

Gender inequalities in feudal society: Women's limitations and resistances

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the limitations faced by women in medieval society due to gender roles. It aims to challenge the stereotypical view of medieval women and highlight their contributions. The methodology involves historical contextualization, quotes from scholars, and a critical perspective. It combines descriptive and analytical approaches to understand the social dynamics that have shaped women's lives.

Keywords: Gender roles, Medieval women, Social dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle Ages are often characterized by their rigid hierarchical structures and the prevalence of strictly defined roles in society. In this context, women faced significant challenges due to gender inequalities entrenched since Antiquity, which shaped their lives in various aspects both social, economic and cultural. This study explores the complex dynamics of society within the feudal system, bringing a cut in the limitations imposed on the female gender.

The relevance of this theme lies in the need to understand not only the historical conditions of women in the Middle Ages, but also how these conditions influenced their lives and contributions to the society of the time. The existing literature reveals a variety of perspectives on the role of women, but in this study we will address the traditional view of clerical misogyny.

OBJECTIVE

The main objectives of this work are to investigate gender inequalities in medieval society and to examine the social roles attributed to women, seeking to shed light on the varied experiences of medieval women and to offer a broader view of their influence and historical importance, challenging simplistic and stereotyped interpretations of the feminine. Based on a critical review of the historical literature, the study seeks to highlight the relevance of understanding how women faced significant limitations in their daily lives, covering social, economic, and cultural areas. These limitations highlight the social norms that restricted women and delineated their roles within the feudal context. This examination is not limited to normative expectations, but also investigates the actual practices that shaped and sometimes challenged those norms. In addition, we seek to explore the contributions of medieval women and their strategies of

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resistance, an example of which is the Marian cult, imposed by the Church in the Middle Ages, but which somehow benefited the lives of women who lived in a predominantly restrictive historical environment.

We also bring a critical analysis of the different historiographical perspectives on the role of women in the Middle Ages. This study confronts traditional interpretations with contemporary approaches that value the diversity and complexity of women's experiences, aiming to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive view of the legacy of medieval women.

And finally, this work aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of women's contributions to medieval European civilization, challenging historical stereotypes and promoting a more just and representative historiographical narrative.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used is predominantly historical and cultural, bringing a historical contextualization in which the text begins by situating the reader in the historical period of the Middle Ages, highlighting important events and time frames. There is the use of quotes from historians and scholars of the medieval period, such as Bark, Franco Júnior, Hauser, among others, to support the arguments presented. We also make use of a critical perspective by presenting different historical interpretations, showing not only the social and cultural conditions of medieval women, but also criticism of the traditionalist and misogynistic view prevalent at the time. And finally, we seek to bring a descriptive and analytical narrative combining detailed description of aspects of daily life and structures of medieval society with critical analysis of women's conditions and their role in feudal society. Elements that reflect the historical and critical approach seeking to understand not only the historical facts, but also the social dynamics that shaped the lives of women in the Middle Ages.

DEVELOPMENT

To understand the lives of women in the Middle Ages, it is essential to know the historical context in which they lived. This period is often described as intermediate between Antiquity and the Modern era, it is important to highlight that, according to Bark (1966, p.12), "they are periods of transition, without beginning or end, it was then a fusion and not an abrupt interruption or an untimely flow". Historically and didactically, the Middle Ages began in 476 AD, after the fall of the last Western Roman emperor, and ended in 1453, when the Turks took Constantinople.

In the thirteenth century, Feudalism was a society characterized by a structure that was "strongly stratified, closed, agrarian, politically fragmented", as Franco Júnior explains (1986, p.14). To understand this important period in history, it is necessary to consider different cultural aspects and relevant factors. Hauser (1998, p.123) highlights the emergence of aristocratic chivalry, the awakening of lyrical



sensibility, the rise of Gothic naturalism, the emancipation of the bourgeoisie, and the beginning of modern capitalism as essential elements for understanding this era, which profoundly reflected and influenced medieval society. Bark (1966 p.12-15) adds that many of the conceptions of life we have today, such as "the equality of women, rights and dignity of work, convenience of instruction, equal laws, rights and responsibilities of the individual in society" began to take shape in the Middle Ages.

