



EDITED BY
Oliver Janz and Daniel Schönplug

*Gender History in a
Transnational Perspective*

biographies
networks
gender orders

“This collection explores important topics
in the history of European feminisms.”

ANN TAYLOR ALLEN, University of Louisville

GENDER HISTORY IN A
TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE
Networks, Biographies, Gender Orders

Edited by
Oliver Janz and Daniel Schönplüg

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INTRODUCTION



Globalisation seems to define lives and minds in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, historians are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that global networks, exchanges and interdependencies are no recent phenomena and have shaped Europe and the world for many centuries. This applies in particular to the histories of women, gender relations and feminisms, which were not only influenced by processes of globalisation but must in many respects be considered their driving forces. Historians the world over have accepted the challenge of a new global perspective on women's and gender history. A first wave of scholarly work has focused on the treatment of women's and gender issues in international relations¹ and in international organisations, such as the League of Nations.² These fields are closely related to the dynamic histories of border-crossing feminist and women's movements.³

In addition, since the 1990s, comparative research on women's history and gender has intensified. Topics as diverse as marriage and family, the welfare state and women's suffrage are increasingly being examined in a European, transatlantic or global context.⁴ Recent debates, moreover, show how fruitful investigations of gender relations and constructions in imperial and colonial contexts can be.⁵ They examine the manifold behaviours, attitudes and activities, between collaboration, resistance and the search for new role models, of women in colonies. Of special interest has been the question of whether the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century marks a transitional phase during which gender relations, and sexuality in particular, increasingly became subject to the premises of racism.⁶ Historical gender studies of colonial contexts also raise questions about Eurocentric approaches, the pluralism of feminism and women's movements, and 'imperial feminism'.⁷ Non-Western scholars in particular have posed the question of whether central categories

of European and American women and gender historiography might not themselves be affected by colonial and imperial thought patterns.⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis has reminded us that there is no single path along which gender relations in various cultures have advanced, but multiple, parallel and diverging paths of potentially equal value.⁹

In this broad historical discussion on women's and gender issues, the term 'transnational' has seldom been used. Leila Rupp was among the first to consider the work she did on international women's movements 'as part of a transnational history that we are only beginning to write'.¹⁰ Francesca Miller reviewed Rupp's and other related studies and distinguished 'formal intergovernmental activities carried on at the international level' from transnational activities where 'participants met together not as representatives of their governments but as individuals or representatives of civic organisations, clubs, unions and other local or regional entities'.¹¹ Miller is aware of the fact that the distinction between 'international' and 'transnational' was not invented by the historical actors under study (the term 'transnational' was only coined in the 1920s and originally had a completely different meaning), and that it is not usually made by scholars in the field, who tend to use the term 'international' for every kind of border-crossing feminist activity. Moreover, she emphasises that it is often impossible to draw a sharp line between the two terms as there are transnational organisations that involve state actors and that even receive state funding.

But in recent debates in the field the term 'transnational' has taken on new meanings. Today, it no longer serves exclusively to designate certain historical objects (i.e. non-governmental, border-crossing political networks and institutions), but rather it characterises a new way of looking at different kinds of historical objects that transcend national or cultural boundaries. This explains why, in a programmatic essay, Ann Taylor Allen prefers to speak of a 'transnational perspective'.¹² Along the same lines, Julie Carlier has argued that the case of the Belgian women's movement is suited to underscore the explanatory value of a transnational perspective which makes possible an analysis of a national phenomenon by considering its connections, interactions and relations to other nations and to supra-national institutions alike.¹³ 'Transnational history' is thus being established as a specific and complex perspective in gender history and beyond, that blends existing forms of comparison with the history of bi- and multilateral connections – such as travelling and border-crossing migrations, exchanges, information flows and transfers, mutual perceptions and interactions. This approach, which can be applied not only to distinct individuals and institutions but also to larger social groups or even entire societies, gives new impulses to the field of international or global women's

and gender history. As a contribution to this ongoing debate, the Berliner Kolleg für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas hosted a conference in October 2007 sponsored by the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung and the Hamburger Stiftung für Wissenschaft und Kultur. Prominent scholars from eight European countries and the United States debated central questions pertinent to this topic. The gathering was also a homage to Gisela Bock, a pioneer in international women's and gender studies, who retired that year from her university position but who has since remained incredibly active in the international research community. She was an engaging participant in the conference, and the contributors and the editors, as well as women's history in general, are deeply indebted to her. Therefore, we would like to dedicate this volume to her.

