

Western European Gender Relations – Gender relations

Overview Opportunities for women in business and the marketplace grew, with the evolution of mediaeval cities and towns, and with the growing diversity of roles to be played in society. Although during the early feudal period we see women (as well as men) constricted largely to basic agricultural work, we see women (a few) growing into distinguished regal and social positions in the urban societies of the later Middle Ages.

The earlier period: the Church The Catholic Church provided (and tended to define) the higher roles available to women in the earlier Middle Ages. Despite rare exceptions, ‘heretical deviations,’ the Roman Catholic Church has consistently excluded women from the priesthood, and that on scriptural grounds. Furthermore, a decree of 441 C.E. vetoed the possibility of women deaconesses, a significant priest-assistant role reserved for trained men. Within the Church framework, however, there remained significant opportunities not only for nuns--who could take that route out of a life of often heavy agricultural labor--but for administrative roles in the church, including the important role of Abbess, a monastery supervisor who was able, not infrequently, to supervise communities of monks as well as of nuns.

The earlier period: secular roles The nature of early Feudalism, the years leading up to 800 A.D., dictated the overwhelming social concern with agricultural labor. Though small cities were by this time slowly enlarging, ninety percent of a society’s work life went into farming and field work, all of this done with little technological assistance. (We noted, under the entry on Innovation, the important advances made, in the period in question, with heavy ploughs, horse shoes, and horse collars.) Within this agricultural culture women were active participants, regularly busy with such jobs as gleaning, weeding, binding of sheaves, making hay and collecting wood. On a slightly more entrepreneurial level, and with a little luck, the same women might work their ways up into positions as brewers, bakers, or high class spinners.

The higher middle ages (1100-1300) With the growth of urban life, roles for women--in business, in commercial trade--were increasing. There were, in addition, numerous regional queens, and a toweringly influential patroness like Elinor d’Aquitaine (1120-1204), who opened paths for women writers and artists. Even on the women’s labor front there were developments, like the growths of guilds, which in important cases provided women with labor solidarity, and with some protection against the widely prevalent gender inequality.

The late middle ages (1300-1500) By this mature stage of mediaeval (almost early modern) development, women of great spirituality and intellect surge from the framework of Catholic orthodoxy. Apart from such saintly figures as Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and Saint Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), there are heroic warriors of faith, like Joan of Arc (1412-1431) and Isabella of Castille (1451-1504), one of the most powerful regents of her time.

Afterstory With the development of the Christian Middle Ages, woman gain larger and more influential voices, and without question soar above most of their male counterparts, In church or state. But women’s history was also evolving on other levels, and in matters of biology, for example, women’s nutrition was improving--with increased access to sources of nutritional iron, and the opening of trade routes to such comestibles as salted herring, rabbit, and a wide variety of nutritional grains.

Readings

Farmer, Sharon, *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis, 2001.

Erler, Mary; Kowaleski, Maryanne, *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca, 2003.

Discussion questions

Were women, on the whole, better off in the Middle Ages or in Greco-Roman antiquity? Narrow your response by picking a specific time period from each culture.

How much social and economic upward mobility did the aspiring woman have in the Later Middle Ages?

How free were women, in the Middle Ages, to pick and (if necessary) divorce their spouses? Pick a time period on which to concentrate.