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APUSH – A2

In 17th century colonial America, the family groundwork was laid down very firmly. Everyone in the household was expected to perform their assigned duties. The definition of their duties were most concretely outlined in religion, the driving force within the community. Although life was generally very harsh, for women particularly, laws (which were often strict in punishment) both protected and kept the population complaisant.

As stated in document 5; husband and wife would dwell together, and have “tender love and affection to one another. This is plainly commanded by God.” This was a part of the social fabric of the time. Things like adultery, bestiality, or speculated witchcraft were viewed as extremely disruptive to the social fabric. Those offenses were punishable by death (doc 1).

Women in Massachusetts respectably had their own liberties. They were granted the liberty of having a competent portion of her husband’s estate upon his death (doc 1). More importantly, they were free of “bodily correction or stripes by her husband.” However, even though women are the child bearers they were still viewed lower than men. In document 5 it explains that wives were subject to the husband’s government within the household- “The husband is called the head of the women. It belongs to the head to rule and govern.”

Mortality rates were also especially low, which affected the economy. In Pymouth the majority of women did not live past 40 (with 12% not making it past 30). This is mainly due to complications during child labor. The majority of men lived until about age 60 (doc 3). This sustained men to outlive wives, perhaps allowing men to marry two or three times.

Coming to a better understanding of women’s experiences in the 17th century, it’s clear that there were many obligations and few comforts. The life of white Christian women alone was fraught with doctrines. Society educated women to believe and obey god, their husbands, and fulfill their duties to their children.