

CHAPTER 1

WORLDS APART, TO 1700

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- What were the different roles of early Native American women?
- What was the place of women in the political and economic order of early modern Europe?
- How was women's work tied to social organization in Africa in years before contact?
- How were different ideas about women and gender important in the early years of contact among Africans, Europeans, and North Americans?



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TIMELINE

1100	Islamic trade routes develop to African ports south of Sahara
1200	Cahokian society in Midwest at its height Aztecs begin their rise to power in central Mexico
1337	Hundred Years' War begins in Europe
1347	Black Death begins to decimate Europe
1492	Columbus arrives in the Americas Ferdinand and Isabel expel Jews and Muslims from Spain
1503–1504	Amerigo Vespucci explores New World
1517	Martin Luther begins Protestant Reformation with Ninety-Five Theses
1521	Hernán Cortés conquers the Aztecs
1545–1563	Council of Trent
1558	Elizabeth I becomes queen of England
1564	Jacques Le Moyne explores Florida

FOR CENTURIES, women in all parts of the world have been of critical importance in feeding their societies and rearing their children. Indeed, these roles were so important that their societies not only saw the productive and reproductive roles of women as linked, but societies also evolved complex laws to regulate how women produced and reproduced. Community strategies to grow food and trade goods included alliances created by marriage or other kinds of sexual relationships.

These alliances varied tremendously throughout the Americas, Africa, and Europe, creating different household structures. Women

might live in small families with only their husbands and children, or they might be part of a more extended lineage in which they were one of several wives, or they might live in a society in which their relationships with their mothers were more important than their relationships with their husbands. In some societies, women controlled the farmlands and took primary responsibility for agricultural production, whereas in other places their husbands or fathers were more likely to control these resources. As a result, women in different parts of the world exercised power in diverse ways, and women in some societies had more power than women in other societies.

In the thousands of years before the end of the fifteenth century, when the continents of the Americas, Africa, and Europe came into explosive contact, these different forms of social organization evolved, to a large extent, independently of one another. However, as Europeans developed deeper trade relations with Africa beginning in the middle of the fifteenth century, discovered the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century, and soon after began the forced transport of African slaves across the Atlantic, these different forms of social organization became the subject of intense scrutiny. As men and women in Africa, Europe, and the Americas took each others' measure in the years following contact, they noted with unease different patterns of dressing and social life, family organization and work, and religion and governance. Although occasionally these encounters with different cultures prompted self-reflection, more often they provided fodder for misunderstanding and conflict.

WOMEN IN THE AMERICAS

By 1000 CE, densely populated, architecturally sophisticated, and complex societies that were rooted in agricultural production had emerged not only in Mexico, with the successive domination of the Olmecs, the Mayans, and the Aztecs, but also in the southwestern United States, with the development of the Pueblo cultures, and farther east, with the Mississippian cultures that flourished along the banks of the Mississippi River. In areas farther north, other groups such as the Iroquois combined a semi-mobile existence with farming and hunting, while in some places to the west, the California and Northwest Coast Indians shared forests and streams that were so abundant these groups had little use for agriculture. Each of these societies used ideas about gender to organize work and the distribution of resources, but their execution of these ideas was different from group to group because gender is a constructed category. As a result, different societies create different gender roles.

Cultural Differences

Among the Iroquois peoples of the northeastern United States, women were a dominant force, creating both **matrilocal** and **matrilineal** families. Women not only farmed the land but also were the ones who inherited it, a system that worked well in a society in which men were often gone. The Iroquois League, initially composed of the Senecas, the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondagas, and the Cayugas, had been formed in the fifteenth century to bring peace to these tribes. However, during the spring, summer,

and fall, men continued to fight as well as hunt, leaving women behind to tend to the land. Before departing, the men cleared new fields for planting with a slash-and-burn technique, and women then planted and harvested the crops of corn, beans, and squash. Women worked in their fields communally and then distributed and prepared the food—both crops and animal meat from hunting—for their families.



Native American women were often responsible for planting crops. Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues captured this gendered division of labor among Timucua women during the 1560s, when he traveled with an expedition through what is now Florida. His artwork was later disseminated in engravings made by Theodor de Bry at the end of the sixteenth century.

The role of women is less clear in the Mississippian societies that developed during this same period in cities and villages stretching from Louisiana and Alabama in the South to Illinois and Iowa in the North. The vast urban center of Cahokia, populated by probably twenty thousand to thirty thousand people at its peak in the twelfth century CE, was the most spectacular of these settlements. This complex culture was extremely hierarchical, composed of political and religious elites who were supported by large groups of artisans and farmers. Cahokia used the agricultural produce of outlying farmlands for its subsistence, and Cahokian leaders marshaled the labor of thousands to build huge pyramids for ritual purposes. Although both men and women of the peasant class may have been farmers in this society, women were ritually linked to agriculture and fertility in figurines depicting them with farming tools and produce.

Women were also closely tied to agriculture in the Pueblo societies that emerged in the Southwest. By the time Europeans arrived at the beginning of the sixteenth

century, many of these Pueblo societies were organized both matrilineally and matrilocally. Like the Iroquois, women owned the homes that their families lived in and the fields that they farmed; the goods that their families accumulated passed through the female line. However, unlike the Iroquois, husbands and sons of Pueblo women often did the actual farming, in addition to hunting small game to supplement the family diet. Women prepared the food that was produced and crafted beautiful pottery jars and tightly woven baskets that were dense enough to carry water and store excess food. They also built the homes where their families lived. Men cut and hauled the timber that was used to frame their pueblos, but women were responsible for the rest of the construction. While women controlled the household, Pueblo men controlled the *kivas*. Central to every Pueblo town, kivas were buildings that men shared for socializing, for ritual practices, and for weaving. Although women in southwestern societies also wove, weaving was clearly an important activity for men in Pueblo societies.