In the Middle Ages, the medieval nobility, essentially rural, maintained close ties with the popular classes, with whom they often did not distinguish themselves, "neither by culture nor by education, but only by the status and respective advantages they enjoyed", as Lopes explains (1994, p.79). In addition to labor relations, the medieval social structure developed an intricate network of vassalage bonds that were not only economic in nature, but also moral and even affective, as observed by Lopes (1994, p.79).

It is also necessary to emphasize that with feudalism the social classes of this period came to be seen as divine ordering, and for this reason the change from one social class to another was almost impossible. Hauser (1998, p.182) clarifies that any attempt at change was "equivalent to a rebellion against God's will for man". Thus, medieval man accepted his vassal status and did not fight against it, only resigned himself. The general conditions of life in this period were very difficult to cope with. Huizinga explains to us that

The calamities and privations were more oppressive and cruel than today. The contrast between disease and health was greater; The severe cold and ghastly darkness of winter were more poignant evils. Trials, business transactions, weddings and burials, everything was announced loudly with processions, shouts, laments and music. (Huizinga, 2010, p. 11)

Medieval man lived a terrifying reality in his daily life. Between the city and the countryside there was a sharp contrast. The city was enclosed in its walls, compact and bristling with numerous towers. According to Huizinga, "[...] no matter how tall or massive the stone houses of the nobles or merchants were, the towering figure of the churches dominated the city's skyline" (Huizinga, 2010, p. 12).

The Church was no longer under the rule of the Roman nobility, this period was known as the "triumphant". Religious education and literary instruction were deeply intertwined, forming the core of the new Christian school, which combined worldly and spiritual teachings. In this context, Bark (1966, p. 39) points out that a "new education system with modern values and objectives was being built". Despite the strong dominance of the clergy, the prestige of their monopoly was seen as one of the main means of achieving salvation.

This influence of the Church, deep and comprehensive, led society according to its own rules. In order to enrich himself even more, St. Augustine recommended that every Christian "should leave to the Church in his will the part of his son, and if he had no descendant, he should indicate to the Church his heir," as mentioned by Franco Júnior (1986, p.68). Society was basically agrarian and the Church was the



largest owner of tax-exempt land, which further increased its economic and political influence. It was also able to control the most intimate manifestations of individuals such as:

[...] his conscience through confession, his sexual life through marriage, his time through the liturgical calendar, his knowledge through control over the arts, the feasts, his thought, his mastery over his own life and his own death through the sacraments (one is only truly born with baptism, one only has eternal rest in the sacred ground of the cemetery). It legitimized horizontal relations by sacralizing the feudal-vassal contract [...] justifying servile dependence. (Franco Júnior, 1986, p. 71)

In the Middle Ages, the separation between clergy and laity served as a strategy to highlight the opposition between good and evil, virtues and vices. This reinforced the incontestable authority of the Church, which was responsible for guiding the moral life and defining the supernatural domain, as explained by Mattoso (1985, p.22). During this period, medieval man's worldview was deeply rooted in the sacred, influencing his way of living daily under the influence of the supernatural. Time was rigidly divided between day and night. Without sufficient artificial light, human activities were limited to daylight hours, night was the unknown moment, there were dangers that were not seen, and the Church was the one who protected them against these frightening moments.

Monasteries, such as castles and citadels, were built in places fortified against evil assaults, sometimes in the mountains, symbolizing isolation, ascension. However, as in castles, monasteries attracted the riches of the region, [...] (for the peasants) willingly surrender all that they have, because they fear death, judgment, and the monks protect them against the worst dangers: those that are not seen. (Duby 1988, p.23)

In the conditions of the time, the Church cultivated superstition and ignorance. Superstition was, at that time, generalized, because, according to Bark (1966, p. 116), "people followed what they were taught". In the religious institution there was also room for nuns who performed multiple functions, with an abbess as mother superior. Religious communities offered a welcoming environment and a religious atmosphere where women could live, pray, and work. By serving God and caring for one another with humility, they could participate in the liturgy and find an outlet for their administrative and intellectual talents. Duby (1991, p. 261) clarifies that "some women performed the functions of deans, chambermaids, stewards and porters. Others worked as librarians, copyists and teachers." The clergy instructed the women that they should behave humbly in the church. If they were virgins, they had to imitate Mary, mirror of chastity, inscription of virginity, testimony of humility, honor of innocence, Duby (1991, p. 252).

