systems in which these two ideals are sometimes seen as mutually exclusive.

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**Gospel Principles and the Roles of Women**

The present role of women in LDS society is singular to the degree that it reflects the teachings and doctrines of the Church. Among the most fundamental of these is individual agency, or the right to choose. Consistent with this doctrine, a woman’s role varies with her circumstances and the choices that she makes within the context of LDS belief; she may fill many roles simultaneously.

One function of women is the consistent attention to the needs of others—not only family but all within reach of their help. Most render care personally in times of illness, death, or other life crises, but often they work in a coordinated effort with other members of the Relief Society. To “share one another’s burdens, that they may be light” (Mosiah 18:8) is a principle and expectation associated with the very essence of a woman’s membership in the Church (see Baptism; Sisterhood).

Caring for those in need often leads women to develop better ways of handling problems and to acquire specialized skills. Early in the history of the Church, women became nurses, midwives, and doctors; some established hospitals and baby clinics, while others started schools for young people (see Deseret Hospital, Maternal and Child Health Care). They also developed HOME
INDUSTRIES, carried out a thriving SILK CULTURE, and established a large grain-storage program (see WELFARE).

The Latter-day Saint community in the mountain West, perhaps because of polygamy, perhaps because men were often away on missions, provided an unusual independence for women—and an interdependence among polygamous wives. These conditions offered both the impetus and the practicality for women to acquire education and training uncommon to many women of their day. No less typical, LDS women today continue to take part in helping to “bring forth and establish the cause of my Zion” (D&C 6:6). They care for the poor and sick; serve proselytizing, welfare, and humanitarian missions; and teach children and youth, realizing their contribution to the temporal and spiritual welfare of the Saints.

The companionship role is one most often identified for women in the Church. Adam “began to till the earth,” and “Eve, also, his wife, did labor with him” (Moses 5:1). President Spencer W. KIMBALL pointed out that women are “full partners” with men (Kimball, p. 42). This companionship is not limited to the husband and wife partnership but includes women serving cooperatively with men (e.g., Priesthood and Relief Society) to carry out the work of the Church. From the early days, “the women of the Church have voted side by side with the men on all questions submitted to the Church membership for vote, . . . an advanced concept in 1830 when no women and few men voted in any church and few women had political franchise” (History of the Relief Society, p. 102).

Underlying the companionship role is the inherent EQUALITY of men and women as suggested by the creation account: “In the image of his own body, male and female, created he them, and blessed them” (Moses 6:9). Spiritual gifts, promises, and blessings of the Lord are given to those who qualify, without regard to gender. The receipt of spiritual gifts is conditional on obedience, not gender (D&C 46:9–25).

Bruce R. McConkie of the Council of the Twelve emphasized the equality of men and women in things of the spirit:

Where spiritual things are concerned, as pertaining to all of the gifts of the Spirit, with reference to the receipt of revelation, the gaining of testimonies, and the seeing of visions, in all matters that pertain to godliness and holiness and which are brought to pass as a result of personal righteousness—in all these things men and women stand in the position of . . . equality before the Lord [Ensign 9 (June 1979):61].

Temple ordinances are further evidence that “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:11).

It is to be noted that the highest blessings therein [the temple] available are only conferred upon a man and woman jointly. Neither can receive them alone. In the Church of Christ woman is not an auctor but an equal partner with man [Widtsoe, p. 373].

Women and men, although equal in status, fulfill some separate and different roles in the work of the Church. To men is given the responsibility of holding the priesthood, with many prescribed duties. The role for women is less precisely defined, though no less real. According to Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve:

We know so little about the reasons for the division of duties between womanhood and manhood as well as between motherhood and priesthood. These were divinely determined in another time and another place. We are accustomed to focusing on the men of God because theirs is the priesthood and leadership line. But paralleling that authority line is a stream of righteous influence reflecting the remarkable women of God who have existed in all ages and dispensations, including our own [Maxwell, p. 94].

