Gender played a very important role in the witch-hunts that took place in Early-Modern Europe. Carol Karlsen, pointed out that “between 1645 and 1647, several hundred people had been hanged in the wake of England’s most serious witchcraft outbreak. More than 90 percent of these English witches were women.”[[1]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/Gender-Bias-in-Witch-hunts#_ftn1) Although these statistics are one of the highest, a correlation was also seen in other countries during the heights of the witch-hunts. Women were more often targeted than men because of the views of women, during this era; specifically their roles within society, the vulnerability of their soul, and an inability for some to fit into a male dominated society. Women also had a stricter view on sin during this time frame; which led to higher confessions amongst women. It was for this reason that it was not until women and men began to view sin similarly that witch-hunts ended.

**Roles of Women During this Time-Frame**

Women were often targeted due to their responsibilities surrounding tasks that dealt with the survival of the community, such as preparing food, being a midwife or lying in maid, and tending animals. It was believed that witches had considerable control over the health and life of others.[[2]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/Gender-Bias-in-Witch-hunts#_ftn2)Because these were all jobs that had the potential of going very wrong, women were often blamed when someone died or became sick. A midwife who delivered a deformed or still born child could very well become targeted.[[3]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/Gender-Bias-in-Witch-hunts#_ftn3) A mother may want to blame someone for their tragedy and since the midwife was present, they are subject to being accused of doing something supernatural to cause this.[[](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/Gender-Bias-in-Witch-hunts#_ftn4)[4]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/Gender-Bias-in-Witch-hunts#_ftn3)

**Satan a Sexual Aggressor/ Women as Sexual Objects**

Women were also targeted because Puritans believed that Satan assaulted the body through sexual transgressions. The fact that Satan and his imps were viewed as male influenced the idea that [witches](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/Benandante-Witchcraft-in-Early-Modern-Europe)were usually women. The witch was often viewed as having had sex with the“devil’s imp,” and giving her body to Satan.[[5]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn5)Also, witches’ familiars were believed to have had “sucked at the breasts, [as well as]… latch onto any unusual markings or witch’s teat.”[[6]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn6)Suckling provided nourishment to their familiars and imps. Because women provided the nourishment for infants, this idea of suckling only reinforced the idea that witches were women. Suckling was believed to be used for sexual pleasure as well. Reis pointed out that men were not completely immune to these ideas of suckling and carnal pleasure, because “their bodies were searched during the trials, and the investigations occasionally found evidence of such activity,” although such findings were rare. As a result it was believed that men’s “bodies were more difficult and less tempting objects of the devil’s attacks.”[[7]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn7)

**Ignorance About Anatomy**

One characteristic that both men and women shared regarding the witch-hunts was the idea that their souls were feminine. Therefore, mens' souls were viewed just as evil as women’s. In the eighteenth century, womens' anatomy was perceived as identical to men’s except pointing inward. Consequently, they believed that “inwardness meant femaleness,”which was why the soul was believed to be feminine. Although this should cause men and women to be viewed as equally susceptible to sin, this was not the case. Puritans believed that the body protected the soul. If the body was strong, then the soul was better protected. Therefore, men who were created physically stronger were viewed to be less susceptible to Satan’s attacks.[[8]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn8)

See all 6 photos

**The Weaker Sex?**

Females, as a whole, were considered easier targets for Satan due to being viewed as weaker than men physically, spiritually, and morally.[[9]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn9) Puritans“believed that Satan attacked the soul by assaulting the body.” “Not only was the body the path to the soul’s possession; it was the very expression of the devil’s attack.”[[10]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn10)As a result, their spiritual and moral selves were considered more vulnerable because of their weaker bodies, which left them more susceptible to the devils traps[[11]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn11)and Satan could more easily possess their souls.[[12]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn12)Although men’s bodies were seen as more difficult to tempt, this did not exempt all men. Even though witchcraft was not considered to be inherited, often people who were closely related to a previously accused witch were thought to be witches themselves; such as daughters, sisters, and even male relatives of the accused.[[13]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn13)In fact, Karlsen pointed out that, “nearly half the males [accused] were husbands, sons, or other male relatives of the accused women.”[[14]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn14) Still, these men were a minority.

**Gender Bias**

Not only were men’s bodies viewed as being able to fight off Satan’s attacks more readily, but men were also seen as being allowed to have certain female qualities. Women, on the other hand, were not allowed to possess masculine traits without being seen as odd and not fit easily within society. Reis explains this further:

Men were not required to adopt outwardly feminine traits and risk compromising their masculinity; but man’s soul, his inner self, could safely display female virtues. Passivity and receptivity to Christ’s advances resided in men’s’(female) souls, but their bodies—and sense of themselves—remained masculine.[[15]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn15)

In other words, men could maintain their perception of masculinity, despite having a feminine soul. Their feminine soul allowed them to be submissive to Christ without appearing feminine to their neighbor. Women, in contrast, were not allowed to show masculine characteristics without being viewed negatively by society.