The forms of devotion of the preceding centuries have been replaced by other appellations; the Marian confraternities multiplied and the miracles of Our Lady are repeatedly copied, according to Verdon (2006, p.9). The convents were mainly intended for young men from noble families who offered

significant dowries. At the end of this period, many convents began to reject peasant women as candidates. For example, in Flanders, the foundations of convents specified that only young people of royal or princely lineage could be admitted, as Verdon (2006, p.65) records.

Even with this differential treatment of wealthy women, there was still a tendency towards misogyny in the Church. Duby (1991, p. 273) records that although clerics were often misogynists, the medieval period represented a pinnacle for the female condition.

Mary in the figure of "Virgin of Peace", "*stella maris*" and mediatrix before the Divine, was venerated as the supreme example for all the women of the Church. According to Brouquet (2010, p. 121), she was considered a "masterpiece" of nature, "the first by dignity and precedence, the source of all virtues", thus, the cult of Mary develops at the end of the Middle Ages, thus justified by Verdon:

The cult of the Virgin, excluded during the High Middle Ages, becomes particularly flourishing from the eleventh century onwards. With frequent communication, devotion to the Virgin is the best help of faith, writes Gregory VII, to Countess Matilda. (Verdon, 2006, p.8).²

During the Middle Ages, this cult of the Virgin Mary experienced a significant rebirth, so the expression "AVE / EVA" symbolized the duality between the figure of Mary and Eve, where "EVE" symbolizes the loss of humanity and when inverted "AVE" evoked the greeting to the image of the mother of the Redeemer, according to Verdon (2006, p.8). Although the Marian cult has been seen by some scholars as a promotion of the female position in society, as Le Goff argues, Christianity did not contribute significantly to improving her material and moral position, however Duby (1991, p. 274) corroborates that the new changes to Mary are a consequence and that the cause of this improvement verified from the twelfth century onwards, in the condition of women.

Texts dealing with medieval women are usually works by clerics or lay writers. These works present women as inferior beings, descendants of Eve, the instigator of sin, according to the Church's discourse. Verdon (2006, p.5) records that this situation of inferiority lasted throughout the Middle Ages. In the first half of the twelfth century, the superiority of men over women was extremely evident. Arguments about the inferiority of women were drawn from Roman law, the creation narrative in the book of Genesis, the Pauline writings, and the works of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and St. Ambrose. This Christian culture had a considerable weight in the conception of medieval women, and in order to trace this feminine profile, it is necessary to take into account, according to Macedo (1999, p.9), "the situation of women in the peoples that formed European society and the interpenetration of certain habits of the Celts,

² The cult of the Virgin, erased during the High Middle Ages, became particularly flourishing from the eleventh century. Marian devotion was very developed in Cluny. Along with frequent communion, devotion to the Virgin is the best support for the faith, writes Gregory VII to the Countess Matilda. (Verdon, 2006, p.8)

Romans and Germans". The Romans, for example, attributed female freedom to their occupation in society, but always evaluated as a being of "natural inferiority".

Tied to family interests, she was not even allowed the right to choose her husband. His life was "restricted to domestic means, and as a sign of submission he should keep his hair long," Macedo (1999, p.10) explains. The family underwent significant transformations in its structures to be able to maintain itself. In this way, the beneficiaries were the male members, heirs of the family assets. The firstborn son inherited most of the assets and the daughters were excluded from the succession. The material goods received were considered dowries that would be administered only by the husband. The father or the head of the wealthiest family feared the danger of financial instability. The high dowries to pay and, to reduce the number of marriages, the young women were destined to spend their lives isolated in the monasteries, becoming "wives of the Lord", as recorded by Macedo (1999, p.14-16), at the end of the twelfth century, the convents and monasteries of women grew considerably, as a result of the processes of transmission of goods, which determined the fate of aristocratic women.