Among the Aztecs who rose to power in central Mexico beginning in the twelfth century CE, women lived in a society that was not matrilineal, but both patrilineal and patrilocal. Men were responsible for the farming, while women were responsible for domestic activities. Girls married young in Aztec society—sometimes when they were ten or twelve years old—and went to live with their husbands' families. While much of their responsibility centered on the home, one of their activities, weaving, took on broader significance. As the Aztecs expanded their conquest to surrounding areas, they taxed both the men and the women in the societies they conquered. While men paid their tributes through work or warfare, women paid their tributes in cloth. Demands for cloth tributes increased over the years so that women had trouble producing enough to meet their obligations. Thus, some households who could afford to do so acquired female slaves to help with the weaving or husbands took additional wives.

Marriage, Family, and Gender Identities

Just as practices of work and inheritance varied among Native Americans, so too did ideas about family. Family lineages and clans were more socially significant than the smaller units formed by husbands, wives, and their children. A woman's relationship to her parents or siblings who controlled the land she farmed was usually much more important than her relationship to her husband. Because individual family units were absorbed into larger households, and because land was communally owned or managed, marriage negotiations were simple, and little property changed hands. Small gifts were exchanged between husband and wife as a show of reciprocity, but legal obligations beyond that were uncommon.

Marriages were primarily personal relationships that could be dissolved if the relationship deteriorated. Divorce was most common during the first year of marriage and less likely once a couple had children, though still accepted. Children of these marriages became a part of the mother's lineage.

Not only was divorce accepted by many Indians, so too was **polygamy**, the practice of having more than one spouse at a time. Where circumstances warranted, a man took more than one wife. Some of the higher-status Indians of the eastern United

States, particularly chiefs, had extensive social responsibilities that were too onerous for one wife to shoulder. An extra wife in that case was an important way to extend additional hospitality. Where warfare had reduced the proportion of men in a society, more than one sister sometimes married the same husband who would contribute hunting goods for them to share. This practice of **soral polygamy** was particularly useful in matrilineal societies, because when a man married two sisters he was still a part of the same lineage.

Because marriage had a very different meaning for Native Americans, so too did sexuality. Pueblo women viewed sex as a way of not only welcoming strangers but also limiting their power. The same was true of Algonquian women in the Chesapeake region and the Huron¹ women near the Saint Lawrence River. Indeed, unmarried women in Indian societies were usually free to engage in sexual relations with as many men as they wished. In some cases, women expected a demonstration of reciprocity when they engaged in sexual relations with men who were not their husbands. Pueblo women, for example, expected a gift such as a blanket or piece of meat. Such exchanges were not required for sex that occurred within marriage, because by the very nature of the relationship, such obligations had already been worked out.

Some women in the Great Lakes region preferred temporary relationships with male hunting companions to the commitments that marriage demanded and constructed a gender identity that was neither male nor female. These hunting women never married. They preferred traveling with men through the forests to staying with women in the villages to raise children. Their relationship with a particular man usually only lasted as long as a hunt. They provided food and clothing for their companions and expected compensation in return. They enjoyed sex with their partners and if children were produced returned them to their villages to be raised by their families. These children did not have the status that would allow them to marry into the higher ranks of their governing class, but they were otherwise accepted by their relatives, suggesting the extent to which the alternative gender identity of their mothers was accepted.

While hunting women in the Great Lakes region represented one important variation on the basic gender divisions between men and women, an even more widespread variation in gender distinctions occurred in the case of people who were biologically male but dressed like and took on the roles of women in their society. Today they are referred to as *two-spirit people* or *men-women*, though in precontact times the names for this alternative gender identity varied. Although they were never very numerous in any given community, two-spirit people could be found in most areas of North America except the Northeast where the Iroquois dominated. Two-spirit people were highly valued in their communities and sometimes functioned as spiritual leaders or took on other jobs of ritual importance such as burying the dead. In other cases, they were prized for their ability to apply the strength of a man to the jobs usually undertaken by women, such as grinding corn. The sexual relationships that were allowed for two-spirit people varied with their tribes. Among the Pueblo Indians, for example, they were allowed to have sex only with men, not women. While most of their sexual relations were with men, this was not always the case, and sometimes they did have

sexual relations with women. Indian cultures observed a strong binary division of gender between men and women, but the presence of hunting women and two-spirit people shows how these cultures also included third and even fourth gender identities for some of their members.

Exercising Power

How women exercised power was largely a result of the kind of society they lived in. In hierarchical and highly stratified societies, such as those found among the Mayans and Aztecs in Mexico or the Mississippian cultures surrounding Cahokia, power was exercised by elite classes of royalty and nobles. Women who were born into those classes sometimes wielded significant power, but they did so because of their elite status rather than their gender.

Among the Mayans in Mexico, some women exercised the power of **sovereigns**. Both Princess Kanal Ikal, who ruled from 583 CE to 604 CE, and Princess Zac-Kuk, who ruled shortly after, inherited their positions and ruled independently of any power held by their husbands. Among the Aztecs, who dominated central Mexico several centuries later, women of the royal line made strategic marriages to maintain the power of their family. Women such as the Lady of Cofachiqui also ruled in some of the Mississippian groups that survived in the southeastern United States into the period of contact with Europeans.

