

## WOMEN IN WEST EUROPEAN HISTORY

**Classical background** Gender relations in Greece and Rome were firmly patriarchal, though Rome granted a bit more leeway to women at some points. In both societies sexual offenses, particularly adultery, were harshly punished. Greece was also noteworthy for the frequency of homosexual relations between upper-class men and boys (often alongside a marriage), and this continued to some extent in Rome. Greek philosophers emphasized the inferiority of women, and women had no formal political rights even when male citizens voted. However, Greek and Roman religion also highlighted the role of goddesses, and women often participated and even led religious rituals. On the whole, however, Greek and Roman precedent did not play a great role in subsequent gender relations in Western Europe, where the impact of Christianity, along with the standard conditions of agricultural society in a region that was long somewhat backward economically, loomed far larger.

**Postclassical period (medieval Europe)** Christianity introduced several features that affected gender. In the first place, church rules insisted in principle on consent to marriage, and while arranged marriages prevailed without much voice for the parties involved, there may have been some constraint; and child brides were relatively uncommon aside from some negotiations by royal families. Christianity also led to the establishment of convents, providing a religious outlet and an alternative to marriage for some women (however, a substantial entry fee limited this opportunity for most). In a few cases nuns gained considerable education, contributing books about piety and religious music – as in the exceptional instance of Hildegard of Bingen. Western Christianity also displayed unusual uneasiness about sexual pleasure. Celibacy became required in principle for the clergy, including monks and nuns, and the religion developed active hostility to homosexuality. A few manuals about sexual methods circulated privately, but there was little guidance for most married couples. Amid considerable regional variation, there was no systematic protection for any property rights for women; widows, particularly, were often at the mercy of sons or other male relatives. Indeed, women were often seen as the property of the nearest male relative, and there were cases in which wives were sold. Divorce was difficult if not impossible in most cases. Women's economic contributions were of course vital in agriculture, and also in most urban crafts; some wives served as shopkeepers for their artisan husbands, and a few female crafts developed – such as lace making. Through marriage and personality, some women played important political roles in royal and aristocratic families. Also in the aristocracy a literature of “courtly love” developed that praised the affection that could develop between a man and a woman (usually chaste, sometimes outside of marriage). On the other hand, male aristocrats strongly emphasized martial virtues that might set them apart from wives and daughters.

**Early modern period** The centuries after about 1400 were unexpectedly significant for gender relations in Western Europe, though there was no systematic change and developments pointed in several different directions. An increasing handful of upper-class women gained access to secular education, largely within the family, and some contributed works of art and literature during the Renaissance. Protestantism had an even greater impact. Protestants rejected the belief that celibacy conferred special spiritual status, which heightened the valuation of family life: Martin Luther himself married a former nun. Fathers were still expected to guide moral education in the family, but Protestant tracts began to pay greater attention to the importance of wives' contentment. Protestantism also promoted more attention to education, and while expanding school systems still privileged men a growing minority of women gained literacy; in Iceland, in fact, women's literacy rates almost equaled those of men. On another front: from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward what has been called the European style family gained ground. For most peasants and townsmen, this involved relatively late marriage age (later 20s) for both women and men (outside the aristocracy, where patterns changed less), which in turn heightened the importance of the nuclear family (since grandparents had fewer years to overlap with their adult children's families). This, in turn, heightened the importance of coordination between husbands and wives. The economic status of women, however, may have weakened slightly, as men increasingly excluded women from the skilled crafts. Large numbers of women did participate in the expanding domestic manufacturing sector, but at lower levels of skill and pay: more often spinners, for example, than weavers. During the

16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the massive witchcraft scare in many parts of Europe saw a disproportionate number of women, particularly older women, accused and executed – a sign of new social tensions – though the furor eased by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, new consumer opportunities affected gender relations aside from the very poor: interest in more fashionable clothing increased, particularly for women; men's clothing, in contrast, often became more drab. New furnishings and tableware, including porcelain products, heightened the importance of family dining, particularly an evening meal prepared and guided by the wife and mother.

**The long nineteenth century: overview** This period saw massive changes in gender patterns, though with decidedly complex implications. On the one hand, women's moral authority and family stature greatly improved, particularly but not exclusively in the middle classes; and the male-female literacy gap began to be eliminated. Rapidly falling birth rates, responding to the decline of child labor, resulted in new emphasis on more intensive involvement for mothers with individual children, but potentially new opportunities for other activities as well. During most of the century, however, political disparities increased – as men gained the vote; the rise of formal feminism was a key response. Finally, however, women's economic situation deteriorated, making the majority more dependent on marriage. With declining work opportunities, domestic service became the largest job category for urban women, while prostitution also increased.

