

Condition of Women in Medieval Europe

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Introduction

Can binaries exist in a society? This is an important question that arises whenever an attempt is made to understand the position of women in civilisations. The magnitude of implications of extremepoints of view in society becomes graver when the civilisation under review is the European civilisation and the period that is being analysed is the medieval era which lasted approximately from the 5th to late 15th centuries. The medieval period is subdivided into the Early, High, and Late Middle Ages. Like in most of the civilisations of that age and time, the moral compass of the entire population rested with the women. In the quest to achieve a predetermined societal balance, using the powers of religion as well as law, patriarchal norms were imposed and women in medieval Europe were robbed of their agencies and were rendered faceless. The civilisational burden that was put on women had lasting consequences which are seen even to this day.

The imposition of societal binaries

A biblical story that has been used for centuries to subjugate women is that of Adam and Eve. According to Genesis 3:16-19, Eve, who was created from Adam's rib, was held responsible for his expulsion from paradise for having given in to temptations by eating the forbidden fruit. This 'original sin' was also an important theme of medieval art. By portraying the serpent who tempted Eve to disobey God as female, the belief that women were morally weak and were more likely to tempt men into committing a sin was perpetuated. With the help of this story, the superiority of men was established and it became an absolute truth which could not be held to question. Women were not only pushed to inferior status but they were reminded of their moral depravity time and again. St. Paul the Apostle in the first letter to the Corinthians wrote, "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says." In the first letter to Timothy, he said: "Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed; then Eve." Other passages in the Bible that perpetuate bigotry are: I Corinthians 11:3 which states that man is the head of the woman or 1

Timothy 2:11-15 which makes clear that women are subordinate to men and Eve was the first sinner.

The Church which was the most important religious institution had an all-pervasive effect on the lives of women. It even began dictating dress code for women. St Jerome sharing his thoughts on women's clothing had prescribed sobriety, restraint, and the eschewing of all vanity and embellishment that would make a woman stand out.

Though in recent past, attempts have been made to deconstruct many of lines in the Bible, the statements in general reflect how women were treated and by placing the burden of morality on them, how they were effectively erased from all public spaces. Through these biblical stories and observations, it was propagated that a woman held the power to seduce a man into his downfall and because of this, they had to be controlled at all times. This innate understanding of women was not just a part of Roman Catholic Christianity which was the main religion of medieval Europe. The other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam which were practiced in certain cities had the exact same views. All three religions blamed women for being unable to control her temptations and leading men to the path of absolute doom.

Over time, Eve became synonymous with the moral depravity of women. All those women who didn't conform to the societal ideals were labelled sinners. A significant section of women who possessed power and knowledge came to be called "witches." The wise old women who understood herbs were called "white witches" while those who practiced witchcraft were called "black witches." The white witches were initially held in high esteem but that changed once Bubonic Plague brought about death and destruction all over. The witches being different from the rest of the women, it was easy to blame them for the disaster and hold them responsible for the countless deaths. Drawing legitimacy from the Bible which saw those who practice witchcraft, or magic of any variety as worthy of death, these women were executed. The Church encouraged these executions and went as far as calling any woman who worked with herbs a "witch." The unbridled power of religious sanctions put an end

to intelligent and independent women finding their own footing in the medieval society.

Another popular form that women were represented in was that of the “medieval prostitute or whore.” These women were seen as the biggest sinners. Paradoxically, medieval literature while ostracizing these women emphasised that they have no power over their sexuality and they need to surrender completely for the well being of their families and men in society.¹

This period was arguably one of extremes. While on one hand, women were portrayed as beings capable of evil, on the other hand, there was this image of St. Mary, the mother of Christ who was considered the saviour of Christians. As Virgin Mary, she was lauded for being passive and weak and as Mother Mary, her sacrifices were eulogised and women were told to concentrate on their families and not look for spaces beyond it. This paradoxical image of Mother Mary was portrayed as the way of redemption for women by atoning for the sins of Eve who was responsible for the downfall of mankind.

The biblical discourses in the medieval era were dominated by this particular discourse of “Virgin Mary.” In the Bible, St. Mary is said to have taken the vow of virginity and she abided by it despite giving birth to a child. This was used to define what an “ideal” Christian woman should be and using religion the role of women in society was reduced to remaining “pure” until marriage after which their primary responsibility was procreation. Subsequently, the literature of the medieval period also started echoing these sentiments. In sharp contrast to Eve who lacked any decision-making skills, the Virgin was portrayed as the voice of reason. She was someone who was respected by all and was the guiding light in all the stories that were inspired from the Bible.

The form of Mother Mary had put an even greater pressure on women of yore to adhere to strict regulations imposed by society. The Bible considered the role of mother the most

¹Women in Medieval Literature and Society. British Literature Wiki
<https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/women-in-medieval-literature-and-society/>

paramount for a woman and she was expected to support her family in all possible ways. Mary was declared as the Mother of God by the Church as early as 431 CE at the Third Ecumenical Council. By giving birth to a son who was believed to have redeemed the world of Eve's sins, she was considered to have absolved women of all sins. Yet the status of women never improved and the dichotomy continued to be practiced in the treatment of women. There was no middle ground which viewed women as human beings with basic rights.

The religious text had also dictated the values that an ideal mother should possess. This further enabled men to put down unachievable standards of how a woman should be within their families and even the slightest flaw became a weapon for the men to suppress women. The superior position that men had in the societal order also translated to women having to bear male children. For the rich, a male heir was important to carry forward the family legacy and for the poor, more male children meant a bigger workforce.