Women occasionally took on the role of **shaman** in some Indian societies. In the Great Lakes region, both men and women were shamans. They were often sought to predict the future or dance in a curing ceremony. In one case from 1636, a particularly powerful female shaman was called in to cure a sick woman when three male shamans had failed. According to the Jesuit priest who watched, she “began to shake the house and to sing and cry so loudly that she caused the devil to come who told them more than they wanted.”

In some tribes, such as those of the Iroquois, women participated in many crucial decisions. While the chief of their tribes was always a man, Iroquois matrons chose him—and they removed him if necessary. They also chose men to speak for them at council meetings. They sometimes even demanded captives in warfare or kept men from participating in war. Thus, although men and women engaged in very different roles in society and exercised different kinds of power, Iroquois women were not subordinate to men. Buttressing their political voice, however, was their control over the distribution of food.

In many of the less-hierarchical societies, in which the household was a key social component of the larger social system, women most clearly exercised power when they controlled their bodies or the distribution of resources. When women in matrilineal societies decided whom to have sex with, they controlled access to their lineages and the inheritances that passed through their lineages. If they decided to end a pregnancy, they also controlled who would be a member of their societies. By providing food to their households, they were responsible for the physical survival of their communities.



View the Profile on Lady Xoc

Lady Xoc was one of the most powerful women in Mayan civilization.

EUROPEAN WOMEN

Europe was in a state of upheaval in the two centuries that preceded its discovery of the Americas in 1492. Various parts of the continent were being transformed socially and economically by growing trade with Asia and Africa. A new class of wealthy merchants began to rival nobles for power. Peasants struggled to survive while landholders, eager to graze their own herds for commercial purposes, claimed pasturelands the peasants had been using. This social and economic dislocation was compounded by the demographic catastrophe of the bubonic plague, introduced into Europe by rats from a ship bringing merchandise from Asia. The **Black Death**, as the plague was called, struck originally in the 1340s, wiping out about twenty-five million people within three years. Periodic outbreaks added to the death toll, and within fifty years, Europe's population declined by 40 percent. Finally, the Hundred Years' War, fought largely on French soil from the middle of the fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century, not only exacerbated the chaos and misery caused by the plague and the demands of trade but also ended with the emergence of more modern nation-states in Europe.

All of these changes had consequences for women. In some cases, powerful female leaders such as Elizabeth I of England and Isabella of Castile gained power as a result of inheritance or marriage. With social and political hierarchies shaken to the point of collapse, gender roles adapted. Women took on new jobs, but their very flexibility in the face of catastrophe itself became a subject of debate and concern, particularly because they lived in societies that were organized around male leadership in both the home and the government.

Flexible Labor Force

Throughout Europe, many peasant women lived on small farms. Their activities were mostly confined to the household while men took charge of the fields. The household, however, was an expansive concept. Women's work included child rearing; tending gardens where they grew peas, turnips, and onions; processing food; and baking bread. During cold winter months, women turned to spinning so that they could make clothes for their family. Where possible, women collected nuts and berries from nearby woods and often tended the pigs and chickens that provided meat and eggs.

Women also performed other valuable tasks beyond the household. At harvest time, women helped the men to cut the grains and bind the sheaves. They also herded the cattle into the field after the harvest to eat what was left. Women's flexibility to work beyond the household was crucial as land became so scarce that peasant families could not support themselves with their produce and as money was demanded in the payment

of rent. Women made butter, cheese, and soap, not just for their own consumption but also for sale at local markets. Women—more than men—also worked as day laborers for wealthy families and sold produce or animals that they raised to earn extra money families need to survive as the economy became increasingly commercialized.

Many urban women also demonstrated their flexibility in the wake of the disruptions caused by the Black Death when they moved into trades, formerly the province of men. In England, many of the guilds that determined how trades would be practiced in a city allowed the wives and daughters of their members to join as well as permitting the widows of their members to carry on their husbands' trades. As a result, in 1419, thirty-nine of the members of the Brewers' Company in England were women. These women joined a small number of other female craftsmen who had established themselves in trades throughout Europe even before the plague had struck. In Paris, for example, five exclusively female guilds were operating at the end of the thirteenth century. Women were particularly active in the silk trades, which required careful handling of the delicate threads and cloth. By the end of the fifteenth century, however, as the population returned to earlier levels, women began to disappear from the guild rosters. A few hung on as grocers, locksmiths, brewers, and weavers, but most did not. Men who wanted their jobs pushed women out, and guilds changed their rules to favor men.

In all circumstances, women earned less than men for their work, usually significantly less. As one contemporary writer during this period put it, women were “half-men” whose jobs were not as important and who worked more slowly than men. Only during the peak years of the plague did women's wages more closely approximate those of men.



Patriarchal Societies

Women in Europe were paid less than men as part of a larger ideology that argued women were inferior to men in both mind and body. They had proven their weakness when Eve had tempted Adam in the biblical account of creation. Medical doctors believed a woman's temperament was ruled by her womb, which severely impaired her judgment. As a result, women were considered disorderly and irrational and could not be trusted because they lied. They caused social discord with their gossip. And because they lacked self-control, women could not control their sexual appetites. A woman's lusty sexuality was one of her most prominent weaknesses. Some writers argued that women were sexually insatiable (and thus more like animals than men were) because they could have multiple orgasms.