**The long nineteenth century: key changes** As industrialization and urbanization increasingly moved work outside the home, growing numbers of European families began to pull women out of the formal labor force and into more purely household functions. Many middle-class women were never formally employed at all, and many working-class women stopped work upon marriage or childbirth. In the process gender differences were redefined and accentuated: good women were now held to be moral and emotional guardians of the family, able to moderate both sexuality and anger, while male characteristics were suitable for the outside world, serving as “breadwinners” for the family. (Women's roles as consumers also gained new attention, with new levels of advertising aiming at this market by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.) Redefinitions of the family as an emotional unit, plus urbanization, also led to a decline in arranged marriages, in favor of direct courtship by young people themselves. By mid-century some legislation limited working hours for women, partly to favor their family roles, which sometimes further reduced their employability compared to men. At the same time, however, education for women expanded rapidly, initially because of a belief that education was vital for modern motherhood and also as a new source of teachers. By mid-century, new women's movements began to spring up in a number of countries. Individual feminists, like Mary Wollstonecraft in England, had argued even in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that the new ideas about the “rights of man” should be applied to women also (despite the fact that Enlightenment thinkers had largely excluded women from their claims). By the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century growing numbers of women, and liberal male allies, argued a variety of legal changes were essential, and reforms gradually provided greater protection for property rights; new opportunities to initiate divorce; and access to higher education and professional training. Claims for a right to vote added to the mix, leading to substantial agitation in places like Britain by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Countries like Britain and Sweden began to allowing women the vote in local elections by the 1860s; Finland was the first European nation to extend general voting rights, in 1906, with some women elected to parliament the following year. Finally, by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century new “white blouse” job opportunities opened up for some women, serving as sales clerks, secretaries, telephone operators as well as teachers and nurses.

**The contemporary period** Major developments both built on and modified some of the key 19<sup>th</sup>-century trends in gender patterns. Full voting rights were extended in most European countries of Protestant background soon after World War I (including Germany and Britain), in countries like France right after World War II. Women's share of elected official grew gradually, and women as national leaders became commonplace in Scandinavia by the end of the century, and significant in several other countries. Parity in higher education also became standard by that point. Changes in popular culture modified 19<sup>th</sup>-century standards concerning sexuality, with growing interest in women's sexual pleasure, more revealing dress (including beachwear), and often highly sexualized films, television shows and advertisements. (There was important pushback against many of these changes, particularly in Nazi Germany.) Birth rate reduction continued, with a very modest interruption after World War II; by the 21<sup>st</sup> century birth rates in countries like Italy had fallen well below population maintenance levels. Abortion remained illegal in most countries until the 1970s, when it began to be decriminalized amid often heated discussions. France

initially granted rights through the 10<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy (in 1975), but then gradually extended this particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with expenses often covered by the health care system. Parallel to birth rate decline, women gained a variety of new work roles. This occurred briefly during both world wars, and then more durably from the 1960s onward when over 40% of the labor force became female. A new surge of feminism, from the 1950s onward, inspired by work such as Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, argued for fuller parity between the genders and a reduced emphasis on women's family roles. Male-female wage gaps persisted, but did diminish. By 2000 gay rights, including the right to marriage, gained wide approval in most West European countries; Denmark, in 1989, became the first country to begin to recognize legal rights for same-sex couples.

### **Study questions**

1. What were the main ways that Christianity affected gender patterns in Western Europe, from the medieval period onward?
2. What was unusual about the European-style family, and how might it have affected gender relations?
3. Why have feminists, and historians, argued about the implications of major developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: was this a period of progress or deterioration in gender patterns?
4. What were the most important changes in conditions for women during the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
5. Based on contemporary trends, would you expect to see gender patterns in Western Europe stabilize during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or undergo another set of major changes?

### **Further reading**

Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2002).

Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: women in Europe from prehistory to the present* (rev. ed., 2v. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

C. MacLeod, M. Shepherd and M. Agren, eds., *The Whole Economy: women and work in early modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Ann Allen, *Women in Twentieth-Century Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).