However, when women married, they reproduced the forms of power of feudal-vassal relations. The wife called her husband "Senior" (Lord) reflecting feudalism in the domestic environment. For the religious, women were seen as "naturally" inferior to the "virile sex", considered only a simple secondary reflection of the male image. Couples did not become equal because the woman was considered "responsible for the fall of mankind into sin." Because of these prejudices, the husband exercised total dominion over his wife, and the pains of childbirth were regarded as his punishment. Thus, for the clerics "the direction or the government was reserved for the man, and the woman was the one who was in submission", Macedo explains (1999, p.16, 19). Verdon (2006), in turn, points out other data from this situation:

In the second half of the fourteenth century, Gilles Bellemère enumerates the defects of women. Your nature is evil. She inclines to concupiscence, she is different from man by her frailty, her weakness of spirit, her little natural constancy of discretion. And he quotes the phrase of a jurist, little known: woman is an imperfect object, a docile animal, a hateful being, the origin of discords, an encouragement of disputes, instigators of all crimes. The disorders of her blood, the obligation to be defended by a man, the inability to teach in public, to take orders, to confess, [...] (Verdon, 2006, p.6).³

Men of the time were visible and dominant figures, while women were often hidden and relegated to secondary roles. In literature, women were symbolically represented by men, mainly ecclesiastics.

³ In the second half of the fourteenth century, Gilles Bellemère never ceased to enumerate the faults of women. His nature is evil. Inclined to concupiscence, she differs from man in her frailty, the weakness of her mind, her lack of natural constancy and discretion. And he quotes this sentence from a little-known jurist: woman is an imperfect object, a lovable animal, an odious being, the origin of discord, an encouragement to disputes, the instigator of all crimes. His blood disorders, the obligation to be defended by man, the inability to teach in public, to receive orders, to confess, [...] (Verdon 2006, p.6)



Women were seen as part of their belongings and their movable property, they had the right to give them away and then receive them back and then abandon them, treating them as mere objects. According to Duby (1995, p.155), men "expose them by their side, pompously dressed, as one of the most beautiful pieces of their treasure, sometimes they hide them in the depths of their dwelling and, if it is necessary to take them out of there, they conceal them under veils and cloaks". However, this behavior was not intended to protect women out of consideration, but rather to prevent other men from wanting to appropriate them.

The masters controlled women's time and lives, giving them three successive states throughout their lives: "daughters, necessarily virgins; wives forced to copulate in order to fulfill the function of bringing their heirs into the world; widows, fundamentally returned to continence", according to Duby (1995, p. 156). All these periods marked the obligation of subordination to men. However, these same men of the twelfth century feared women, because there were those who did not allow themselves to be easily dominated. These women were judged and considered bad people: "since they were stubborn, they felt it was their duty to train, tame, guide them, so men thought they were responsible for the conduct of their women", illustrates Duby (1995, p.156). Men even had the right to punish the sins of their wives, or even to kill them, if it was deemed necessary.

Peasant women constituted the majority of the population, especially in the High Middle Ages, considered indispensable to the survival of the family, due to their hard work on the land and inside the family homes. Verdon explains that:

Women participated in numerous agricultural works, in the shearing of sheep in spring or early summer, in haymaking in June, in harvesting at the end of July, in harvesting in September, in caring for animals. However, they could not do a job, ploughing or sowing, not only because of their physical weakness, but also for symbolic reasons, the earth was female and man the only one who has the exclusive right to penetrate her seed. (Verdon, 2006, p.72).⁴

At that time, textile work played an important role, meeting the needs of the family and providing the feudal lord with what he needed. Likewise, the manufacture of needles, scissors and belt buckles was no stranger to women's activities, Verdon (2006, p.72-74) adds. During this period, the level of women's wages was much lower than that of men, they received more or less half the salaries of men and, under these conditions, many of them prostituted themselves to survive, according to Verdon (2006, p.75).

