

**Rights of women**

Women were treated as minors in Roman law. They could not vote or hold political office. Instead, she was under the control of her ***paterfamilias*** all her life. Even once she was married she was legally protected by the head of her birth family and so her husband might have had to be careful before mistreating her too much (although some certainly did). Nevertheless, although possible, it was hard for them to initiate divorce

Women’s position in society also greatly depended on their social background and their marriage. Their role was seen to be in producing heirs for the family, through whom property could pass and the family name and reputation live on.

The ability of women, particularly wealthy women, to interact with other members of society was somewhat restricted. Nevertheless it was not uncommon for them to visit friends, go to public places such as the market, temples or the baths.

**The Wife**

The *paterfamilias’* (head of the household) wife was important for the running of the family’s home whilst her husband conducted business, mostly away from home. Her role included directing the household slaves and inspecting their work, educating their daughters and helping run any dinner parties held in the house.

Perhaps the most important task the wife had was managing the spinning of wool and weaving of cloth. This seems strange to us but Roman families prided themselves on their ability to make most of their own cloth, even if they could easily afford to buy this. A wife would be expected to know how to do this and to teach others, including her daughters. It is common to find sculptures of wealthy women spinning and it is a skill often mentioned on their tombstones. Even Livia, the wife of the first emperor Augustus, was known for making her husband’s clothes herself!

The wife would also nurse her infant children, even if she had slaves to help her. Childbirth was a dangerous business for them as it brought the risk of infection.