Medieval Women in Western Europe, c. 1000-1350 CE

By Ane Lintvedt

The female half of the population in Medieval Western Europe experienced oppression—and some opportunities—driven by religious and secular laws.
Introduction

As people tried to rebuild their societies in the post-classical world, they often looked to traditions, religions, and laws to bring some order to their new realities. We’ve seen mostly male rulers across several eras use religion to bolster their claims to political power. Now we’ll look at how this intersection of religion and secular (non-religious) laws shaped women’s lives in medieval Western Europe in the mid- to late Middle ages (c. 1000 – c. 1350).

Social structures

In medieval Europe, laws and cultural practices generally considered women to be the property of their nearest male relative. Their actual social status depended on the status of their father or their husband. Elite women, such as nobles and aristocrats, lived on big rural estates and had some access to education, provided by private tutors. Their principal jobs were to run a household of servants and family members, and to have many children, preferably sons. As elites, they had opportunities to travel and to buy luxury goods from foreign lands coming from the trade routes.

Women in families who owned shops or small businesses, either in the countryside or in the town or city, were considered middle class. They may have had some education if they worked in the family business, especially math and basic writing for bills and receipts. According to a census from the early 1300s, women in Paris worked in 130 occupations. Like noble women, these middle class women were also responsible for running the household and producing and raising children. If the husband’s business included apprentices—basically a live-in intern—the wife managed them as well. In the countryside, a woman was considered middle class if her family owned a nice prosperous farm. There was little need or opportunity for a formal education, but they had the same domestic duties as any other middle class woman.

But relatively few women in the medieval Western European world were wealthy or middle class. The vast majority were peasants or members of the working classes... and, well, they worked. They still had all the household and child raising jobs, but also had to produce food some way, often by working outside the home to support their families. In the cities, they could find work as servants or employees of some sort, and in the countryside many were paid as farm workers. In the early Middle Ages, many of these rural women and their families were serfs: farm workers whose only pay was a place to live, more or less.
Religious traditions about women

The main religion of medieval Western European kingdoms was Roman Catholic Christianity. Judaism was also practiced, primarily in medieval cities, and Islam was practiced in the Iberian peninsula (modern-day Portugal and Spain) which was technically part of the Abbasid Caliphate. These three Abrahamic religions had a lot in common when it came to teachings about women, starting with the story of Adam and Eve. Religious leaders often blamed Eve for getting humans thrown out of Paradise, promoting the idea that all women were, at some level, inherently disobedient and had to be controlled by men.\(^1\) So religiously, women were blamed for letting knowledge and evil out in the world. Still, all three religions also had some powerful women in their religious traditions whose actions were held up as equal to any man’s love and religious devotion.

Christian women and religion

Women had different ways to interact with Christianity depending on their social status. An elite woman could join one of the region’s many convents—especially in the early middle ages (c. 600-c. 1000). She might even become the Abbess, and run the place.\(^2\) But the Catholic Church became more powerful, wealthy and centralized with the pope’s authority in Rome. That’s when women’s authority in convents—which could be vast estates with hundreds of people employed—came to an end. By the 1300s, a succession of popes ordered that men (priests) should run the convents. Women (nuns) in the convents were now cloistered, meaning they were forbidden to leave the convent grounds. In spite of being excluded from running their own spaces, many women still got a lot out of convents. These institutions often ran schools for girls, provided health care, and employed women from the community. Nuns were appreciated as valuable members of the community, and this occupation was one of the few ways a woman could get an education.

To join a convent, a substantial fee had to be paid to cover the nun’s living expenses for the rest of her life, which is why these women tended to come from very wealthy families. Some women who could not afford to join a convent came together in communal, women-only houses. Known as beguines, they studied and lived religious lives while they worked in the community. Convents meant different things to different women. For example, a wealthy widow choosing to live her life in peace in convent might have seen it as an escape from a worse life at home. Then again, an illegitimate daughter being hidden by her wealthy family to avoid social scandal would have seen it as a prison.