Along with the cult of Mother Mary, what further oppressed the women were the concepts of courtly love and chivalry. These two concepts established that women were meant to be weak and subservient and had to be protected at all times. The gender roles were clearly defined. The concept of chivalry only aggravated the already dismal condition women were in. It established in no uncertain terms that men were the brave warriors and women had to be protected and rescued. Men's roles were in public offices and women had to be passive and confined to domestic spaces. In all sense, woman became the conquered who had no say even in matters concerning her own body and life.²

Aggravating the gender inequality further, churches kept reminding women of their place in society. Christian women attended church on Sundays and holy days, but were only audience members. Men and women were seated separately and the latter did not have permission to take part in any religious

² Martha Howell. "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe,"

Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries

ceremonies. Men sat on the right side of the Church and women on the left which also symbolised women's status as the Latin word for Left meant "sinister", or evil. Even among the women, there were class divisions with the elite women sitting in the front, the middle-class women in the middle range of seats, and the lower classes either sat or stood at the back.³

Like Christian women, Jewish women were also excluded from public religious life. According to Torah, the Jewish religious text, women were also seen as morally inferior to men, and men were directed to love and praise their faithful and obedient wives. Most of the men spent a lot of time studying the religious texts, because of which women worked in family businesses and found themselves in a better position than Christian women. In addition to this, amendments in Jewish law around the year 1000 which banned polygamy and forbade the men from divorcing their wives against their wills significantly improved the position of women. But despite the small achievement that one particular religion made, women's condition remained dismal and they continued to be relegated to the fringes in all spheres.

Women in domestic spaces

In medieval Europe, religion was a powerful tool that established social order. Giving this societal hierarchy further legitimacy were rules and regulations that again served as a medium to subjugate women. Even in Roman Empire where the concept of public power was highly evolved, women were systematically excluded from all public offices. There were definitely women who rose to the highest levels of sovereignty by becoming queens. A number of powerful queens can be noted in English history. One of the most remarkable was Queen Isabella (1295–1358), who (in collaboration with her lover, Sir Robert Mortimer) brought about the end of the reign of her husband, Edward II (1284–1327). But in most cases, women ruled in the name of a minor child as the offices passed from fathers to sons. It was only in the absence of a male heir that the office could fall into the hands of a woman. But in this, it was dynasty and the want to keep power within the family that became significant

³AneLintvedt. "Medieval Women in Western Europe, c.1000-1350 CE." *World History Project*

factors in putting a woman in a position of power. It did not result in opening up of public spaces for women. In medieval towns where a more republican form of government was followed in which the officials were elected, women were completely absent from political roles. Women did not have the right to vote and they were denied the right to any kind of political participation.

When it came to the private rights of women, they were given the status of *alienijuris* (minors) and were governed by the principle of *patria potestas* (paternal power).⁴ The inequality that was propagated in the religious texts came to reflect in every sphere of society and the state had complete control over women's bodies and their lives and rights. The moment a girl was born in medieval Europe, she came to be placed under the control of her father. And in the event of her father's death, she was placed under the control of a male guardian. After marriage, the rights over her vested with the husband. The patriarchal rules did not permit women to marry without their parents' consent, own property while remaining married or inherit land if they had any surviving brothers. In effect, women were considered the property of male relatives. Their social status entirely depended on the status of their fathers or husbands, and women had no identity of their own.

Traditional conservatism was the core factor that decided women's participation in society. The Church and the aristocracy had absolute authority to determine lives of women. While the Church used the powerful force of religion, the aristocracy ensured that the feudal system was in place to maintain the social order. Population was divided into three classes, namely, clergy, nobility, and serfs.

Class played a major role in determining the position of women. The High Middle Ages witnessed population explosion where the population of Europe grew from 35 to 80 million between 1000 and 1347. The exact reason why this happened remains unclear. Almost 90 per cent of the European population

⁴Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple. "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1100." *Feminist Studies*, Winter - Spring, 1973, Vol. 1, No. 3/4, Special Double Issue:

remained rural peasants. The peasants were often under the control of noble overlords and there weren't many free peasants. This had the biggest impact on the women as they were considered the property of the landlord and did not have any freewill. When it came to rural women, most of them were serfs and did not have any rights over their lives. The lord controlled all aspects of the peasant's/serf's life and also made decisions about the lives of his wife and daughters. He was the one who decided when a girl should marry. After marriage, the entire control of the woman went to the husband.

Women who were serfs had no control over their lives or bodies. When a female serf got married, her father had to pay a fine to her lord which was known as *merchet*. The logic given was that marriage meant a loss of worker and also of the work that her future generations would have put in. A second fine known as *leyrwite* had to be paid by a serf who indulged in sexual acts forbidden by the Church. The reasoning was that such an act lessened a serf's value which would have an impact on the money that her lord was entitled to. Numerous instances have been recorded where lords have forced their female serfs into involuntary marriages to protect their land and ensure more workforce by means of the children that she will bear. The lords had the power to put any number of restrictions on serf women. If an unmarried serf woman got pregnant or had sex outside marriage, the lord had to be given compensation. Medieval lords had the legal right, *droit de cuissage*, (right to the thigh), to have sex with any serf woman on her wedding night. Women seldom had any escape from the serfdom status as it was passed on to her children. Contrary to this, gentry status was passed on to the children from their father.