This view of the female character provided strong justification for not only treating women as inferior but also making sure they were under the control of men. By the sixteenth century, a lively pamphlet debate had emerged in England in which one side warned of the dangers of women's inherently shrewish natures and uncontrollable sexual urges. The other side argued that women's weaknesses were more the result of poor socialization and that if women were properly trained they could be modest and pious. Indeed, many women already measured up to this standard, their defenders claimed.

Of course, there were strong class overtones to this distinction as well. In Spain, wealthier women upheld their families' reputations with their virtue. Their sexuality had to be carefully policed lest whole families' suffered dishonor, so they therefore appeared more modest than poorer women. Among the lower classes, family honor did not have the same value, so the virtue of these women did not have to be protected or policed in the same way. It was these women who were seen as promiscuous.

Throughout Europe, regardless of their class position, women—wives and daughters—were legally under the control of their husbands and fathers. This **patriarchal order** extended from household to government, as men were expected to rule their families and their communities. In countries that followed Roman law, such as Spain, the Netherlands, and France, women still maintained important rights of inheritance and property holding. In Spanish law, for example, girls and boys inherited property from both their mothers and their fathers, just as they inherited both their parents' names. Spanish women kept the right to the property they brought into marriage; and if they died childless, their siblings and parents laid claim to the property, not their husbands. Husbands in Spain still usually managed their wives' property, and wives had to get their husbands' permission before buying or selling it, but married women made contracts and used the courts when necessary to protect themselves.

In England, a different set of legal rights evolved for women under what eventually became known as common law. Married women in England merged their legal identities with that of their husbands. In this system of **coverture**, a married woman surrendered her property to her husband along with her name. As a **feme covert**, she could not make contracts, testify against her husband in court, or engage in any other legal transactions. Only those women who never married or who became widows assumed the status of **feme sole** and were able to engage independently in legal transactions. Unless a husband made specific arrangements specifying otherwise, his widow usually received the interest in one-third of his estate when he died rather than simply regaining the property she brought with her into the marriage.

Whether structured around Roman law or common law, these patriarchal households not only were necessary to compensate for the perceived weaknesses of women but also were part of a larger political order. Families were viewed as the building blocks of the state; they were the first line of defense in maintaining a larger patriarchal order. A man ruled over his wife and children just as a king ruled over his kingdom. As Thomas Hobbes pointed out in *Leviathan*, his famous book on political philosophy published in 1651, a family was "a little monarchy." Thus, in England, if a servant killed his master or if a wife killed her husband, the crime was one of petty treason, not homicide. Female subordination was a part of political as well as family ideology.

Because marriage was crucial to both the political and social order, marriages in Europe were increasingly regulated by the sixteenth century. Many people at this time resisted actually formalizing their marriages legally. A large segment of the poor in Europe married informally, sometimes by jumping over a broom. Such informal marriages had the advantage of being broken without expensive divorce fees, should the divorce even be allowed. In Spain, a couple could establish a relationship simply by

having a contract notarized, and they could end the relationship with a second notarized contract. Concubinage, or *barragania*, as the practice was known, was well established in medieval Spain. Indeed, in medieval Spain, couples even performed the marriage ceremonies themselves with only two witnesses present. The marriage was usually preceded by an engagement, which was considered to be so legally binding that many couples felt it was acceptable to have sex after an engagement agreement had been signed. The Catholic Church attacked these practices at the Council of Trent in the 1560s by declaring marriage a sacrament and demanding that marriages take place inside a church, in the presence of a priest. Protestant clergy also demanded a more formal ceremony and required their followers to “post banns” before they married, announcing their intentions for all. In both ways, the churches were making sure that couples recognized the public importance of their personal relationships.

Review this source; write a short response to the following questions.

Margery Brews, Letter to John Paston (1477)²

1. How does this document demonstrate the financial aspects of marriage and the division of labor within marriage?
2. Using information from the text, explain how patriarchy operated in the life of Margery Brews.

Whether formal or informal, European marriages were **monogamous**. Most people in northwestern Europe lived in fairly small households of six to eight people composed of parents and children during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Larger, more extended households that included grandparents and other relatives were more common in southern Europe. In either case, peasant families were careful to control the number of children they had. In northwestern Europe, where many couples waited until their late twenties to marry because they were setting up independent households, the number of children they had was automatically reduced by their late start. But couples also controlled family size through abstinence, *coitus interruptus*, abortion, or infanticide. The Catholic Church condemned abortion, forbidding it in the twelfth century after the first month or two of conception and banning it altogether in the sixteenth century. But the practice still continued. In poorer areas, some families that simply could not afford to feed more children also practiced infanticide. Girls were more likely to be killed than boys, as was clear in the gender ratios that emerged in which more men than women were present. Methods were subtle: girls were weaned earlier than boys in some areas, thus exposing them to the risk of disease, or parents might “accidentally” roll over on a baby while sleeping, thus smothering it. In a society in which men were expected to rule, boys were more likely to survive infancy than girls were.

