Why Women’s Status Deteriorated

Excerpt from *World History in Brief Major Patterns of Change and Continuity*by Peter Stearns.

Directions:

1. Read the excerpt once *silently* to yourself.
2. Re-read the passage and do a **close read**.

*(Close reading is a strategy in which students interact with the text. The purpose of a close read is to analyze the text at a deeper level* ***and*** *communicate to your teacher your thinking as you read.)*

Use the following annotations as you read:

* Underline what you think Peter Stearn’s **thesis or main arguments** are
* Circle words that are new to you / you don’t understand
* Write in the margins questions you have, reactions, connections to something else you learned about or already knew, etc.
1. After you read and annotate, answer the following questions **on a separate sheet of paper and in complete sentences**.
2. According to Peter Sterns, what caused gender relations to change from egalitarian (completely equal) to patriarchal (dominated by men)? Provide a one sentence answer.
3. List four pieces of evidence or reasoning that Stearns provides to support his claim.
4. Separate Stearn’s argument into ***causes*** leading to the decline of women’s status and effects of changes that occurred ***after*** women lost status.
5. Write a one paragraph reaction to Stearn’s argument. Do you agree or not? What parts of his argument make sense and which do you have problems with? Explain. (**Note that I am not asking you if you agree that women should have fewer rights and privileges; I am asking if you agree with his argument about why this happened.)**

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      Despite images of cave men dragging women off by the hair, it is quite clear that hunting and gathering societies did not subordinate women systematically. Women's economic contributions were reflected in a religious culture that often stressed the female creative principle. This situation changed as agriculture became established, and the trend occurred everywhere that farming spread. (Interestingly, nonagricultural societies, like the herding peoples in Central Asia, continued to give women greater voice, which led to some important culture clashes when they encountered agricultural civilizations.)
      The signs of change abound. Men did the heaviest agricultural work; Middle Eastern art by 3000 B.C.E. showed men always responsible for plowing. Because men's relative economic importance grew, male children were favored and men had primary rights of property ownership. While religions long continued to feature gods and goddesses, emphasis on a primary male creator god, like Marduk in the Middle East or Zeus in Greece, increased; goddesses became more peripheral. The Jewish religion, emphasizing a single god, pushed this principle of a masculine divinity still further. Laws and social habits often followed suit. By 2000 B.C.E., many Middle Eastern women were veiled to help ensure that they would remain sexually faithful to their husbands--who were not placed under any such controls.
      The question, of course, is why this happened. The rise of women's history and new debates about women's rights today open the gender inequality of the past to explanation; it no longer seems self-evident. Current explanations include several components, and it is unlikely that such a basic shift resulted from one factor alone. Agricultural societies, needing to defend from attack and not infrequently seeking to conquer, organized more formal military forces, which gave new emphasis to male power. The birth rate went up, as agricultural societies found uses for more labor and also needed to compensate far higher disease rates; this meant that women spent more of their lives bearing and caring for children. Men may have pushed for greater power to compensate for the decline of the hunt. In the upper classes, at least, establishment of agricultural property made determination of inheritance more important: men wanted to know which children were theirs and so tried to regulate women's sexual behavior. We do not know how these various causes mixed together, but the result is clear. And in most agricultural societies, women's inferiority tended to increase with time, as success prompted more male groups to demonstrate their status by lording over women.