The fines imposed in cases of abduction were another parameter that proved the subservient position of the serf women. If a maidservant was abducted, then the person who committed the crime had to pay 35 solidi, the value of the slave in addition to a fine for the loss of working hours. If a male serf tried to seduce a female serf, then he was liable to pay a fine of 72 solidi which included the value that he is worth as well as the maidservant's value. If a freeman seduced a maid servant, then he had to pay

15 solidi to her lord.⁵ If a free-born woman were to marry a serf, she will lose all her rights as a free-born woman and would have her property taken away from her and would be proclaimed an outlaw. The same was the case with a free-born man too.

Lower-class women were mostly bakers, brewers, milkmaids, barmaids, artisans, weavers and, primarily, tenant farmers who worked alongside their husbands and children in the fields. Their children were treated as adults from as early as 10 years of age and irrespective of gender, they were sent to support their fathers and brothers who were engaged in peasantry. Girls from poor families were not married until they were in their twenties after which they continued to work alongside their husbands.

The power of the noble women in their households depended on how much land they brought to marriage as land was synonymous with power. The primary job of these elite women centred around running their households consisting of family members and servants. Women from rich backgrounds had a vastly different life where their freedom was more restricted. Many of the girls were married as teenagers and their choice was never taken into consideration. Most often, these marriages were a deal between families with political or economic interests. The women came completely under the control of their husbands and they were constantly pushed to give birth to male heirs because of which they had to go through the circle of childbirth numerous times. It was found that as many as 20 per cent of women died in childbirth and coupled with poor medical care, it became the most common cause of death among young women. As far as women from poor families were concerned, they were forced to give birth to many kids as that will mean a bigger workforce. These women had to fulfil their domestic responsibilities along with tilling the land or engaging in other economic activities. Due to the added responsibilities, the life spans of these women did not go past forty years.⁶

Marriage and property rights were intertwined in Medieval England. Death of a husband could significantly alter a woman's

⁵Rivers, Theodore John. "The Laws of Salian and Ripuarian Franks. AMS studies in the Middle Ages"(AMS Press 1986)

⁶C N Trueman. "Medieval Women". *The History Learning Site*.

relationship with her minor children.⁷ It is interesting to note that the laws were different for women who were widowed or single. They had rights similar to those of men and had access to property. But they were at a disadvantage when it came to inheritance as property could be passed on only to the male heirs. The rights of women were limited to that of being a caretaker or a property possessor. The women were merely carrier of property from one male line to another and had no independent rights.

In England, women were not uniformly subject to the marital property regime of Common Law as customary laws dictated what would come under private property. While some places ruled that the husband is the sole custodian of the property wife brought to the marriage, in other places, husbands were only given guardianship. Some other places allowed women full ownership of personal goods like clothes and jewels.

In Roman Empire, custom marriage *sine manu* permitted a woman to remain under the power of family instead of being transferred to her husband's if she lived in her father's house three days a year. In such cases, a woman could jointly own property with her father but the control of that property still vested with the husband. After her father's death, there was a guardian or tutor who had power over her. Here an interesting exemption was made for women who had three children as she could be free from the guardian's control. Compared to the women in medieval England, Roman women had more power in their private spaces as they had direct access to wealth and property.

In medieval Spain, women were entitled to a dowry which was legally independent from her husband's funds and had to be returned upon her husband's death with a 20 per cent increase known as an *augmentum*. Married men had to ensure that their wealth grew enough to pay this amount, failing which their eldest son would be denied inheritance and it would go to the wife. Due to this law, many women inherited substantial

⁷Janet SenderowitzLoengard. "Legal History and the Medieval Englishwoman: A Fragmented View." *Law and History Review*.

amounts of money and they were in a much better off position than their counterparts in other states.⁸

In German law, women were barred from the inheritance of any property which came to her husband as the object of sale or capture. Certain women received bride gift from their husbands and on consummation of marriage, received morning gift. Later when women began accumulating wealth, the law tried to control the amount of property that passed into the hands of women by stipulating that the morning gift would not exceed a quarter of the husband's endowment.⁹

Divorce was a difficult process as the Church always stressed on the indissolubility of marriage. In exceptional circumstances where a spouse was unable to consummate the marriage, where it was discovered that the spouses were too closely related to one another, or where one spouse had been unable or unwilling to consent to the marriage, the Church granted an annulment. Legal separation was granted on the grounds of adultery or cruelty. But these provisions only allowed a couple to live apart and they were not allowed to remarry. The Church was steadfast in its interpretation of Bible which stated, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matthew 19:6)

Gross inequalities existed even in areas where men and women were seemingly engaged in the same work. According to documents¹⁰ from Medieval England, in rural areas, for reaping a man could get 8 pence a day while a woman could only get 5 pence for the same work. For hay making, men would earn 6 pence a day while women got 4 pence. Many in the countryside also worked as servants to the rich which were not adequately rewarded. In towns, women were kept away from guilds and also from any profession that required skilled labour. They were reduced to the roles of helping the male members of their family

⁸Jeff Fynn-Paul. Did Medieval Women Have 'Agency'? Or was it 'All About the Patriarchy'? Examples from Medieval Spain. leidenmedievalistsblog

⁹Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne, The Power of Women Through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1 100

¹⁰Records of 1461

and in rare occasions where women were allowed to be part of a trade guild, it was mostly clothes making. There were also companies that required permission from the woman's husband.

What significantly altered the condition of women was the outbreak of the Black Death pandemic of 1347-1352 CE which took so many lives that women were forced to come to the forefront and take charge of the businesses of their late husbands. They regularly operated their late husband's or son's business, gained title to their lands, and had greater autonomy than before. Noble women, who had been expected to manage their husband's estate and vassals when he was called away on business or to war, now became solely responsible for operations and transactions following the death of their husband and sons.