As for women's behavior and occupations, from a very early age girls were led to a reserved procedure with modest gestures and occupied themselves with needle and thread work to distract evil

⁴ The women participate in many agricultural tasks, in the shearing of sheep in spring or early summer, in haymaking in June, in the harvest at the end of July, in the grape harvest in September, in the supervision of the animals. However, it is not up to them to carry out certain tasks, such as ploughing or sowing, not only because of their physical weakness, but also for symbolic reasons, since the land is a woman and the man alone has the right to let the seed penetrate it. (Verdon 2006, p.72)

thoughts. In the villages, the young daughters of artisans learned the trade of embroiderers, seamstresses, among others, explains Brouquet (2010, p. 16). Those who were already married, the responsibility was to take care of the house. They lit the fire to prepare food, kneaded bread and cleaned the house, but their work did not stop there. Textile production occupies a good part of his day with the carding and spinning of wool, or with the weaving of linen to sew sheets and clothes for his family and for the feudal lord, according to Brouquet (2010, p. 79). The mother of the family was also busy

[...] from the garden, the orchard, the chicken coop from which much of the food came. She takes care of the animals, beats the butter and makes the cheese. Most of these activities take place in a small perimeter near the house, she also participates in field work during the busiest periods: threshing and harvesting fruit in summer, and harvesting in autumn. The young women tended the flocks and sheared the sheep with their mothers. (Brouquet, 2010, p. 81).⁵

The young unmarried women worked in the homes of other families in the village as wage earners, during the harvest or when they needed labor. These young women were condemned to live poorly fed and poorly clothed, often beaten and sexually abused by their employers, Brouquet points out (2010, p. 82, 90). With this perspective of life, the young woman's body was an object of constant struggle to remain a virgin, a personal struggle, a struggle for herself, her family and for the whole society, explains Brouquet (2010, p. 15).

Physical pleasure was condemned by the Christian morality of the Church, limiting sexuality to the extreme. The sexual relations of the couples were severely disciplined by the religious. Macedo (1999, p.20) clarifies that at certain times sexual intercourse was forbidden under penalty of religious penance, especially during Lent and on holy days. The Doctors of the Church, St. Ambrose, and especially St. Jerome, warned the spouses about too ardent love in marriage, considering it adultery. St. Augustine summarized the purpose of union in three words: "progeny", "fidelity" and "sacrament", Duby (1991, p. 296). Thus, the function of marriage was only to generate children, equally for wives, abstention from carnal desires had to be strictly complied with and justified by the liturgical calendar. Verdon (2006, p.40) complements when he states that

They kept Sunday, the Lord's day, possibly the Sabbath. Wednesday and Friday being days of mourning, numerous penances are prescribed for continence. The feasts of various saints are added before Christmas and Easter. Chastity should also be observed some time before communion. (Verdon, 2006, p.40).⁶

⁵ [...] the garden, the vegetable garden and the henhouse, which provide most of the food. She milks the cow, churns the butter and makes the cheese. Most of her activities take place in a small area around the house, she also participates in the work in the fields during the busiest periods: threshing and picking fruit in summer, and gleaning in autumn. The young girls look after the flocks and shear the sheep with their mothers. (Brouquet 2010, p. 81)

⁶ They will not have any reports on Sundays, the Lord's day, and possibly on Saturday. Wednesday and Friday being days of mourning, many penitentiaries prescribed continence. In addition, there are Lent before Christmas and Easter, the feasts of various saints. Chastity must also be observed for a certain time before communion. (Verdon, 2006, p.40)



Forced marriages were one of the causes of women's escapes, either by their own decision or by a kidnapper, known as "*rousso*". The Church was not in favor of a new marriage, but she did not condemn it, so widows married for various reasons, especially ladies of high status, owners of large goods, who needed someone to defend their patrimony. (Verdon, 2006, p.49). Women suffered physically, Macedo (1999, p.21-24) records "men, fathers or husbands reserved the right to punish them as a child, a domestic, a slave. It was an unquestionable, primordial, absolute right of justice." In this way, the "spanking
However, if the woman bore male children, she guaranteed a place of respect among the other family members, because when widowed she would have moral ascendancy over her children. If this was not the case, only one destination was reserved – the mystical marriage with Christ in monasteries and convents. Widows, according to Verdon (2006, p. 48), had three choices: consecrate themselves to God, remarry or live in society. The situation of women in medieval society was complex and sometimes ambiguous, but social and religious expectations were always limited.