**Outcasted Women**

The women that were most likely to be accused were those who did not fit easily into society. Women during this time period were expected to be quiet, submissive, and under a male head of the household. Therefore, when a woman used coarse language or was self-sufficient she was seen as odd, which ultimately put her at higher risk of being accused. Also, because women were beginning to live longer, there was not yet a role that allowed older women to fit easily into society. Therefore, there was a large increase in the amount of witch accusations for those over the age of forty. Although women under forty might be accused, less than a quarter would face a trial. On the other hand, forty percent of women over the age of forty would face a trial and more than half of these women would become convicted.[[16]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn16)These statistics are believed to be a result of the fact that women over forty were no longer of child bearing age. Therefore, they did not have a specific purpose within society any longer.[[17]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn17)

Many of these women were also widowed, which meant they were no longer under the care of a man. Some of these widowed women were accused because they had inherited large sums of money or property when their husbands had passed away.[[18]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn18) They were then capable of supporting themselves financially, and many chose not to remarry even if they had the opportunity. These women, in particular, caused tensions amongst the core beliefs within the Puritan society.[[19]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn19) Puritan leaders felt that women owning land was a breaking up of their society by not having a male head of the house. The resulting tensions caused [witchcraft](http://hubpages.com/topics/religion-and-philosophy/paganism-and-witchcraft/5168)accusations.

Young women played a different role in the witchcraft accusations. They also did not fit easily into society, especially within Salem. These young women felt oppressed and unheard. Reis points out that “these young women perhaps feared for their future, worrying that they would end up alone, with no one to establish their dowries and find them husbands.”[[20]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn20)Even though it started out with them experimenting with magic, they eventually began exhibiting signs of being possessed. The fits they would go into while being “possessed” allowed them to be able to act in ways their society prohibited and say things they normally never could. This allowed them to have at least some power within a society that repressed them.[[21]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn21)Pressures to blame someone for these possessions increased until “witches” were accused.[[22]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn22)Many times these young women had never met those that they named.[[23]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn23) Because they could more easily say a woman’s name than a man’s due to the patriarchal society, this further increased the likelihood that women were the ones on trial.

**Gendered View On Sin**

Another reason that women were more often executed for witchcraft was because women and men regarded sin differently. The differing ideas regarding sin contributed to how each sex confessed or denied witchcraft accusations,[[24]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn24)which affected the way a person was viewed and ultimately the outcome of a trial. Men more often viewed who they were as separate from the sins they had committed. Although they would repent of their sins, they did not internalize the minister’s message like women did.[[25]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn25) Women were more apt to view their sins as having been in obedience with Satan and against God, no matter how ordinary the sin may be. Alice Lake was a very good example of this. She had convinced herself “that her sexual transgression was enough to make her a witch. Although she had not signed an explicit compact with Satan… she had covenanted with him through the commission of sin.”[[26]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn26)

One reason that women confused sin with witchcraft is because they viewed themselves as inherently evil. It was their natural evilness that caused them to sin. Men, on the other hand, believed that their sin corrupted their soul; therefore, they could easily repent for their shortcomings and salvation.[[27]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn27)It is not surprising due to women’s belief in inherent evilness that “they could more easily imagine that other women were equally damned.” For that reason, women more easily accused other women of witchcraft.[[28]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn28)If accused of witchcraft, due to women’s “guilt over their perceived spiritual inadequacies, [they might]… confess to specific transgressions they apparently had not committed,” such as witchcraft.[[29]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn29)

**Societies View On Women**

Even the confessions themselves were perceived differently by the judges and magistrates as Karlsen pointed out. She states, although women and “men who confessed to witchcraft outside of the Salem outbreak were punished… most confessing women were taken at their word and executed, confessing men were almost all rebuked as liars.” Even amongst similar cases of the accused, the punishments were much more severe and long-lasting for a woman than for a man.[[30]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn30)Women were also more apt than men to be charged repeatedly once they were exonerated by the courts of a witchcraft accusation.[[31]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn31)

**Evolving Gender Stereotypes**

During the eighteenth century, ideas regarding gender and sin evolved. When combined with the scientific revolution, witch-hunts became less prevalent until they stopped altogether. One of the profoundest changes was a decreased emphasis on Satan. Instead, there became an increased focus on fearing God. Instead of Satan possessing their bodies for sin, God would punish them.[[32]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn32)Also, they began to feel that they were not battling Satan, but their own selves.[[33]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn33)This shows a shift in both the way that women and men viewed sin. Their views became more similar; therefore, neither sex was being persecuted more than the other. [[34]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn34)Reis also points out that “even women—who perhaps still perceived the devil’s threats more palpably than men—were able to select Christ.”[[35]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn35)This shift in ideas was most likely due to the scientific revolutions focus on“enlightened” and “rational” thinking.[[36]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn36)

**Oppressed Finding Their Place**

Men and women who had previously felt oppressed found roles within society. The Victorian woman was no longer considered inherently evil but encouraged to “spread their moral influence as the ‘mothers of civilization’” for their husbands who worked in the sinful world.[[37]](http://angela-michelle.hubpages.com/hub/1252943#_ftn37) Young people were also more capable of providing for themselves, because they were being encouraged to find their independence. Adolescent girls in particular had new social outlets. They no longer felt the suffocating pressures that society had placed on them during the seventeenth century and earlier. Even women who were no longer of child bearing age had a changed role within society. They were now responsible for educating the boys who would soon be the heads of their own households. These women no longer were viewed as a hindrance on society, but necessary citizens. All these people who were stressed within the community now found a comfortable place within society. As tensions dissipated, so did accusations.

Although some men were definitely victimized during the witch-hunts, these hunts were largely due to prejudices against women, especially those women who did not fit neatly inside of the patriarchal society of the seventeenth century. This vast victimization of witches is important to be studied today, because it brings attention to those who are unfairly treated.

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