Women as cheap labour was a concept that was accepted in the guild system. It became profitable for guilds to hire women than men. But this proved to be a temporary phenomenon as men felt threatened by the changing status quo and started making the lives of women difficult. Due to loss of work, they kept retaliating and eventually the guilds imposed stringent restrictions on women and became restricted to men.

What needs to be understood here is that the women who were able to overcome the restrictions and entered the trade guilds, often illegally, did so for survival. It was never an act of rebellion to claim the spaces that were denied to them. The women who got legitimate positions in the markets were either widowed heads of households or had debilitated husbands and had no other means to survive. They had in fact “negotiated” with the patriarchal system and never tried to break the barriers that were already in place. In a sense, the responsibility that was vested with them was of subsistence. As stated earlier, the threat to male privilege was becoming clear, the guilds started closed doors on women and no woman was allowed to be given any positions of governing authority.

The primary reason for the inequality that existed was due to education not being accessible to most of the women. Schools were predominantly meant for young men and girls were seldom made part of it till 1300. In instances where women were permitted in these schools, they were part of the families that started these schools. Convents were the most famous

educational system for women in Medieval England. Apart from that, there were castle schools, court schools, cathedral schools, college church schools, village schools, apprenticeships, and universities that offered learning avenues. But only very few sections of the female population were formally schooled as most of them were taught at homes by parents, tutors or parish priests. Only elite women hailing from the families of nobles and aristocrats had the luxury of having a private tutor.

For women coming from middle class families who were mostly engaged in family businesses, education was out of bounds. Some of them may have got some training in writing bills and receipts while they helped their male members of the family with the businesses.

In castle schools, the education given was primarily of a non-serious kind. Girls were groomed for their future role as wives and were taught chivalric ceremonials and the social graces. They were trained in dancing, singing, table manners, dice games, welcoming guests and other attributes considered necessary for them to be accepted in the social circles. Higher education was seen as men's forte and women seldom went to universities.

Since most of the education system was run through the church, the priests propagated a strong anti-women view point. A perspective that found widespread support is as follows: "The woman is subject to man on account of the weakness of her nature . . . Man is the beginning of woman and her end, just as God is the beginning and end of every creature. Children ought to love their Father more than they love their mother." (St. Thomas of Aquinas, 1225-1274)

The main purpose of education during this period was predominantly to keep the girls distracted so their minds will not go to "evil" places, harmful thoughts, or provocative thinking. Women and girls were to be devoted to their religion and families.

Since women were considered such inconsequential actors in society, it comes as no surprise that they were not given much

importance in legal matters.¹¹ In criminal law, the terms used for women were witches and/or murderers and/or prostitutes. In civil law, they are mentioned primarily with respect to property rights following marriage. In the high medieval era, gender discrimination was rampant. Women were treated as a separate group and had numerous social, economic, religious, legal and economic challenges.

Most often, women were not even considered legal entities. If a woman transgressed, it was the husband who was sued. Majority of the women were not recorded at the time of their deaths. In empirical research conducted by Barbiera and DallaZuanna on mortality trends in Italy during the Middle Ages, this invisibility of women becomes clearer. Women were routinely underrepresented in the cemetery sample. Between the 6th and the 9th centuries, the mean sex ratio was 171 males for every 100 females, while later, from the 10th until the 16th century, the mean sex ratio was more balanced, with 151 males per 100 females. Yet women were systematically underrepresented and the reason remains unknown.

In the realm of civil law, married women did not have the legal right to sign contracts, being witnesses in court, or borrow money in their names. All of these had to be carried out under the legal authority of their husbands. But unmarried adult women were allowed to sign contracts, borrow money and be part of the legal procedure. In criminal law, a woman's marital status was insignificant as they were subjected to the same punishments as the unmarried ones. Here, women who were found guilty of capital offenses were given the most brutal punishment: burning at the stake. Men who committed capital offenses were sentenced to different kinds of execution depending on the severity of their crimes. This was directly linked to deep rooted misogyny which believed that a woman is the upholder of good societal values and she can't falter.

Sexual violence was a recurring theme in the records of the medieval age. Instead of humanising women, rape was seen an attack on the father's or husband's property. Consent was never

¹¹Kelly D Weisberg. "Introduction." *Women and the Law: The Social Historical Perspective*. 1982

taken into consideration. Multiple instances have been recorded where unmarried women have said that they were “seduced by force” which in itself is incongruous. Even the concept of seduction itself objectified women to a great extent. The definition of seduction as given by the French is, ““a victory won over a woman’s propriety by criminal manoeuvres and odious means.”¹²

Witchcraft and the hounding of women

Witchcraft was seen as one of the worst forms of crime in medieval Europe. One of the earliest records of a witch can be found in the Bible in the book of 1 Samuel, thought to be written between 931 BCE and 721 BCE. It narrates the story of King Saul who took the help of the Witch of Endor to summon the dead prophet Samuel’s spirit to help him defeat the Philistine army. The witch brought him back to life but prophesied the death of Saul and his sons. As prophesied, the next day, Saul’s sons died in battle, and Saul committed suicide. The Old Testament has the verse, Exodus 22:18 which condemn witches. It says, ““thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Throughout the Bible, there are passages which caution people against using witches to contact the dead.