Challenges to Patriarchy

The patriarchal order in Europe confronted an important wrinkle in its gendered hierarchy as the wives and daughters of kings took the reins of power. By the sixteenth century, women had assumed the crown in some of the most important new countries in Europe. Isabella of Castile inherited this position, as did both Mary I and her half sister Elizabeth I in England. Women did not inherit the throne in France, but Anne of Austria and Catherine de Médicis assumed powerful roles as **regents** while their royal children were young. In each case, as these women held on to their power and ruled decisively, debates erupted about their competence. Were women, even when royally born, really fit to take the reins of power? Some argued that women, even if educated, could not overcome the limitations of their bodies. Others, however, distinguished between the personal body of the queen (which could be female) and her public persona (which could assume the characteristics of a male leader), a distinction commonly made when Elizabeth I ruled England. As she herself declared, “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king.”

Most women of lower status, of course, held no political power, although neither did their husbands. Like the men in their societies, their engagement with the government tended to surface sporadically in the protests and revolts that arose around taxes, unfair prices, or other injustices. Common women could not hold office and, except in countries following Roman law, did not have access to the courts for settling disputes.

One realm in which women were able to exert significantly more control over their lives was in the convents. Although convents in the early modern period had lost many of the religious privileges they held during the medieval period, they still continued to offer an important alternative to marriage for women who had the means to enter them. Women in convents were expected to live cloistered lives of prayer, and their families were expected to make a significant financial contribution upon the entry of a daughter or widow to support this sort of life. Still, nuns often conducted small schools (though forbidden to do so) or produced crafts that helped to provide for their livelihoods because most convents were not self-supporting. To run their convents, nuns often had to take on a variety of supervisory tasks connected with their lands and formal operations. Women in religious orders not only took on jobs that were usually reserved for men; they also adopted lifestyles that allowed them to live with other women, free from the day-to-day supervision of men that characterized most households of the time.

Convents, along with monasteries, came under attack during the Protestant Reformation. Beginning with Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, and following with the wide-ranging theological treatises of men such as John Calvin, new Protestant denominations were created in the sixteenth century that not only undermined the power of the Catholic Church but also affected the terms by which many women exercised power in their lives. Protestants, for example, argued that the celibacy of priests and nuns was an undesirable state of existence more likely to result in sinful than saintly behavior. They thus eliminated convents from their religious practices and

urged all women, as well as men, to marry. Given the power of men over women in marriage, some women certainly found their options for exercising power curtailed. On the other hand, most Protestant religions moved away from the Catholic practice of accepting all children born of their followers into the church. Many Protestant denominations, particularly those influenced by the teachings of John Calvin, began to demand a conversion experience of all members, women as well as men. Women thus joined Protestant congregations as individuals rather than as family members, therefore assuming a kind of spiritual equality with men.

The ability of ordinary women to form a relationship with a church independent of their families did represent an important break with tradition. In European societies, most women derived their status and power from their rank (as members of a royal family, for example) or from their positions in their households. Women who lived in countries that adopted Roman law generally had more legal rights than those who did not. But in either case, they operated in societies in which male control of family and governance were closely intertwined norms, thus limiting the power that women might derive from their important activities within the home. In both the work they did and the positions they achieved, women in Europe differed not only from women in the Americas but also from women in Africa.

AFRICAN WOMEN

By the sixteenth century, the vast continent of Africa supported a wide variety of societies that ranged from complex urban traders to agriculturalists to wide-ranging groups of hunter-gatherers. While some people farmed, others herded cattle, sheep, and goats, and still others mined the rich natural resources that included gold. Salt, nuts, ivory, gold, and slaves became important commodities for trade throughout Africa and beyond. Patrilineal households were increasingly the norm by this time as Islam spread from the North into the trading cities along both the eastern and western coasts and into interior cities such as Timbuktu. Women participated actively in these urban economies, producing and trading goods. They also tended the crops on many of the inland farms, shouldering their responsibilities sometimes as wives and daughters or, if they were less fortunate, as pawns or slaves.

Work and Power

In Africa, as in all parts of the world, there was a clear, gendered division of labor in the work women did. Their economic activities varied, depending on their particular culture, but women south of the Sahara Desert tended to engage in jobs of central economic importance. They not only had primary responsibility for rearing their children, but also took an active role in the farming, craft making, and trading that sustained their societies.

Throughout Africa, women were farmers. In many of the settlements of southern Africa, women were responsible for farming while men were responsible for herding the animals. In West Africa, where agriculture was also the predominant mode

of living, labor was divided differently. Women cared for children, collected firewood and nuts, and watched after small livestock while men prepared the fields for planting. Both men and women in West Africa planted the fields, but they tended different crops.



View the Profile of Idia, First Iyoba of Benin

Idia was one of the most powerful women in the history of Benin.

Women were responsible for weaving cloth in West Africa, and throughout Africa, they wove mats and baskets and crafted pottery. While many of these items were designed for home use, women also traded their goods at local markets, along with any surplus produce they had. In most cases, women entered the markets on very different terms from men. Among the Yorubas of West Africa, for example, men controlled the more far-flung trade of luxury items that brought a profit, while women dominated the local markets that focused on the use value of the items they exchanged. As such, men's and women's trade affected their societies in very different ways. Women's trade did not lead to stratification in society the way men's trade did because it simply did not generate the profits that would allow some to become wealthy. Instead, women's trade facilitated the day-to-day living requirements of all community members. At the highest levels, women in West African societies balanced the power held by male leaders. While most kingdoms were ruled by a king, the position of queen mother was also extremely important. She could intercede for those who had offended the king, and in certain circumstances, her influence could lead to the removal of a king. Idia, the mother of Esigie, was a particularly important queen mother in the sixteenth century who was credited with providing her son with the advice, medicine, and magic he needed to assert his power in the kingdom of Benin. In other cases, women assumed direct power. Queen Aminatu of Zazzau was one of the most famous to do so at the end of the sixteenth century. She not only fought with her kingdom's soldiers but also successfully extended the trading empire of her region leading to a powerful economic expansion.

