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## **Women in the European Middle Ages, 1200-1500: An Appraisal**

### **Abstract**

*From attitudes to original sin to the roles of wives, mothers, nuns, artisans, and rulers, the article examines the role of women within their social class in High and Late Middle Ages, that is, from the early twelfth century until about the second quarter of the fifteenth century. The place of women in society was often dictated by the biblical texts throughout the European Middle Ages. It is evident from the facts that women were treated as the second class members within their social class. Numerous special sins and faults were attributed to women. Among the deficiencies and sins ascribed to women were: arrogance, pride, voracity, unethical behavior, wolfishness and terrible temper, and that's only the tip of the iceberg. It was also declared that women must be kept out of public office, must not use any sort of power nor serve as judge, may not participate in public congregations or councils, and must give themselves to their residential capacities. At that time, many ideas that were considered universal intervened through local conditions, traditions, and conventions, and that's why women were not treated as equal to men since they fell under male control regardless of their social status in the European Middle Ages.*

### **Introduction**

Medieval period or the Middle Ages is a period between the fall of Rome and Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> Italian humanists presented the expression "Middle Ages" and its prosaic meaning with an inquisitive intent. Humanists wanted the restoration of traditional inclining and culture. The possibility of a thousand years of dimness and lack of awareness isolating them from the ancient Greek and Roman world served to highlight the Humanist's own work and beliefs. In a sense "Middle Ages" was introduced to separate themselves from it.<sup>2</sup> A plethora of literature has been produced on the European Middle Ages, but very few authors have given reference to the role played by women in the European Middle Ages yet, which has left a gap in the description of medieval society.

Various social roles were possessed by the women in the European Middle Ages. They held the position of daughter, mother, spouse, worker, pious devotee, artisan and the role of authority (much of the time, for instance, abbess or ruler regnant. During the European Middle Ages the concept of woman changed in a number of ways, and there were several factors that influenced their role within their social class during that period. In the extremely hierarchical medieval

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society, the social classes differed significantly from each other in their economic condition, legitimate rights and methods of living. The article embarks upon a singular question that whether or not there was any condition that was shared by all women in the European Middle Ages. Therefore, the article problematizes the assumption that women from diverse social classes had enjoyed equal status with men, and they were allowed a large measure of freedom in the European Middle Ages.

### **The Public and Legal rights of Women**

Restrictions were imposed by law on all women *qua* women and distinctions were made in the rights of women. A woman had no share in the government of the kingdom and of the society by law. The woman of that era was not allowed to hold the public office. Women were not allowed to participate in any institutions of the government.<sup>3</sup> It is declared explicitly by the literature of the estates: “Women must be kept out of all public office. They must devote themselves to their feminine and domestic occupations.”<sup>4</sup> According to the English jurist Glanville, they were not accustomed to serve the king, either in the army or in any other royal service.<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that the medieval civilization’s demeanour towards women was dictated by an unconscious Ideology, because the church and the state both supported the denial of the rights of woman by giving plain explanations and justifications.<sup>6</sup>

Women were not allowed to take part in the town councils, and they were never called by their kings to attend the assemblies.<sup>7</sup> Many single women and widows participated in the manorial court assemblies on the manor, but they were not permitted to hold any office or perform any function. But women inherited fiefs. Thus, there were a few women who ruled over domains and took an interest in the feudal assemblies of their lords.<sup>8</sup> A fief inherited by woman carried a certain office with it, sometimes it was performed by someone else, yet some of the time she herself performed it. Abbesses enjoyed great privileges in the fiefs that belonged only to their convents.<sup>9</sup>

A function of the social and political structure is called a legal system. Women were not only barred from serving as judges or lawyers in the high and later Middle Ages, they were not even allowed to appear as representatives of other persons in court (*procurator*).<sup>10</sup> A woman could appear as another person’s representative only if she appeared as the wife of her husband. In England, the peeresses, whose right was recognized by the House of Lords in 1442, were barred from judging any case in that institution.<sup>11</sup> According to the French jurist Beaumanoir, women regardless of their social class were restricted from their activities by the law, and they were also not seen as an individual in the same sense that it saw men in the European medieval society.<sup>12</sup>

### **Woman in the Church**

The perception of gender roles in European Middle Ages was greatly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Taking the sacrament of the priestly

order was not allowed to woman and her right to preach was denied by the Church.<sup>13</sup> As St Paul stated:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” **(I Corinthians 14:34–6)**<sup>14</sup>

