

GENDER IN HISTORY – Postclassical Period

Major developments For societies in Asia, Africa and Europe, despite great variety, two major changes differentiate the period from its classical predecessor, in addition to the decline of many great classical empires. First, missionary religions spread more widely. Buddhism and Christianity had been established before, but they reached out into new regions during this period; and Islam arose and proved to be particularly capable of reaching across political and cultural boundaries. Second, interregional trade increased, spurring the exchange of goods particularly through Indian Ocean trade. Both developments had significant implications for gender relations. In addition, a number of specific regions introduced new practices, such as footbinding in China, that further emphasized women's inferiority.

Economic change This rise of somewhat more commercial economies created some new opportunities for women. In China, for example, increased production of silk, often for export, created a larger category of female manufacturing workers, operating in loosely organized shops though usually at low rates of pay. Cities grew in many places. Again in China, urban populations rose to over 12% of the total, and a more vibrant urban economy generated new chances for female entertainers. A courtesan class developed, heavily dependent on male patrons but accorded some prestige for beauty and artistic achievement; some women in this group became authors and artists. Upper-class women also gained some new influence in the Byzantine empire, in a few cases assuming political power directly. On the whole, however, women's opportunities were still curtailed by larger inequalities, and some societies used new wealth to impose new limitations on women – as in the spread of Chinese footbinding which curtailed activities for many urban and upper-class women. In the Middle East and India, many women were largely secluded in their households and limited by strict rules over appropriate dress.

The missionary religions Buddhism, Christianity and Islam differed in many respects, but they all introduced new emphasis on the basic spiritual equality of men and women. In Christianity and Islam, women had souls, and were capable of salvation; in Buddhism, women shared in the divine essence. The religions also gave women new opportunities in religious vocations, as in the convents established by Christians and Buddhists. At the same time, however, the religions remained highly patriarchal in most respects. They carefully insisted on male leadership – in some ways, more systematically than some of the older polytheistic religions had done. They emphasized the subordination of wife to husband. The results of religious change had complex implications for gender relations, introducing some new variety in vocations but confirming patriarchy in a number of ways.

Buddhism The Buddha established convents for women with some hesitation, though they followed from the new recognition of women's spiritual potential; and he carefully placed them under the control of male monks. And the religious prestige of monks tended to eclipse the female role. Still, the existence of convents allowed some women to avoid marriage and defy the wishes of their fathers. As one woman noted, insisting on joining a convent, "What must I submit thrice (to father, husband and son) when I am considered a woman of propriety?" Some male Buddhists in Japan were particularly eager to welcome the religious insights of women, arguing they deserved equal credit with male views. At the same time, however, Buddhism could also confirm the authority of husbands in the family. Some Chinese men welcomed their wives' enthusiasm for Buddhism because it made them "tranquil and satisfied with their fate." And Chinese Buddhist leaders, adapting to Confucian tradition, carefully insisted on the superiority of husbands in the family. And some Buddhists worried that women could distract men from the paths of virtue: "women can ruin the precepts of purity." Contradictory impulses were clearly involved.

Christianity Christianity exalted the spiritual potential of women, and Mary, mother of Jesus, became an enduring religious symbol. Many women found new opportunities in convents and some, like Hildegard of Bingen, contributed important treatises on piety that gained wide influence. Christian insistence on the importance of consent to marriage, for both genders, on the whole reduced the incidence of child brides in the Christian regions. There were also significant efforts to reduce female infanticide. On the other hand, Christianity did little to affect other laws concerning gender, particularly when it came to male

control over property. Widows in many Christian areas were entirely at the mercy of sons or brothers when it came to economic support. Many Christians used Eve's role in the original sin to maintain concern about women's potential to tempt men into evil habits, leading to disproportionate efforts to regulate female sexual behavior. Christian suspicion of sexuality in general – including praise for the spiritual superiority of celibacy – affected both genders, but impinged more on women. And priestly authority, in all the major versions of Christianity, remained resolutely male.

Islam Muhammed was eager to modify Arab tradition to improve conditions for women. Most notably, the Qur'an and Islamic law carefully protected women's right to property. Women retained control over dowries, and daughters had inheritance rights along with sons – though at only half the rate. Women could also initiate divorce, though the process was much less complicated for men. The Prophet directly attacked infanticide. While Islam carefully avoided any formal monastic movement, individual women did gain credit for spirituality, and some served as highly regarded teachers; women also participated in the spiritual enthusiasms of the Sufi movement. The importance of religious pilgrimage to Mecca, provided opportunities for women to travel. At another level, in contrast to Christianity, Islamic advice urged the legitimacy of female sexual pleasure, though sexual activity outside of marriage, or during special periods such as Ramadan, was prohibited (and sometimes severely punished). On the other hand, official leadership in Islam, including involvement with legal scholarship, remained resolutely male. "The first condition for a judge is that he must be a man....As for women, they are unsuited to positions of authority." In contrast to Christianity and Buddhism, the two genders worshipped separately, with far better spaces provided for men. While Islam insisted on marriage consent in principle, child brides remained common in many Islamic regions. Particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, but ultimately also in India, Islam also gave religious sanction to older traditions that insisted on concealing dress for women, including veiling, though it was not an official obligation. As with Christianity, attitudes to women were affected by the belief that, particularly in sexual matters, women were more likely to sin or induce sin: a passage in the Hadith claimed that "I had a look into Hell and saw that most of its inhabitants for women." This approach justified many efforts to regulate female behavior a subject them to male authority in the home.

Results The postclassical period introduced important changes for some women but, probably, not for most. The tensions in all the missionary religions limited the impact of ideas about spiritual equality. Efforts to debate which religion was "best" for women at this point are inevitably inconclusive. To the extent that the missionary religions prompted new interest in education – particularly important in Islam – males were the primary beneficiaries, often widening the literacy gap between the genders. At the same time other developments – like footbinding in China, the new practice of *sati* for some Hindu women (in which wives were expected to kill themselves after the death of a husband, on grounds that without a male women had nothing to live for), plus growing regulation of dress and public activities for many upper-class women in many Islamic regions –all introduced new efforts to enforce female inequality. Even the growth of cities in some prosperous regions (regardless of religion), though it had various results, inevitably involved an expansion of prostitution, reflecting the precarious economic conditions affecting some women.

Study questions

1. What were some of the developments that heightened gender inequality during the postclassical period? How can they be explained?
2. To what extent did the missionary religions, as they expanded, create new opportunities for women? Why and how, at the same time, were these opportunities characteristically limited?
3. Compare the results of Christianity and of Islam on gender conditions. Was either religion more advantageous to women than the other?

Further reading

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: realizations* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

Gavin R.G. Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World* (New York: Springer, 1999).

Barbara MacHaffie, *Her Story: women in the Christian tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).