Family Economies

Both matrilineal and patrilineal societies existed in Africa. Along the east coast of Africa, matrilineal societies were the norm when Muslim traders arrived seeking entrée into society after 1100 CE. Marriage to local women allowed traders access to land, trade, and political influence. In towns where political power was transmitted through the mothers' lines, their children reinforced the power of traders until some of these societies shifted to a patrilineal system in an attempt to undercut this access.

In West Africa, systems of patrilineal descent also came to predominate over matrilineal lines by about 1200 CE, though women still maintained some important

forms of control over their lives. In some of these societies, they were still able to obtain a divorce easily, for example, if they became dissatisfied with their husbands. Indeed, divorced women could maintain a position of high status in their societies, as was clear in the case of the *karuwai*, divorced women who were leaders in the bori possession cult among the Hausa people. In part, divorce was accepted because in many West African societies, ties to one's birth family were more important than ties to a spouse so that birth and death were more important causes for celebration than were marriages.

Marriage, however, was a crucial way of organizing labor. Land was shared communally in many African societies and use of it was determined by village elders. A man's claim on the labor of both wife and children was extremely important because labor was a relatively scarce commodity. Thus, men derived their wealth through the control of labor rather than through ownership of land. A man paid a bride-price for a wife because women were recognized as important workers and a woman significantly increased her husband's wealth when they married. Without such a payment—in cattle, cash, or other valuables—a marriage was not legitimate and a man had no claim to his children. Most young men did not have the resources to pay a bride price, so their relatives were often intimately involved in the selection and negotiations that took place around a marriage. Wealthy men could acquire more than one wife, with polygamy being an accepted practice throughout Africa, though it was limited by the economic practicality of bride-price.

Dependence and Freedom: Slavery in Africa

While marriage was one way for a family to acquire workers, pawnship and slavery were two other ways to build a family's labor force. **Pawns** were literally people who had been pawned to pay for a debt. Often they were children—and often they were girls—who were held by the creditor until the family could pay its debt and redeem them. Until that time, the pawn's labor belonged to the creditor. Because pawns still had known kin who were often nearby, they were unlikely to be mistreated or to be sold to anyone else. Slaves, by definition, had no kin and had no rights. They were outsiders in the communities where they lived. Perhaps they had been seized in warfare or perhaps simply kidnapped for sale as a slave. They could be resold and their children could be held as slaves as well.

In Africa, women were twice as likely as men were to be held as slaves. They were prized for both their productive and their reproductive value, and it showed in their price. Women cost twice as much as men in the African slave market. Given the work that women could do, this is not surprising. They were trained in crafts, farming, and domestic work. They might also be given as gifts to reward valiant warriors. For men looking to increase the labor they needed for farming, purchasing a slave to be a concubine could be cheaper than paying the bride-price for a wife. These unions were viewed as inferior to marriages between free people but were particularly common when a man wished to take a second wife and could not afford the marriage costs. Slave women who were not taken as concubines by their masters often found themselves

given to other men in the family. Thus, unlike free women, slave women had little control over sexual access to their bodies.

Slavery has existed since early times, even in a civilization as “enlightened” as that of ancient Athens. Scholars who study slavery continue to argue over the place of the slave in ancient Greek society. Generally speaking, slaves who lived in the cities were well treated; could have their own, separate jobs; and were sometimes freed for loyal service. Slaves who lived outside the cities and toiled in the mines or fields were subject to much harsher treatment and literally might be worked to death.

Slave women did find one advantage in the sexual relations their masters demanded of them. If they bore children of their union, both they and their children could be set free. This was also true if they bore children as a result of relationships with other free men in the masters’ households. What this represented, in fact, was the slow incorporation of a “kinless” slave into the household of the master. Faced with the loss of control such freedom could entail, some groups changed this custom. In the West African kingdom of Songhay, for example, slave women were not allowed to marry free men to ensure that their children were kept as slaves. Askia Muhammad, who came to rule the kingdom in 1493, changed the law to allow slave women to marry free men but decreed their children should still remain as slaves. However, in most cases, within a generation or two, children or grandchildren were incorporated into the family lineage.

Women not only were more likely to be held as slaves in Africa but also were more likely to value the labor of slaves. Because women were responsible for so many agricultural and domestic duties, one way to manage that workload was to draw on the labor of slave women. Even in cases in which a slave woman was owned by a man, her labor was often very much at the service of another woman. Wealthy women sometimes purchased their own slaves. By forcing slave women to take over their domestic duties, these women could pursue other activities, including more lucrative trading practices. Slave women who were relocated to Islamic societies in North Africa or the Middle East faced the harshest conditions. Free women in Islamic societies north of the Sahara Desert were sequestered from public life, so the duties of slave women who worked for them were extensive.

THE GENDERED DYNAMICS OF CONTACT

The European discovery of the New World in 1492 and the slave trade with Africa that developed soon after brought the peoples of three continents into growing contact. Over the course of the next three centuries, the Native American population was decimated as a result of disease and warfare, while large segments of the population of Africa were forcibly transported to the New World as slaves. Europeans, who looked not only for profit but also for legitimacy in these activities, argued that they were conquering inferior peoples lacking in the essentials of civilization. Central to these arguments was the view that women and gender relationships in Africa and the New World were not simply different but degraded.