Over a period of time, it became a powerful tool to hound any woman who did not conform to the then existing societal ideals. In the early stages, even while accusing women of being evil, there were efforts to further degrade their position by stating that women were influenced by the “devil” and they were not acting on their own. It was propagated that only the very “stupid and dim-witted” were held captive by the Satan when they were asleep and influenced their mind. In the 11th century, Bishop Burchard of Worms said: *Some wicked women, turning back to Satan and seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, believe [that] in the night hours they ride on certain animals with the pagan goddess Diana and a countless multitude of*

¹² Anna Clark. “Female Sexuality.” *The Routledge History of Women in Europe Since 1700*

women, and they cross a great span of the world in the stillness of the dead of night.

There is an indirect reference to witchcraft and the role of women in a 13th century letter by Pope Gregory IX. He had described a gathering of heretics but it matched the descriptions of the “witches’ Sabbath”. The letter stated that orgies should have enough women, otherwise men would engage in “depravity” with other men which would subvert the laws of nature.¹³

One of the most infamous witch hunting manuals, *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of the Witches) written by two well-respected German Dominicans in 1486 further propagated the idea that the women’s inherent lack of intelligence made them fall prey to demons. It essentially laid down guidelines on how to identify and how to hunt down witches. It became a holy grail for Protestants and Catholics for annihilating women who were thought to be witches. It is believed that for more than 100 years, it was only next to the Bible in the number of copies it sold in Europe.¹⁴ A paragraph from the book read: *Just as through the first defect in their [women’s] intelligence they are more prone to abjure the faith; so through their second defect of inordinate passions ... they inflict various vengeance through witchcraft. Wherefore it is no wonder that so great a number of witches exist in this sex.*

By the end of the 15th century, the perception of witches underwent a drastic change. From dimwits, these women were portrayed as those who flew on brooms, indicative of the domestic spaces that women are viewed in and the women branded as witches were feared. Compared to this, men who were thought to engage in witchcraft were shown as riding a demon horse. The belief was spread that the witches had secret gatherings known as “the sabbath” where they would worship the devil and indulge in reprehensible acts like human sacrifice and take part in orgies. The change of perception was attributed

¹³ Jennifer Farrell. “The evolution of the medieval witch – and why she’s usually a woman.” The Conversation

¹⁴ History of Witches. History.com

to “learned magic” having infiltrated Europe from the East which only the educated men from the clergy had access to initially. Over time, some features of this were blended with “common magic” that was widely practiced in Europe with no formal training. Since women started entering this realm of magic that were reserved for men, they began to be viewed as a threat which had the capability of destroying the carefully crafted male supremacy. Magic came to be viewed as an act of rebellion by the Church and it kept emphasising that men can still get out of the clutches of the devil using the power of education but women will never be able to.¹⁵

So, it comes as no surprise that the Church, society and law decided to kill these women who posed danger to male authority. There are records of killings that first began in Germany in 1572. A woman named Eva was charged for using witchcraft to murder a child in the settlement of St Maximin. She was tortured until she confessed and along with two other women was burned at the stake. By the mid-1590s, a town with only 2200 residents had burned 500 people for allegedly practicing witchcraft. According to historical consensus, it is believed that between 1400 and 1782, 40,000-60,000 people were put to death for witchcraft. The epicentre for witch-hunting remained Germany, Switzerland, and north-eastern France. The last recorded instance of witch-hunting was recorded in Switzerland in 1782.¹⁶ Most often single women, widows and women with different gender identities were targeted.

Crimes against women in medieval Europe

The influence of the laws that were formulated in the medieval period is visible in the justice system of modern-day Europe. Early forms of policing in Europe depended on reports of local officials and juries who were all men.¹⁷ Punishments in medieval Europe for crime were rather harsh and inhumane. But for

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Gwynn Guilford. “Germany was once the witch-burning capital of the world. Here’s why.” Quartz

¹⁷ Teresa Phipps. “Law, violence and the ‘dangerous’ women of medieval England.”

<https://dangerouswomenproject.org/2017/02/08/law-violence-dangerous-women-medieval-england/>

women it was worse as there was the inherent belief that women should never overstep the boundaries that were created for them. And the most ironical fact was that the punishments for women were decided by men and in most cases, women were punished in a brutal manner for offences as minor as gossiping. At the core of the punishments meant for women was humiliation which was yet another way of establishing male supremacy.

The most common among the medieval punishments was Scold's Bridle, the use of which was first recorded in Scotland in 1567. Later, local magistrates started giving this punishment extensively in both Scotland and England in the 16th and 17th centuries. Also known as a witch's bridle, this form of torture and public humiliation was exclusively meant for women. The device was essentially an iron cage for a woman's face used to punish women who were perceived as "too loud," "unruly" or those who used to gossip a lot. The heavy iron mask had a sharp metal gag which pointed to the mouth to restrain the tongue. Women were made to wear this and paraded on the street for up to 12 hours. Any women who did not heed to the moral standards at that time were made to go through this torture. Women were branded witches, prostitutes or shrews to justify this punishment. On many occasions, women were also sentenced on the request of their husband or his family members for not being submissive wives. Sometimes these women were chained to a hook by the fireplace in her home "until she learned her lesson." An even more humiliating punishment that "overbearing wives" were made to undergo was the "walk of shame." Women were made to walk through the town often in their petticoats while crowds jeered at them and called them "whores."