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\(^1\) Indeed, the Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose writings from the fourth century BCE were some of the only Greek writings known in medieval Europe, also considered women to be intellectually, morally, physically and emotionally inferior copies of men.

\(^2\) A convent is a community of women (nuns) who devote their lives to religious study and work under the supervision of an abbess or a member of the Christian church hierarchy.
Christian women attended church on Sundays and holy days, but were only audience members. Women were not allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies. Women and men sat on different sides of the church, in keeping with the social structures. That meant the elite women sat in the front, the middle-class women in the middle range of seats, and the lower classes sat in the back or stood. Men sat together on the right-hand side of the church, and women sat together on the left-hand side. This was no coincidence, as the Latin word for left means “sinister”, or evil, and the story of Eve continued to dictate women’s status, even where they sat. The Church replicated the social and gender hierarchies of the society in general, although the idea that women’s souls were equal to men’s souls was taught and generally believed.

Jewish women in medieval Europe

Christian kingdoms passed laws forbidding Jews to own land because owning large farms and estates gave one significant social status, and that’s what the law was really trying to prevent. Therefore, in Western medieval Europe, Jews lived in urban areas. Some lived in their own Jewish neighborhoods to be near the synagogue, to be where Hebrew was spoken, and to have shops that carried kosher foods. And frankly, some lived in these neighborhoods to escape antisemitism. Many other Jews lived with Christian neighbors in mixed neighborhoods, spoke the local language as well as Hebrew, and shared stories and practices of daily life with their Christian neighbors.

Like Christian women, Jewish women were generally excluded from public religious life; they rarely learned Hebrew and did not receive training in Jewish law. There was no tradition similar to the Christian convent where Jewish women could leave their families and study their religions. Within the Jewish religious traditional texts, women were also seen as morally inferior to men, although men were directed to love and praise their faithful and obedient wives. Jewish women did, however, create special prayers for events that had special meanings for women, such as menstruation, pregnancy, children, baking bread, or visiting cemeteries.

As some Jews prospered in trade and money lending in medieval Western Europe, Jewish women benefited from a more prosperous family economy. These newly-wealthy families amassed large dowries for their daughters, with which the new wife obtained status in her marriage and with her new family. Because it was considered virtuous for men to spend time studying the holy texts such as the Torah, Jewish women often took on much of the work of running businesses, something that would have been unusual for Christian women. And as they worked in the family’s business, these middle class women also became financially literate and made lots of business decisions. Other improvements in Jewish women’s positions in society came when there was a revision in Jewish law, around the year 1000, banning polygyny (men having more than one wife) and forbade men from divorcing their wives against their wills.

In eastern medieval Europe, such as the kingdoms of Poland and Russia, Jewish families could trade do business, plus they could own land, but not a lot of it. Rural Jewish women had the same lives that rural women in Western women lived, working on farms and taking care of the family and household.

Note: Because of the region being covered, this article did not cover Muslim women. Most Muslim women in western Europe at this time lived in the Islamic kingdom of Al-Andalus, which is modern day Spain and Portugal, and which was closely connected to Islamic North African states.

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3 Antisemitism: the hatred of Jews. When there were unexplained disasters in medieval society, sometimes Jews were used as scapegoats or easily-blamed villains.
4 A dowry could be money, land, goods given from the bride’s family to the groom’s family at her wedding.
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Sources


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Ane Lintvedt is a teacher at McDonogh School in suburban Baltimore, Maryland. She has an MA in History from The Johns Hopkins University, and has been integrally involved in the development, writing, scoring and teaching of AP World History for 20 years. She has written both student and teacher guides, as well as given papers at major historical conferences. She was awarded the Pioneer in World History Award by the World History Association in 2013.

Image credits


Medieval peasant women harvesting grain alongside a man, from the Luttrell Psalter, c. 1325-1340. © Heritage Images / Getty Images.

The German Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179 CE), born to the nobility and later leader of a convent, sketching on a wax tablet while receiving a vision. From Scivias, a book of illustrations composed by Hildegard von Bingen and completed c. 1151-1152 CE. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hildegard_von_Bingen.jpg

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