Discovering New Worlds

European merchants and monarchs began searching in earnest for new passages to Asia in the middle of the fifteenth century after conflicts with Islamic officials of the Ottoman Empire disrupted the trade routes that they had been cultivating for a couple of centuries. Portugal, drawing on advanced research in navigation, had already developed trade with Africa when Bartolomeu Dias, a Portuguese sea captain, successfully navigated the southern edge of Africa in 1488. Four years later, Christopher Columbus succeeded in persuading the monarchs of a newly consolidating Spain to fund his attempt to find a westward route to Asia. Ferdinand and Isabella were looking for new sources of wealth to support the military they had built up to drive both Muslims and Jews out of Spain. In the wake of Columbus' discovery, Spain sent a succession of explorers and conquerors to establish its empire, including Hernán Cortés, who conquered the mighty Aztecs of central Mexico in 1521.

The Europeans who explored the Americas returned with stories of wonder not only about the riches of the New World but also of the men and women who inhabited it. Many of these stories concerned dangerous women in narratives that seem to have symbolized the fears of the explorers rather than portraying the actual societies they encountered. Amerigo Vespucci, traveling through the New World in 1503 and 1504, described female cannibals who attacked and ate a Spanish sailor. At another point, he described women who forced their husbands to enlarge their penises to satisfy their sexual cravings, even though the practice was dangerous to the men. Spanish explorers, including Columbus and Cortés, wrote of islands of Amazon-like women (heard about but never quite discovered) who lived without men (except to mate) and fiercely protected their riches of gold and jewels. California's name was derived from a fictional Spanish story about an island of pagan women who were conquered, Christianized, and married by Spanish soldiers. In cases like these, explorers carried with them European myths of strange lands and used them to embellish their stories of adventure in a new world in which anything seemed possible.

Even more important, Europeans routinely characterized the New World in feminine terms—as a body both fertile and ripe to be conquered. Sir Walter Raleigh famously described Guiana at the end of the sixteenth century as “a countrey that hath yet her maidenhead.” In other words, he compared Guiana to a virgin, waiting for the right man to penetrate and possess it. As Raleigh elaborated, “It hath never bene entred by any armie of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any christian Prince.” Visually, America was repeatedly depicted in feminine form, greeting male European explorers. Soldiers and explorers were invited to engage in a conquest that was not only economic and political but also sexual and predicated on ideas of gender hierarchy.

Complementing this gendered ideology of European male conqueror and virgin land was the image of the impotent or dissipated Indian male who had failed to properly cultivate the nature surrounding him. As one English writer noted, the

“womb” of Indian land was “barren” because it was unknown to the Indians. In making this argument, European conquerors returned repeatedly to their perception that Indian men were lazy because they hunted rather than farmed. In Europe, hunting was a leisure activity for the upper classes and farming was officially the activity of men. By this logic, Indian men who hunted were loafing and thus not entitled to their lands.

Sexuality and Claims of Civilization

Europeans not only viewed these new worlds in gendered terms, they regarded the sexuality and sexual practices of the people living there as degraded. Repeatedly, explorers from one continent judged the practices of another by their own standards and found the others wanting. Systematically, they came to understand differences in female behavior as an indication of a society’s savagery and its need to be conquered by “civilized” people.

One early English trader, venturing to the west coast of Africa in the sixteenth century, was both fascinated and repelled by the women he saw who did not cover their breasts. Describing their breasts as “very foule and long, hanging down like the udder of a goate,” the trader suggested the way in which he perceived these Africans as more



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John White, “A Cheife Herowans Wyfe of Pomeoc and her daughter of the age of 8 or 10 years.” Europeans such as John White were fascinated by the domestic arrangements of the peoples they encountered in the New World. This portrait, drawn at the Roanoke settlement at the end of the sixteenth century, conveyed a sense of motherly nurture that Europeans would understand.

animal than human. European explorers in the New World made similar observations of the Native American women they encountered.

While lack of clothing was equated with a lack of civilization, African and Indian attitudes toward sex suggested immorality to Europeans. In the New World, European men repeatedly commented on encounters they had with Indian women in which it was expected they would have sex. Others expressed shock that some Indian women expected gifts from men when they had sex with them. To Europeans, this did not represent the reciprocity that it did to Indians but, rather, smacked of prostitution.

Europeans were equally appalled by the two-spirit people they met in Indian villages. Their perspective was clear in the European name that emerged for this third gender: *berdache*. The term was derived from the Arabic word *bardag* that had been adapted in Italian, French, and Spanish languages to describe the passive male in same-sex encounters. Spanish conquistadors called these men *bardaje*, a term of condemnation. Spaniards also called them *putos*, male whores, perhaps because these men-women in the Southwest were expected to have sex with any young man who demanded it of them.

Europeans were extremely curious about how Native Americans lived. Early expeditions sometimes included artists who would provide sketches of the life they found. Those sketches are an important record not only of what life was like in the New World, but what the artist chose to represent. John White traveled on several expeditions to the New World, including the one in 1585, where he produced these images of Algonquian women and domestic life in the area around Roanoke Island, off the Carolina coast. Jacques Le Moyne was a French artist who accompanied a French expedition to what is now northern Florida in 1564. Many of his watercolors were destroyed before he left, so he recreated his images from memory. Christopher Columbus wrote his letter to Luis de Sant Angel, one of his financial backers, considerably earlier, in 1493. Like Le Moyne and White, though, he considered depictions of women and domestic life to be an important part of his exploration.



