

Did institutions take over women's work?

International Women's Day was marked yesterday. Each year, the occasion celebrates women's achievements and highlights the ongoing struggle for equality and recognition. These conversations are important. Yet the day can also invite a deeper reflection about history and civilisation: when traditional knowledge became institutionalised, did power quietly shift away from women?

Across much of human history, women were central to the functioning of societies. They were caregivers, and, above all, the bearers of life itself. These roles were not merely domestic responsibilities; they were forms of knowledge accumulated over generations and embedded within communities.

Consider childbirth. For centuries, birth was largely managed by women through midwives and community networks. Midwives understood the rhythms of labour, herbal remedies, and the practices that supported mothers before and after delivery. Birth was a communal event guided by experience passed down from one generation of women to another.

Beginning in the 18th and 19th centuries, however, childbirth gradually moved into hospitals as the fields of obstetrics and gynaecology developed. Medicine brought enormous scientific progress and dramatically improved survival rates. Yet the professionalisation of childbirth also meant that a process historically managed by women became institutionalised within a medical system that male doctors largely dominated.

The midwife, once the central authority in childbirth, gradually became an assistant within a structure run by medical institutions. The question is not whether medical progress was necessary - it clearly was. The more intriguing question is whether the "institutionalisation of knowledge also transferred authority".

Cooking provides another revealing example. Across cultures and throughout

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Women's Day



history, cooking has traditionally been associated with women in the household. Mothers and grandmothers preserved recipes, techniques, and food traditions that sustained families and communities.

Yet when cooking moved from the home into the professional world of restaurants and global media, the picture changed dramatically. In much of Europe and North America, many of the most celebrated and highly paid chefs, especially those featured on television and running elite restaurants, have historically been men. Celebrity chefs dominate culinary shows, restaurant empires, and international awards, even though the knowledge of preparing food has long been nurtured in kitchens run by women.

The contrast raises an interesting question: when cooking became a prestigious profession with financial rewards and global visibility, why did the gender balance shift so dramatically?

A similar pattern can be observed in traditional healing. In many societies, women were the custodians of herbal medicine and household healthcare. Their understanding of plants and remedies sustained communities for generations. With the rise of modern scientific medicine and pharmaceutical industries, much of this knowledge was

absorbed into laboratories and formal medical training, while traditional healers were often dismissed as practitioners of "folk medicine".

Even leadership structures reflect this broader transformation. In several traditional societies, women held influential roles such as queen mothers, clan mothers, or spiritual authorities who advised leaders and safeguarded lineage traditions. With the rise of modern state systems and colonial administrative structures, many of these positions gradually faded as authority became concentrated within formal political institutions.

Seen together, these examples reveal an intriguing historical pattern. As societies modernised, knowledge that once existed within communities was gradually absorbed into professional institutions. Once knowledge became formalised through licensing, education systems, and economic reward, those who controlled these institutions inevitably gained power.

When knowledge moved from communities into institutions, did power move with it? International Women's Day may, therefore, offer more than a moment of celebration. It may also encourage us to reconsider how civilisations evolve and how the contributions that sustained societies for centuries can sometimes become less visible when new systems of prestige, economics, and authority emerge.

Recognising this history does not diminish modern progress. Rather, it reminds us that many of the professions shaping the modern world were built upon foundations laid long before institutions were created and often by women whose knowledge quietly sustained human civilisation.

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