It seems that Christianity followed the path of Judaism by barring woman from religious order. The Hebrew woman was not allowed to take part in religious services in biblical times, as she could not belong to the *cohanim* (priests).<sup>15</sup> A special place was allotted to her in the Temple. Women had an inferior place in the Jewish law. There was a sentence in the morning supplication in which a Jewish man always expressed gratefulness that God had not made him 'a Gentile, a slave or a woman.' A woman was not a person in Jewish law, but a thing. She had no public or legal rights at all; she was considered to be her husband's property to do with as he wished.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to the teachings of Christianity with reference to women's legal and public rights, the Old Testaments gives no immediate reason to denying women of their entitlement to participate in religious services, the New Testament gave justification: the woman's secondary role in Creation and her role in Original Sin.<sup>17</sup> St. Paul (c.5-c.67) had the same contention to preclude both the privilege from claiming woman to end up cleric and to legitimize her enslavement to man. As he argued:

“...For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for man. For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. **(I Corinthians 11:3-10)**<sup>18</sup>

The idea of the equity of the genders as to salvation was never denied by the medieval Church; however fairness was never upheld by anybody in the terrestrial Church.

### ***The Nuns***

The nun, bride of Christ, was not allowed to assist the priest in the holy ceremonies. She too was the target of pollution fears and subjected to taboos like other women. A continuous tradition of female monasticism had been in the Christian Church. Their lives were dedicated to the church. Thus a special place was allotted to women in the praying order. This position was given to those who had voluntarily chosen the Christian way of life in the medieval society.<sup>19</sup>

St. Paul and Abélard (1079-1142) both objected the idea of a double monastery headed by a woman. According to them, God has assigned the role to the woman to demonstrate the submission of the church to her Head, Jesus Christ. Man has the obligation to assume the role of the head of the woman, and the woman is to submit to her head.<sup>20</sup> This is unequivocally what Paul said in Ephesians: “For the

husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church.” (*Ephesians 3:10*)<sup>21</sup> Abélard composed a draft code in which he advocated a mixed monastery to be headed by a male abbot.<sup>22</sup> According to him, one male abbot should be appointed over both monks and nuns. Man should be head over woman just as Jesus was the head of man. He continues with anti-feminine sayings: it is against the nature for woman to exercise an authority as she is domineering by nature and leads man to sin. The serpent tempted the first woman and, through her, Adam caused the subjugation of mankind as a whole.<sup>23</sup> These bathetic statements were given to justify the subordination of nuns to a male abbot by proving it the part of the natural order of the world. There is no doubt this ambivalent attitude reveals the medieval Christian thought towards woman.

### ***Women Mystics***

During some historical periods, mysticism appears to be more predominant and more legitimate, and mystics are more required by their communities. Valerie Marie Lagorio, in her essay, quotes Evelyn Underhill in support of the possibility that mysticism appears to increase in specific periods, but is itself luxuriously creative: “The great periods of mystical activity tend to correspond with the great periods of artistic, material, and intellectual civilization.... It is always as if [the mystics] were humanity’s finest flower; the product at which each great creative period of the race had aimed.”<sup>24</sup> One such period was the High Middle Ages in Europe (1100–1450), a time of great social change as the feudal system gave way to capitalism, cities, and a new middle class.<sup>25</sup>

A great contribution of women to spiritual creativity can be seen in the European Middle Ages which always remained in the circle of Christian mysticism. Medieval mysticism can hardly be imagined without such figures as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-1294), Mechthild of Hackeborn (1240-1298), Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), St Gertrude (1256-1302), Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373), Catherine of Sienna (1347-1380), Juliana of Norwich (1342-1416).<sup>26</sup> The great female mystics were given respect which no other woman earned in that period. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote about the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic and advocated the same notion.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Bernard of Clairvaux recognized the sanctity of mystic. This acceptance of a female mystic was due to the acceptance of the few female prophets in the Old and New Testaments. Toward the end of the European Middle Ages, from the thirteenth century onward, women mystics faced greater scrutiny due to the growing prominence of inquisitional procedure.<sup>28</sup> During the fourteenth century the clergy began to greatly restrict the religious lives of women in Germany. The [Council of Vienne](#), in 1311, condemned religious women who preached and lived outside a monastery without the direct supervision of a cleric, thus putting an end to the Beguine movement.<sup>29</sup> Scholastics in the universities began to propose that inquisitional processes should be employed to weed out heresy among women mystics. [Jean Gerson](#), a chancellor of the University of Paris, believed the church's corruption and laxity was the cause of widespread acceptance of female mystics.<sup>30</sup> Gerson wanted to create a permanent post of the Inquisition that investigated mystics and their visions.<sup>31</sup> In the Rhineland and