View “Women of the New World”

Review the images; write a short response to the following questions.

1. What do these images tell us about the work and family life of different Native American women?
2. European men created these images. Based on your readings about European women in this chapter, how do you think European ideals of women and family life influenced what these artists chose to depict about Native American women? Did they differ from one another in their perceptions of Native American women?

Gender and the Emergence of the Slave Trade

Heavily armed with guns and a strong sense of cultural superiority, Europeans had expected the natives of the New World to work for them in the mines and plantations they set up. This expectation was challenged during the sixteenth century, however, as conflict, resistance, and disease decimated the Indian population. Thus, Europeans quickly turned to an additional source of forced labor that they had discovered early in the fifteenth century: the slaves of Africa. Patronizing the trading ports on the west coast of Africa that had begun to send slaves to Europe, they expanded this traffic in human beings during the sixteenth century to include New World destinations as well. During the next three centuries, slave-trading ports grew large and merchants grew wealthy as they increasingly financed slave raids into the interior of Africa to feed the demand for labor.

In the slave trade that developed, gender mattered. Europeans were looking primarily for agricultural laborers for their colonial plantations and mines and thus preferred men to women when purchasing their human cargo because they assumed men worked better in the fields than women. Africans, on the other hand, highly valued women as both agricultural workers and slaves. To a certain extent, this meant that the labor demands of the two continents complemented each other, with the New World taking a larger proportion of men as slaves and Africa retaining a larger proportion of women as slaves, creating gender imbalances on both continents among the slave populations. This situation had become more complicated, at least by the seventeenth century, however, as African slave traders insisted on selling more women than Europeans wanted, arguing that women could do the agricultural work demanded on New World plantations. In the give-and-take that took place in the African slave markets, more men than women were still loaded onto the ships headed for the Americas, but Europeans were also clearly forced to accept more female slaves than they would have preferred.

In the great trade cities that developed along the west coast of Africa, a cosmopolitan culture emerged in which mixed-race people known as Luso-Africans assumed an important role as cultural brokers. They emerged in the fifteenth century as Portuguese traders intermarried with African women who provided them not only with the domestic skills of a wife but also with access to society and trade in their cultures. In some of the African societies, the children of these marriages became outcasts, but in others, the children (as well as their mothers) were able to parley their novel connections into lucrative commercial undertakings. By the seventeenth century, a group of Luso-African women called *nhares* had emerged as wealthy entrepreneurs who headed extensive households staffed by servants and slaves and far-flung business ventures. Often these women became wives of English and French traders who followed the Portuguese into African trade.

For most African women who encountered the slave trade, the experience was quite different. Women who were transported to the Americas came from areas near the trading ports from which they were shipped. They could have fetched a higher

price if sold farther inland, but transportation costs were high. Instead, they were shipped to the New World in a journey called the **Middle Passage**, the second leg of a three-part transatlantic trading network. European captains exchanged their goods for slaves in Africa. Fully loaded with human cargo, ships then sailed for the Americas, where slaves were sold for sugar, tobacco, or other products destined for the European market. Packed so tightly into a ship that many on board died; slaves endured a dangerous and terrifying experience. Women faced not only the dangers of disease but also sexual abuse from the ship's crew. For the women who survived, enslavement in the New World would be a more brutal experience than what they had known in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The slave trade, along with the decimation of the Native American populations, constituted the most devastating results of the contact that began to unfold in the sixteenth century. As Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans intermingled, the consequences were social as well as physical. Household arrangements, key to the social organization of societies on all three continents, varied greatly, as did the place of women within these households. In some Native American societies, women exercised tremendous power. In both Africa and the Americas, women were often the farmers. In Europe, their rights to own property varied depending on whether their countries followed common law or Roman law. In Africa, women could be held as slaves but not necessarily for their entire lives. When new households were forged in the Americas following contact, these different conventions collided and evolved as families continued to be crucial building blocks of the new frontier. As a result, women were key players in the age of discovery that was unfolding.



Study the Key Terms for Worlds Apart, to 1700

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How were the sexual and family lives of Indian women related to the ways in which their societies allocated resources?
2. What did patriarchy mean for women in European society?
3. Why were women more important than men in African slavery?
4. In what ways were women important in misunderstandings about what constituted civilization?

Text Credits

1. Catherine Moriarty, ed., *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100–1500* [New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1990], 208.
2. Ed. John Harland, F.S.A., *BALLADS AND SONGS OF LANCASHIRE: ANCIENT AND MODERNS*, Second Edition, London: George Routledge and Sons and L.C. Gent, 1875. pp. 2–7.

Recommended Reading

Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zimmerman. *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. 1. New York: Harper & Row, 1988. Lively and wide-ranging survey of women in European history.

Iris Berger and E. Frances White. *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. Best available introduction to the lives of women on African continent.

Karen Olsen Bruhns and Karen E. Stothert. *Women in Ancient America*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. Clear and current overview of women's lives and their place in different hierarchies in precontact America.

David Eltis. *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Overarching survey of how slavery evolved in Africa and the Americas that pays particular attention to the role of Africans as well as Europeans in the slave trade, including an important chapter on the role of women and gender.



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