The next form of punishment which reinforced the notion that women were meant to be demure and should confine themselves to their homes was the Shrew's Fiddle. Those women who were found to bicker or argue with each other were made to wear a wooden restrain and walk up and down for two hours as punishment. Sometimes bells were tied on both ends to alert people so that the woman can be further humiliated. Sometimes, two women who were fighting used to be locked together so that

they will be forced to talk to each other. They were not allowed to leave until their argument was resolved. In another form, women who gossiped or had sex outside marriage were chained to a post by her neck and left outside to the mercy of the crowd. An incident was recorded in 1777, when a woman named Ann Morrow who was accused of impersonating a man and marrying another woman was stoned by an angry crowd which left her blind.

One more punishment for women who were accused of backbiting was the "cucking stool" or the chair of repentance. In rare cases, it was also used to punish those who were accused of sexual offences. In this, a woman would be strapped to a wooden chair without a seat or a commode and then forced to sit outside her own house or was paraded through the town. This punishment also had a harsher form which was called the "ducking stool." Here, woman would be strapped to a cucking stool which had long beams and would be suspended over a river or pool. She would be lowered into the water as many times as her punishment dictated. Repeated dunking often proved fatal with the victim dying of shock or drowning.

During this period, women were subjected to particularly high standards of morality and any digression was seen as a direct attack on societal values. Because of this, punishments for sexual offences were ruthless. A woman who was accused of sleeping around was made to undergo penance by being paraded in a barrel which had only her head and feet peeping out. This form of punishment called Drunkard's Cloak was also meted to men for crimes like drunkenness, and disorder. In a harsher punishment, an adulterous woman had her nose and ears cut off while a man was only made to pay a fine. Disfigurement of women was an important aspect of medieval ages as beauty was equated to power.¹⁸

Prostitutes and brothel-keepers had it even worse. They were branded with a hot iron and banished from the town. For women who were accused of theft or witchcraft, the most common

¹⁸Patricia Skinner. "Defacing Women: The Gendering of Disfigurement." Living with Disfigurement in Early Medieval Europe, The New Middle Ages Book Series

punishment was drowning. In 17th century, women were made to undergo trial by water to ascertain if they were witches or not. They would be tied and tossed in water with the belief that a witch will not sink like normal human beings and will float on the surface. This practice had resulted in the death of many innocent women. A more brutal form of punishment that was exclusively reserved for witches, prostitutes and homosexuals was the “pear of anguish” where a pear-shaped device was inserted into the private parts of a woman’s body and gradually “opened” by turning the stem. It then broke into several thin, sharp slivers. The agony that the women were put through was meant to be penance for their “sins” which essentially meant not abiding by the rule put forth by religion.¹⁹

Many a time women who were accused of witchcraft were sentenced to the most gruesome punishment that was there in the Middle Ages. A woman would have her limbs covered in tar, as well being made to wear a tar-soaked dress and bonnet. She would be tied up by the neck on a barrel, the fire lit, and she would be simultaneously burnt and hung in a blazing inferno. At times, bundle of twigs would be placed around her feet so that the fire will consume her and she will be burnt alive.²⁰

A crime that was even more unforgiving in medieval Europe was independent thinking by a woman. In the early 14th century, French Beguine Marguerite Porete wrote, “The Mirror of Simple Souls,” which said that one can reach God through the power of love. The Church felt that such a work will undermine its authority as it placed emphasis on faith rather than religious institutions. It forced Porete to retract her work but she refused. So, she was placed on trial and burned at the stake.²¹

¹⁹JR Thrope. “9 Bizarre Medieval Punishments.” Bustle

<https://www.bustle.com/articles/86247-9-bizarre-medieval-punishments-from-wearing-a-bridle-to-suffocating-under-mud>

²⁰Becky Barnicoat. “11 Messed-Up Ways Women Were Punished Through History.” BuzzFeed

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/beckybarnicoat/fucked-up-ways-women-punished-in-medieval-times>

²¹Lila Rice Goldenberg. “#NunsToo: How the Catholic Church has worked to silence women challenging abuse.’ *The Washington Post*

Medieval prisons for women brought out the stark contrast between the positions of men and women in society. Initially the female culprits were incarcerated in the nearby nunneries. Following that, women's wards were created where all inmates were clogged into one space. Contrary to this, there was spatial division common among male inmates, which was primarily a class division that organised prisoners according to their socio-economic status.²² Women were rendered without identities in every sphere in medieval Europe.

Nunneries: Exploitation masqueraded as empowerment?

The public spaces for women were greatly restricted. Within families, women were treated as second class citizens and even their basic rights were often denied as was made evidently clear with the earlier observations. So, the only option left for a woman to lead a comparatively better life was to enter a nunnery. Monasteries required those taking the veil to live behind the walls of an individual cell living a life of contemplation, prayer and work.²³ Back in those ages, convents were large organizations having multiple verticals and had dozens of people involved in its functioning. For women especially from noble and aristocratic families who were oppressed by the rules of patriarchy, this gave them a chance to rise up the ranks and become the head of a nunnery which would allow them to exercise power over others. Life as a nun meant that they were free from many of the then existing rules and regulations which would have greatly curtailed their freedom and made them subservient to the men in the family. This was especially true for women who wanted to escape the continuous cycle of child bearing where her consent was never taken into consideration. But life in a nunnery that looked appealing for many women from outside was not what it looked like. It imposed more stringent forms of patriarchy and coupled with the power of religion; it once again suppressed the rights of women.