Southern France from 1310 to 1328, [Dominican](#) inquisitors began to burn Beguines and other religious women at the stake in response to the papal bull *Quum Inter Nonnullos*<sup>32</sup> of John XXII (1316-1334) which condemned poverty-based religiosity. As mentioned above that the work of many female mystics was condemned by the church. The Beguine Margaret Porete (1248-1310) is the classical example of it, who was placed on trial in Paris due to her work, *Le Mirouer des Simples Ames*. She refused to answer any question and to defend herself, and in 1310 was burned at stake. She described the seven levels of divine grace through which the released soul will find God.<sup>33</sup> It was said that her work contained more heretical ideas than other mystics. It is important to note that Margaret was not a nun but a Beguine, and the attitude of churchmen to the Beguines was ambiguous.<sup>34</sup> The authoress was burned at stake, but her work was preserved in monasteries.<sup>35</sup>

Although members of both sexes advanced to the forefront of the western religious movement, women seemed particularly sensitive to mystical revelations. In order to explain this phenomenon, a number of authors describe medieval mysticism not as ‘a manifestation of the internal affective states of an individual, but a set of ideological and cultural constructs.’<sup>36</sup> It is recorded that more women experienced spiritual ecstasy than their male counterparts for socio-cultural reasons, rather than for any biological or emotional differences between the sexes just as the mystical movement was rooted in its social context, the female mystic experience had deep association with women’s social position. According to MCNamara, mysticism flourished in the church’s solitude and silence which greatly attracted its female members.<sup>37</sup> Medieval European society placed greater constraints on female religious figures, whose visions may have served as a reaction against prevalent sexual inequality.

### **Women in the Nobility**

The noblewoman is the counterpart of nobleman. Amid the European Middle Ages the privilege to have a place with the nobility was passed on maternal side in certain regions.<sup>38</sup> In the European Middle Ages, the nobleman was also known as a knight; the task of knight was to fight.<sup>39</sup> The heaviest sin of nobleman was non fulfilment of his duty. The knighthood predominated all other designations of the noblemen. Though they were socially divided, but chivalric ethos shared by all warriors.<sup>40</sup> Castles were sometimes defended by women in the absence of their husbands. For instance, Donna Jimena held Valencia for more than a year (1001–2), and organized army against the Muslim attacks.<sup>41</sup>

The fief as a reward was originally granted to a warrior for military service. It was not permitted to woman who was not a warrior to hold a fief. Many canonists and lay legislators denied the right of woman to inherit the fief by arguing that their physical weakness and mental limitations deprive them of their right.<sup>42</sup> The right of woman to inherit fief was recognized by some of the western countries in the central middle ages. Although women were allowed in northern and southern France, in Hainaut, Flanders, west Lorraine, England, several regions of Italy to inherit fief in the central middle ages.<sup>43</sup> But it has been argued that the inheritance of fief by daughter was due to the unnatural death of men in the

nobility. The average life expectancy of men at birth was 24, whereas the average life expectancy of women at birth was 32. Noblemen also went to crusades in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries from which they did not come back.<sup>44</sup>

Women owned fiefs not only by the right of family inheritance, but also by force of their right to part of the property of their deceased husband. Berta of Sweden (d. 1874), widow of Matthew I duke of Lorraine (1193-1251), can be taken as a perfect example who presided over the duke's court.<sup>45</sup> Class, economic and political calculations became the bases for marital ties among the nobility. Marriage ties with the right family helped create alliances and agreements. Sometimes such arrangements among the senior nobility became the reason for bringing changes in the political map of Europe. For instance, as a result of the third marriage of the count of Barcelona (878-1410) to Douce, heiress of the county of Provence and several other areas, the count became the ruler of vast territories on the Mediterranean coast.<sup>46</sup> These marriages were arranged by families just to achieve their class and economic interests. The noblewoman of that period has been regarded pious by many modern historians.<sup>47</sup> But the pious noblewoman was part of the image of the ideal woman in family myths. It has been contended that they did not wound or kill anyone like man, whereas it was just because the number of female rulers was less than the number of men who took part in government and ruled over the territories. All feudal women, who held fiefs and wielded ruling powers, ruled like men in the world of man.

### **Women in the peasantry**

Medieval society was patriarchal. It is indicated by the Marxist historian Chris Middleton that this sort of patriarchal control was presumed. Ideally, women were to fall under male control irrespective of class.<sup>48</sup> Middleton made some general observations about English peasant women and contended that the life of a peasant woman was hemmed by restraint and prohibition<sup>49</sup> In the middle ages, the role of peasants was very limited. Occasionally, the peasants played a part in the regional framework for the sake of feudal lords or the focal administrations. They did not take part in election to national or local representative assemblies.