Despite all these limitations, the representation of women in medieval culture also showed significant variations. In the south of France, women were worshipped for the poetry of the troubadours, marked by sentimentality, courtesy and refined elegance, transforming it into a sanctuary of inspiration. It was around 1209 that the troubadour production was transformed into a literature directed by the Church. It was the Dominicans who imposed the cult of Mary as the official theme of the new troubadours. The lyrical poetry of the Provençal troubadours did not disappear, on the contrary, deep roots had been taken by neighboring countries, which became disciples of the poetic art of the Languedocio, while giving cultured form to the themes of folkloric inspiration. When the poetry of the troubadours penetrated Germanic and Italian lands and crossed the Iberian borders to Galicia, a primitive, autochthonous poetry already vegetated in these populations, which had women as its main agent, and music and choreography as sisters. (Spina, 1996, p.26)

Troubadour poetry and Marian worship were contemporary. Lapa (1973, p. 23) explains that before the "twelfth century there already existed, if not a system of Marian mysticism, at least the service of Mary". For the Christian, the Virgin was the gentle mediatrix between Heaven and Earth, the one who heard the prayer of the supplicant and transmitted it to the Lord. According to Lapa, there are those who see even in this "religious conception, transferred to social life, the deep reason for troubadourism, its panegyric character, the reason why the troubadour asked the lady and not, as was natural, the master". The poetic parallelism is indeed perfect between the attitude of the Christian, "prostrate at the feet of the Virgin, and that of the amateur, lying at the feet of the mistress." Thus, women were deified as the objective of the new troubadour conception of life, which "represents a conscious or unconscious deviation from the Church and the ideals of life that it imposed, a gradual liberation of medieval man". (Lapa, 1973, p. 23)



The troubadours placed on the same plane of worship both the deified mistress and the humanized God. They had equal values. The troubadour preferred the owner for intuitive reasons of social and aesthetic order and not in obedience to any anti-Catholic thought or disposition. (Lapa, 1973, p. 24).

In this way, the old popular mystique of the Middle Ages emerged with the troubadour love song in its classical form, approaches Lapa (1973, p. 5). Historian Jacques Le Goff explains that the civilization that encountered human sensibility also knew how to find the

[...] balance of soul and body, of heart and spirit, of sex and of feeling [...] to claim the autonomy of feeling and to pretend that there could be between the two sexes relations different from those of instinct, of force, of interest and conformism, were things in which there was something truly new. (Le Goff, 2005, p. 352)

In this way, troubadour poetry not only reflects the influence of the Marian cult, but also symbolizes a new conception of life and human relations in the Middle Ages. This new perspective allowed for a form of artistic expression that elevated women to an almost divine status, defying the rigid ecclesiastical and social norms of the time. Thus, through troubadour literature and poetry, a significant influence emerged that, albeit briefly, contributed to reconfiguring the position of women in a society where they were often devalued.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the complex context in which women lived in feudal society, gender inequalities were deep and structural, reflecting the patriarchal hierarchy that dominated all aspects of life. Women in particular faced significant limitations in several spheres of their lives. They were considered legally dependent on men, usually their fathers or husbands. They had no independent legal rights, and could be donated, received back or abandoned according to the will of men, characterizing vassalage relations and obligations between lords and vassals, women were often seen as the property of their husbands or fathers, reflecting the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the time.

Legally, women were considered inferior to men, with no property rights or direct inheritance. Their role was predominantly domestic, although noble women sometimes wielded some political influence. Most goods were passed down through the male line, leaving women without significant economic power.

Women's work varied according to social position. While nobles ran fiefs in the absence of husbands, peasant women faced agricultural and domestic work without significant legal recognition, they were primarily responsible for household chores and child rearing, with few opportunities to participate in activities outside the family environment. Their worth was often measured by their ability to father



children, especially male heirs. He suffered from domestic violence that was socially tolerated, with men having the right to punish their wives as they saw fit.

The dominant influence of the Church permeated every aspect of medieval life, shaping moral, educational, and spiritual norms. Women found some space within religious institutions such as convents and monasteries, where they could have some limited autonomy. With the insertion of the Marian cult in the troubadour culture, women were idealized as inspiring muses, although still within the narrow limits of patriarchal society. This contributed to a new conception of life and human relationships, challenging current norms and providing a symbolic space for female recognition and appreciation in medieval times.



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