²²G. Geltner . "No-Woman's Land? On Female Crime and Incarceration, Past, Present, and Future." Justice Policy Journal

²³Alixé Bovey. "Women in medieval society." British Library
<https://www.bl.uk/the-middle-ages>

It was in the sixth century that Scholastica, sister of Saint Benedict, founded European nunneries with the goal of celebrating God and expanding the influence of Christianity. Many women after receiving just basic education at convents took vow to become a nun and dedicate her life to religious pursuits. Others entered nunneries at the age of seven with the hope of getting an education before they were married off at 14. But the convent curriculum was centred around religion, embroidery, spinning, weaving, painting, morals, manners, and music. Reading and writing involved only Latin. There were a lot of women who made the choice to become nuns in the hope that they will have access to education. But they were left disappointed because the priests did not see any benefit in making them literate. Most of the nuns had learnt their prayers and devotions by memorising the texts. It was mostly nuns who were from the privileged class who were able to teach themselves how to read and write largely due to the education they had earlier received.

By the late Middle Ages, lower academic standards started impacting the functioning of nunneries and many went into debt. The reason for this was that nuns were not taught mathematics because of which they had poor record keeping skills. It is believed that convent education deteriorated to such an extent that romantic readings started replacing spiritual texts.²⁴ There was an inherent belief that women will not benefit from education. Because of this, monasteries sent academically good young men to universities, but convents did not send any women.

These women had dedicated their lives to God, but they were never allowed to enter the realm of priesthood. Teachings from the Bible were invoked time and again to prove that the worth of men were much more than that of women. Though in theory, the Church firmly supported spiritual egalitarianism, truth is that women were never able to transcend the gender barrier. This can be clearly understood if a study is undertaken of the saints' lives in the medieval era. Close to 85 per cent of the saints in this period were male which clearly points to the fact that women

²⁴Shirley Kersey. "Medieval education of girls and women." *Educational Horizons*.

were excluded from leadership roles. Even the enthusiasm that was seen in recognising the contributions of the 15 per cent women waned in the later half and women came to be considered as liabilities and were systematically kept away from playing any prominent roles in the community. Such attitude was regularised within the Church and women were more oppressed than they were in the private spaces of family.²⁵

The elite women could join convents and even rise to the rank of the Abbess in the early Middle Ages (c. 600-c. 1000). But the situation changed with the centralisation of Catholic power and the rising authority of the pope. By the 1300s, a succession of popes ordered that men (priests) should run the convents and this greatly reduced the women's authority. Women were forbidden from leaving the convent ground and they were silenced in the exact place which was meant to give them empowerment.²⁶ Convents were also used as spaces where wealthy families hid their illegitimate daughters fearing social repercussions.

Class played a major role in convents too. 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 meant that only those from wealthy families could afford an admission. The others who couldn't afford this confined themselves to communal women only spaces known as *beguines* where they lived religious lives. These women who were in poverty were not nuns and had the freedom to join the group whenever they chose to as they were not bound by the rules of any religious institution. They also found ways to get around guilds, manufacture goods and provide services to the surrounding community.

The *Beguines* led semi-monastic lives of prayer and work. But since they lived independent lives and were not under the authority of the Church, they were continuously and deliberately targeted. At the Council of Vienne in 1311, the Church ordered the closure of all *beguinages* and told the movement's members

²⁵ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg. "Sexism and the celestial gynaeceum — from 500 to 1200." *Journal of Medieval History*

²⁶ Susan Mosher Stuard. "Women in Medieval History and Historiography." *Speculum*.

to enter convents but they refused and continued to live independently. After this, the Beguines were labelled as heretics, prostitutes, beggars and lesbians and many of them were executed for failing to comply with the male hegemony and the Church's hierarchy.

The actual horrors of the life in nunneries came to light only in the year 2015 when British archaeologists excavating a church site in Oxford discovered skeletons of nuns who died in disgrace after being accused of "immoral behaviour." The burial ground stretched around what used to be Littlemore Priory, a nunnery founded in 1110 and dissolved in 1525. Led by Paul Murray, of John Moore Heritage Services, the archaeologists found 92 skeletons of women, men and children.

Out of these, 35 burials were of females. Males accounted for 28 and the gender of the remaining 29 could not be determined. According to the archaeologists, among the burials was a female aged 45 or more, who was likely one of the 20 women who held the position of prioress. Records have gone on to show that life at the nunnery had a dark side to it. The priories had the power to sit on judgement and they often accused the nuns of getting close to men. Instances have been recorded when the priories have put nuns into the stocks and beat them "with fists and feet correcting her in an immoderate way."²⁷ In 1518, the bishop visited this nunnery as by that time things had taken a turn for the worse. There were also stories doing the rounds of the immoral activities of the prioress as it was found out that she was having clandestine affairs and also had an illegitimate child. Yet when the bishop visited, she chose to shift the blame on the nuns and complained that one of the nuns "played and romped" with boys in the cloister and refused to be corrected.²⁸

What was worse was that in these nunneries more than the patriarchal rules set by religion, the greatest enemy of the women were other women. Drawing authority from patriarchal norms, some women who were in position of power subjugated

²⁷Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*.

²⁸Rossella Lorenzi, "Dark Side of Medieval Convent Life Revealed."
www.seeker.com

the other women for their own vested interests. The sisterhood which was supposed to be the defining feature of a convent was almost invisible and life for those who chose to be nuns was perhaps more difficult than those who chose not to be on the religious path.