A local association was established in town, court sessions were held and functionaries were assigned by the lords. The participation of women in this organization was very limited as they fulfilled none of these functions.<sup>50</sup> They were not permitted to hold the office of village notary, and to copyist of the manorial court. The gatherings where the participation of village landholders was mandatory were gone to just by unmarried or widowed female landholders. Married woman was spoken to by her better half at the gatherings, despite the fact that the choices taken bound all landowners regardless. Case in point, in the little town of Cravenna, in Piedmont, it was decided in 1304 that the lord would not be permitted to entitle, exchange or offer lands on which peasants dowed without the assent of the considerable number of villagers, however this was applied just to women who were widowed or unmarried. To fulfil any official function in the society of peasants was an exception for a woman than for a nobleman to play out her capacity subsequent to holding a fief. The election of women in Halesowen, near Birmingham, to the post of ale-taster in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century can be noted as

one of the exceptions. Women were elected to this post due to an internal migration of the population.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it can be asserted that the periods of crisis became the times of relative improvement in the status of women but not as much as we expect.

### **Married women**

Amid the beginning of Christianity, modesty has been viewed as a commitment as well as a Christian lifestyle. St Paul permitted marriage as a concession to the weakness of the flesh<sup>52</sup> According to him, marriage was preferable to adultery but is not a value in itself, and procreation is not its objective. But for giving a mere concession to human weakness, the Church transformed marriage into a sacrament in the eighth century. In the framework of marriage, the male-female relations were elevated from the sphere of sin to that of sanctity. Marriage was considered sacrament which was not being administered by the priests, but the church gradually determined the relevant laws, norms, and customs. From about the eleventh century, matrimonial affairs became debatable in ecclesiastical courts. A positive theory on marriage developed in the church by citing several verses of the New Testament. St. Paul declared husband as the lord of his wife while mentioning the idea of love and companionship in marriage.<sup>53</sup> On the basis of several verses in the New Testament (**Matthew 5:31–2; Luke 16:18**), matrimony was recognized as an indissoluble tie, like that between Christ and his flock.<sup>54</sup>

The women were expected to raise her children and protect the heritage of her husband when necessary. According to Beaumanoir, husbands were allowed to adopt any measure which they considered proper keeping in mind the end goal to reform their wives. They were allowed to punish them in any way, but were not permitted to injure or kill them.<sup>55</sup> The right of a husband to beat his wife was generally recognized in European medieval society. If husbands went too far, they were fined and it is seen that ecclesiastical courts sanctioned separation in many cases when the husband acted too harshly. Young women from rich families had a tendency to marry sooner than young women from poor families.<sup>56</sup> The poorer families required the large number of working people for them to earn money, so a girl getting married at an early age would have denied them of a labourer. But it did not apply to a rich family.<sup>57</sup>

Within a rich family it was essential to produce a male heir since a great deal of married women's life was spent in pregnancy. However, labour was perilous as therapeutic care was not good enough. It is estimated that more than 20% of all young married women passed on while giving birth to a child; and it was considered to be the most common reason for death among young women at that time.<sup>58</sup>

According to many historians, queens held power in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century European medieval society,<sup>59</sup> but there is no getting away from this fact that they were housewives and the houses they kept were the imperial domain itself. For instance, king Charlemagne (768-814) gave his queen an extensive authority for the regulation of the domestic concerns of the empire. This extensive

authority was given only because of the domestic revolts and armed rivalries that once disturbed the empire. During the time of Charlemagne, a woman inherited her own estate, and also inherited political power to a lesser extent. But these rights of woman were not accepted without complaint. In 895, an assembly of bishops demonstrated that they are one at heart with their roman ancestors on the issue of woman, and woman moved back to the conditions that existed under the Roman Empire.<sup>60</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

The image of woman, as developed and accepted by churchmen in the European Middle Ages, influenced her position in the society and the states of mind towards her. Orthodox Catholicism allowed no hierarchical positions to women, and heavily circumscribed female participation while greatly emphasizing men's authority over women. Through marriage or productive achievements, some women were able to earn respect from men as well as from other women, even a few powerful women can also be seen in the European Middle Ages, but it is also important to bear in mind that the overwhelming majority were not. Most women, even those in privileged circumstances, had little control over the direction their lives took. Queens were unable to become the recognized leaders of their countries even after the death of their husbands. There was the existence of women, but it was a marginal existence. Despite the fact that in appearance and regular activity, rich women and poor women were completely different from each other, they were both limited by their sex and seen as inferior by their society and men. Women were allowed to express themselves, but within the parameters of social construction that always became a stumbling block for them to regain their individuality. The European medieval society presented itself as an extraordinarily masculine in nature where beating wife was considered to be a canonised method of gaining feminine subjugation. On the whole, it can be rightly argued that in no class were the privileges of women equivalent to those of their male counterparts—a negative common factor for the women of all social classes in the European Middle Ages.



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