Wielding an influence for good, women fill myriad assignments in the Church: They preside over, direct, and staff the organizations for women (Relief Society), young women (YOUNG WOMEN), and children (PRIMARY) at WARD, Stake, and general levels; they teach doctrinal study classes for adults, youth, and children; they direct choirs and dramatic productions; they officiate in temple ceremonies; they serve as members of welfare committees at all levels of the Church; and they organize cultural and recreational events in which all members participate.

LDS women also fulfill societal roles such as physicians, lawyers, professors, homemakers, administrators, teachers, writers, secretaries, artists, and businesswomen. Additionally, many serve in community, political, and volunteer capacities. Consistent with the LDS belief that the greatest good that parents do is in their own home and that no other involvement ought to have precedence
over their concern for family, members are encouraged to make pivotal decisions with regard to their effect on the family. This priority of family unavoidably influences the role expectations for women, including that of mother, wife, homemaker, and teacher. Latter-day Saint women are taught from their youth to prepare for marriage and homemaking, as well as for a vocation. Camilla Kimball, wife of President Spencer W. Kimball, counseled every girl and woman to: “qualify in two vocations—that of homemaking, and that of preparing a living outside the home, if and when the occasion requires. A married woman may become a widow without warning. . . . Thus a woman may be under the necessity of earning her own living and helping to support her dependent children” (Ensign 7 [Mar. 1977]:59).

Church leaders have long urged women, individually and as a group, to obtain all the education available to them, to “be given to writing, and to learning much” (D&C 25:8). Schooling for women has been encouraged not only for their own fulfillment and achievement but also for its value in helping them make the home a place of learning and refinement and for its importance in the lives of children. Even though training and education may open many career opportunities for women, the role of mother is dominant for those who have young children, and they are urged to use their training to benefit their children.

The Church does not oppose women working outside the home per se, and recognizes the contributions that they make in government, professions, business, and in creative fields. Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve explained that “a woman should feel free to go into the marketplace and into community service on a paid or volunteer basis if she so desires when her home and family circumstances allow her to do so without impairment to them” (Ashton, p. 93). It is understood that some mothers are required to work for the support of their children, but it is hoped that whenever possible, mothers with children in the home will make home their priority career.

All women are daughters of “glorious mother Eve” (D&C 138:39) who, as the “mother of all living” (Moses 4:26), left a legacy that is the inheritance of every woman. This role transcends the care of an immediate family. It describes a nature and attitude that is basic for all women. President Harold B. Lee expressed this when he addressed the women of the Church assembled in the Tabernacle: “Now you mothers over the Church. . . .” (see Mothers in Israel). Every woman, whatever her family status, calling, or occupation, is involved in the roles of one who nurtures, lifts, consoles; who tenders love; and who protects and preserves families.

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WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Some general conclusions about Book of Mormon women can be drawn from the book’s fragmentary material about marriage, family, and religious organization. Six women are mentioned by name: Sariah, Isabel, Abish, Eve, Sarah, and Mary. Since no women are mentioned as religious or military leaders and only a few as political leaders, it appears that males held virtually all leadership positions in this society. Also, since the Book of Mormon was written primarily to remind future readers of the goodness of God and to persuade them to believe in Christ, it contains no law books and little intellectual or social history discussing the meshing of familial and religious practices. It is reasonable to assume, however, that these people began with many customs similar to their ancestral Semitic cultures and that their practices changed somewhat over the years.

In Nephite society, marriage and childbirth were expected, carrying religious significance and responsibilities (1 Ne. 7:1; Mosiah 4:14–15; 4 Ne. 1:11). Marriages may have been arranged within ethnic groups (1 Ne. 16:7; Alma 17:24) and were restricted outside certain groups (Alma 3:8). Polygamy and concubinage were prohibited and scorned; monogamy was expected, except as the Lord might command otherwise to “raise up seed” unto himself (Jacob 2:27–30).