

# Prince Philip: inequality, sacrifice, and gratitude

*Odessa Hamilton* reflects on the Duke of Edinburgh's forfeiture of male dominance during an era when men ran the world and, by contrast, women lacked the most basic of rights.

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At this poignant time, as we reminisce about HRH The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, and the shining example he set of a man, strong in will and character, yet in many ways secondary to his wife, Queen Elizabeth II, I consider what that meant in the early years. Particularly, how they together have, perhaps unintentionally, redefined gender roles and paved a way for gender equality at a time when it was not popular, nor on the national agenda. After all, if the head of the British monarchy can be a woman, with a sharp and brilliant man beside her in a supportive capacity, can there be bounds to the role of women in any other sphere? I say not. Further, are strength and masculinity paradoxical with submission? They have proved not.

The Duke of Edinburgh has been portrayed as a formidable man who was no less so because he operated as the queen's royal consort. A man of the armed forces, stately, faithful, a great innovator, boldly and unapologetically opinionated, and bluntly outspoken (often controversially so). Yet, this orthodox picture of masculinity is a juxtaposition to his shamelessly subservient and supportive pose in his duty to his wife and country. Let us, thus, reflect on the gravity of the Duke of Edinburgh's forfeiture of male dominance during an era when men ran the world, and by contrast women lacked the most basic of rights.

## 40s

World War II saw an eruption of female conscription, with an only moderate acknowledgement that women notably advantage wartime efforts. Some 7.25 million women had been commissioned into the armed forces, industry, agriculture and the civil defence. Medical care was only available to the insured, typically men, but the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948 offered medical care to all, greatly benefitting women. A woman's destined role of wife, mother and housekeeper was being challenged. However, the second world war saw a decline in the feminist movement and gender inequalities remained rooted in the status quo; too much so to break the cycle of discrimination. Female roles continued to be personified in domesticity, while assuming novel status in the workforce – this saw the beginning of a woman's burden of maintaining two discrete laborious functions for the credit of one ([The Guardian, 2018](#); [The National Archives, 2021](#)).

## 50s

Things being as they were, the 1956 Sexual Offences Act only now afforded females protection from rape, defined as sex without consent; with a minor; by incest; influenced by drugs or impersonation ([OPSI, 1956](#)). In addition, although feminism efforts may have been curtailed, the fifties saw the onset of equal pay among male and female teachers and civil servants. What's more, although thought to be unsuitable for politics, for the first time the 1958 Life Peerages Act permitted women to sit in the House of Lords ([Takayanagi, 2008](#)).

## 60s

Alas, women were only just permitted to retain half of any savings they may have accumulated from any monetary allowances her husband bestowed upon her (viz., The Married Women's Property Act, 1964; [Harbury & Hitchens, 1977](#)). Coinciding with this small triumph, abortion was decriminalised (viz., The Abortion Act, 1967), but only under risk of prenatal mortality ([Addison, 1970](#)), and contraceptives, with relative advice, became available to all women on the NHS, regardless of marital status (viz., The NHS [Family Planning] Act, 1967; [UK Parliament, 2021](#)).

## 70s

Interestingly, there were various drivers for change in the seventies through women's movements, with significant measures toward gender disidentification. Feminism re-emerged and with it a provocation of the 1970 Equal Pay Act, where differential pay between men and women became illegal ([Dolton et al., 1996](#)). Unintentionally or otherwise, discrimination against females at work, in education or training became unlawful (viz., The Sex Discrimination Act, 1975; [Holt & Cummings, 2004](#)), and the Equal Opportunities Commission ensured maternity provisions were made to protect a woman's standing at work while pregnant ([Sacks, 1986](#)). In parallel, protections were afforded to women and children in the home (The Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act, 1976), and with temporary accommodations made as a preventative measure against homelessness. Furthermore, 1979 saw a great win for women in the appointment of Baroness Margaret Thatcher; Britain's first female Prime Minister, and in the same stroke, the annual International Women's Day was formalised. However, all was not just and fair, as women in the seventies were still refused mortgages without a male guarantor ([Roy, 2008](#)).

### Contrast

Thus, against this background of vexing gender inequities, despite a likely initial hesitancy, in personal sacrifice, the Duke of Edinburgh relinquished his naval ambitions in his call for duty and submitted his authority to a woman, his wife, our queen; serving proudly with integrity in her shadow.

### Reciprocity

Notwithstanding, going against the grain of royal convention, in her last journey with him, the queen paid final respect to her husband by opting to submit to his lead. The longest royal union in history has been described as an extraordinary partnership; as the queen's confidant, the duke welded enormous influence during his wife's reign. The queen herself dubbed him as her strength and guide, yet he walked two steps behind her at will, during an era when men would have walked two steps ahead. And so, at the end of this almost semi-sesquicentennial love story, our minds and thoughts are with Her Majesty, as she manages her very public grief with solemnity and poise. In true royal fashion – *duty before self*.

### Gratitude

With dignity and honour HRH The Prince Philipp, Duke of Edinburgh, has loyally supported our sovereign in her service to this country and Commonwealth, and so it is with gratitude and respect that I write this piece to commemorate him.



### Notes:

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