Sexual violence was also an unfortunate reality of the nunneries. The writers of *Women Church World* have recorded instances where members of the clergy were alleged to have raped nuns, forced them into having abortions, kept them as sex slaves and denied them humane working conditions. Unfortunately, the nuns who raised their voices against clerical abusers were vilified by the Church. Sexual abuse in the Catholic Church was reported as far back as the 11th century, when Peter Damian wrote the treatise *Liber Gomorrhianus* focussing on incidents of abuse.²⁹ An incident was recorded in the late 15th century when Katharina von Zimmern and her sister were removed from their convent as the young girls were sexually abused by the priests.

The nuns who had suffered sexual violence and raised their voices became “virgin martyrs.” An example is that of St Agnes who refused to be seduced by the son of a Roman dignitary and stood for her right to remain a virgin. But her act of fighting for her rights was seen as an act of rebellion and she was subjected to a series of cruel assaults: from attempted rape and violent threats to death by being thrown into fire. St Petronilla, who also refused to wed a powerful aristocrat was stretched on a rack and put to death. St Agatha, who resisted the advances of a Roman prefect, had her breasts cut off. St Lucy had a dagger plunged in her neck because she resisted assault by a powerful man. In the lives of the nuns, the abusers were mostly aristocrats who saw a woman’s body as a means to assert their masculinity. The prevailing order within the nunneries demanded women to remain silent and accept their role as disposable commodities. Sexual violence continued to be used as a tool to reaffirm patriarchy.³⁰

²⁹St. Peter Damian. *Liber Gomorrhianus* (Book of Gomorrah) 1051 CE

³⁰Roberta Magnani. ‘Powerful men have tried to silence abused women since Medieval times.’ *The Conversation*

Pope, the supreme pontiff of Catholic Church was also not free from controversies regarding sexual abuse. Women were exploited by those very men who had sworn to protect them. Pope Julius II (1503 to 1513) was believed to have several mistresses and at least one illegitimate daughter despite taking the sacred oath of celibacy. In 1511, a council brought charges of sexual acts against him accusing him of "a sodomite covered with shameful ulcers."³¹

In 1531, Martin Luther, the German professor of theology had claimed that Pope Leo X had vetoed a measure that cardinals should restrict the number of boys they kept for their pleasure, "otherwise it would have been spread throughout the world how openly and shamelessly the Pope and the cardinals in Rome practice sodomy."³²

Pope Alexander VI (1492 to 1503) is considered the most controversial of all Popes for romancing several mistresses and fathering numerous illegitimate children with long-time mistress VannozzadeiCattani (who was married at the time).³³ Pope Alexander VI had openly admitted to having fathered seven children. It was also alleged that he used the Church's funds for staging comedic plays, lavish banquets, masquerades and dance parties.³⁴ Papal master of ceremonies Johann Burchard has in his diary recorded that on October 30, 1501, Pope Alexander VI and his son, Cesare held an orgy in what has become known as the Banquet of Chestnuts at the Apostolic Palace.³⁵

Pope Benedict IX was yet another Pope who was known for his being "cruel and immoral" behaviour.³⁶ Pope Victor III has acknowledged this in his third book of dialogues and had

³¹Dr. Joe J. Payyapilly, "The Spirit of Holiness" (Xlibris Corporation, 2010).

³²Mullett, Michael A. (2015). Martin Luther. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

³³ Connor James A. "The Last Judgment" (Macmillan, 2009).

³⁴Orestes Ferrara. "The Borgia Pope" (Kessinger Publishing, 2006).

³⁵Natasha Ishak. "How Pope Alexander VI Hosted Orgies, Kept Multiple Mistresses, And Bribe His Way To The Top." Ati <https://allthatsinteresting.com/pope-alexander-vi>

³⁶Jana K Schulman. "The Rise of the Medieval World, 500 – 1300" (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002).

condemned Pope Benedict IX's "rapes, murders and other unspeakable acts. He is also known to have sold his holy title to his godfather for 1,500 pounds of gold when he wanted to pursue marriage. In a collection of writings by the church leaders named "*Patrologia Latina*," Pope John XII was accused of turning the "papal palace into a whorehouse."³⁷³⁸

Conclusion

Women across ages have been denied their basic human rights in Europe and the medieval age was no different. Drawing authority from religion and aristocracy, women were forced to lead oppressed and subjugated lives. The most powerful tool, religion which was used to determine the position of women in society came from a space that was purely patriarchal. It did not have any female figures of divinity. It needs to be noted that even Mother Mary was worshipped for having given birth to a son and for adhering to strict codes of morality. She never had an existence that was independent of Jesus. When such a thought becomes the basic foundation for a religion and subsequently for societal values, then it results in an inherent inequality that can never be corrected. The ideas that flow from such a space remains male centric and women are rendered invisible.

The horrors that women faced in the religious and social spheres continue to have repercussions. It is important to have debates over difficult topics so that historical wrongs can be corrected. It is also vital to ask how could Europe that subjugated its own women ended up having the moral right to conquer half the world and preach equality to others? Even as late as 1649, the East India Company did not allow spouses to accompany its members and the rules were relaxed only in 1650. For the English woman, India was not just a new land to explore, it presented itself with an opportunity for her to break the shackles of patriarchy and improve her living conditions. Europe needs to

³⁷F. Donald Logan. "A History of the Church in the Middle Ages" (Psychology Press, 2002).

³⁸Remy Melina. "7 Quite Unholy Pope Scandals." *Live Science* <https://www.livescience.com/8606-7-unholy-pope-scandals.html>

acknowledge its history of brutality and repression and make an attempt to correct the historical errors. Only such an admission will help women reclaim their spaces and towards liberation in its truest sense.

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