

GENDER IN HISTORY – Early Modern Period (1450-1750)

Basic factors It is harder to generalize about global changes in gender conditions during the early modern period than about most of the other conventional world history periods. Nothing as sweeping as the spread of missionary religions provides an overall focus. The period's big developments – massive increases in world trade, the inclusion of the Americas in international contacts, and the rise of a variety of new empires – do not lend themselves to systematic generalizations about gender. A number of specific developments occurred within key regions, however, that had major implications for the areas involved. None, however, constituted a shift in the basic characteristics of patriarchal agricultural societies.

The world economy The spread of trade linking many areas of the world encouraged various kinds of commercial and manufacturing expansion, though as yet without major technological change. In the process tens of thousands of women, in many regions, took on new or ancillary jobs in domestic manufacturing, producing textile products, shoes, basic tools for sale on the market while working in the home with hand-powered equipment. Men participated too, but on the whole gravitated toward the more skilled occupations. Thus, in textiles, women predominated in spinning, but men had a bigger role as weavers. Domestic manufacturing spread in Western Europe, but also Latin America, India and elsewhere. On the whole women were valued for their low cost, and the results rarely improved their economic position. In Western Europe at least men drove women out of the more skilled urban trades, again confirming their reliance on the lower-wage sectors. In many cases, of course, domestic manufacturing was a parttime occupation, and the women participated in other aspects of the family economy as well.

The slave trade The introduction of the Atlantic slave trade from the 16th century onward had huge implications for gender relations in Africa and the Americas alike. In Africa, disproportionate numbers of young men were seized by the slavers, creating a major gender imbalance in key parts of West Africa. In compensation, polygamy expanded, building on the African tradition of family responsibility for women and the capacity of some men to take on more than one wife. Women who were enslaved in the Americas, through the trade or through birth into slavery, were subjected to the hard work, harsh conditions and often brutal punishments that applied to both genders. In some cases, special ditches were built so that presumably disobedient pregnant women could be laid down to be whipped without damage to the fetus. Enslaved women were also subject to frequent rape or intercourse by their masters or members of his family. And – like enslaved men – they also faced the possibility of family disruption through sale of spouse or children. Loss of authority by enslaved men, who had little or no room for independent initiatives even in their families, would also affect the gender culture of this population.

American colonization and indigenous peoples The arrival of European settlers in the Americas disrupted indigenous traditions in fundamental ways, while also, through disease and conquest, massively reducing the indigenous populations. Europeans generally found many indigenous habits to be immoral – such as the tradition in some parts of central America of allowing a courting couple a trial period of cohabitation before full marriage. They sought to regulate sexual behavior more closely, and also to subject women more completely to the authority of fathers and husbands. In French Canada, Jesuits reported approvingly of a man who beat a wife “who had insolently provoked him.” Europeans were also shocked by the tolerance, in some indigenous groups, of “spirit people” who were essentially transgender, assuming that they were homosexuals and attempting to repress the custom. Conversion to Christianity included that idea that women, as well as men, had souls, and in Catholic areas often included considerable devotion on Mary. On the other hand, compared to many indigenous religious traditions, women lost roles in officiating in religious ceremonies. The challenge to customary gender patterns was widespread.

Gender patterns in colonial Latin America As a new Latin American population and culture took shape – combining some indigenous groups, but also a growing majority of *mestizos* along with some Europeans and Africans – a number of important gender patterns emerged. Particularly in the early colonial period, sexual violence was considerable, a pattern initiated by Columbus and his colleagues.

Far more men than women moved from Europe to Latin America, and the gender imbalance combined with male assertion led to high rates of rape or compulsion, along with a male culture than vaunted sexual prowess. Some indigenous groups, like the Mayans, were shocked by European sexual immorality – to which they might have added hypocrisy. High rates of illegitimate births continued to characterize Latin American society well into the 19th century, combined however with serious efforts by groups of women to share the responsibilities of child care. On the other hand, Spanish Catholic authorities vigorously preached the importance of the family and family solidarity – more than had been the case in European tradition – another element that continued in the Latin American gender tradition. Along with the veneration of Mary, this could give women an important position as mothers, though it had less effect outside the family.

The Islamic empires This was not a period of major change in gender conditions in predominantly Islamic regions, but there were some interesting developments. In India under the Mughal empire, habits of isolating upper-class women in the household, in the system called *purdah*, spread widely among Hindu as well as Muslim populations. On the other hand, Hindu traditions, in which men controlled their wives' dowries, had some impact on Indian Muslims even though this contravened Islamic law. In both the Mughal and Ottoman empires, rulers developed increasingly elaborate harems, often creating substantial sections of the royal palace – like Topkapi, in Istanbul – for this purpose. Harems included a variety of female relatives, including wives, but also concubines and slave girls, and could be a source of considerable political authority and intrigue. At the same time, exaggerated stories about the harems contributed to European criticism of the empires – and particularly, the Ottoman empire – as decadent and immoral.

Western Europe In addition to the rise of women's participation in domestic manufacturing, three changes significantly affected gender relations in Western Europe, though they pointed in different directions. In the first place, the rise of Protestantism placed new importance on the family. Martin Luther, for example, pointedly married a former nun. Celibacy no longer, in Protestantism, offered spiritual advantage. By the 17th century, Protestant writers were beginning to pay more attention to the importance of good relationships in the family, including appropriate attention to the well-being of wives. Protestant families still assumed male authority: indeed, fathers had particular responsibility for the moral guidance of children. But there was some change. Protestantism also encouraged more attention to education, and while here too male advantage persisted by the 18th century at least 20% of women were literate in most Protestant regions, a significant shift. (Ironically some Protestant leaders urged literacy for women, but not the ability to write – presumably because as women they would have nothing interesting to say.) Second, what has been called the European-style family structure, though it had started earlier, continued to gain ground. This emphasized relatively late age of marriage for both men and women, at least outside the upper classes. With this, the role of the extended family declined – grandparents often died off before their children began to have children of their own; in turn, reliance on the nuclear family placed a greater premium on the importance of women's work and constructive working relations between husband and wife. Finally, as Europeans gained access to new consumer goods in world trade, such as chinaware for serving tea or coffee, family rituals sometimes became more elaborate; women in the process gained new roles as arrangers of activities like a more formal family evening meal. None of this altered fundamental gender dynamics, though there were a few debates about gender conditions in Protestant areas, but the changes were interesting.

Russia Peter the Great's process of Westernization, around 1700, had some implications for upper class women, as against more traditional subordination. The Tsar for example abolished the traditional practice by which, in the marriage ceremony, a small whip was given from the bride's father to the new husband, as a symbol of male authority. Aristocratic women began to emphasize Western styles of dress and had new opportunities for public activities, for example in attending concerts. Coincidentally, in the 18th century, two major rulers were female, most notably Catherine the Great. Again, basic gender systems persisted, particularly among the vast peasant majority, but there were some limited shifts at the top of society.

Study questions

1. How did European colonization and the slave trade affect gender conditions in Africa and the Americas?

2. How did the growth of world commerce affect women as workers and consumers?
3. What were the major changes in gender relations in Western Europe? To what extent did Russia participate in these changes as well?

Further reading

C. MacLeod, M. Shepard, and M. Agren eds., *The Whole Economy: women and work in early modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Mary Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History; a subversive view of the Western past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in the Early Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Antonio Lavrin, ed., *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

Estela Rosello Soberon, "Family and Care: the universe of sensitive experience in Nonhispanic Baroque Happiness," in Katie Barclay, Darrin McMahon, and Peter N. Stearns, *Routledge History of Happiness* (New York: Routledge, 2024).