Central Topics and Research Questions

The word 'transnational' exists in English, French and German (and probably other languages as well); it is used in political language and as an analytical concept in the political and social sciences. 'Transnational history' is relatively new and is rapidly gaining ground in historiographical debates. The concept is rooted in the longstanding tradition of comparative social history that has not only served to overcome a historicist approach that considered history as the result of the deeds of great male individuals, but also to criticise historiography focused on the nation-state. Highly influential interpretive patterns such as 'American exceptionalism', 'splendid isolation', 'la singularité française' or 'der deutsche Sonderweg' have been challenged by comparative research that transcends national boundaries.

Since the 1980s, however, this approach to comparison shaped by Max Weber's sociology has been fundamentally challenged. Well-founded criticism came from a working group at the CNRS in Paris, in which the Germanists Michael Werner and Michel Espagne played a leading role. The project 'Transferts' firmly disassociated itself from existing comparative approaches. It accused those who used such approaches of separating the entities under comparison too rigidly and of thus confirming traditional national patterns of thought. The project sought instead to show the extent to which national entities had arisen and grown through exchange and mutual influence.

The research on transfer adopted some of its methodological premises from cultural studies and communications research. From these it learned to consider the contexts of origin and reception of a cultural good on the one hand and to pay close attention to the actors and media of transfer

on the other. The 'transfer approach' was based on the conviction that these actors pursued specific interests and that the media they chose determined the processes of transmission. Above all, however, research on transfer adopted the concept of acculturation. According to Werner and Espagne, the needs of the recipient culture, which takes hold of the foreign cultural assets by selective perception and active appropriation, and which alters their meaning, are decisive for the outcome of the communication process.¹⁴

For a long time, these two schools have battled each other in academic journals and roundtable discussions. Today, the supporters of 'transnational history' – and of synonymous concepts such as 'entangled history'¹⁵ and 'histoire croisée'¹⁶ – claim that, in order to examine phenomena that cross national borders, combinations of both approaches are not only possible but absolutely necessary.¹⁷ The heir of traditional comparative history, transnational history looks at similarities of and differences between national spheres. It is aware of the hierarchies and asymmetries that characterise them. Learning from transfer analysis, on the other hand, transnational history analyses the mutual perceptions of individuals and social groups, and examines the complex processes of exchange taking place, generating effects of appropriation, refusal, reinterpretation and translation.¹⁸ The repercussions of these exchanges can become intense enough to bring about individual and collective interaction, the formation of networks, and even durable transnational institutions. These networks and institutions can be understood as 'transnational spaces' that bridge boundaries and incorporate trace elements of the different contexts from which they evolved. But transnational spaces are also likely to obey their own rules and to develop specific features that cannot be traced back to their national origins.¹⁹ As opposed to traditional comparative historiography, which examines above all fixed structures and regularities, transnational history is concerned with movement, change, and dynamic processes.

This volume does not devote itself primarily to theoretical or historiographical problems. Instead, it presents significant examples from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century, aiming to show how a transnational perspective can provide new perspectives. The volume centres around three thematic clusters: first, the world history of women's movements, which has already been treated as a field of transnational history (but not always from a transnational perspective); second, the cosmopolitan biographies of individual women and feminist activists; and third, the comparative and interwoven history of gender orders in Europe and its colonies. The three clusters of topics are closely related. Women's movements and activists represent, as it were, the macro- and the

micro-component of one and the same phenomenon. Gender orders have a close, reciprocal relation to women's movements, as they represent the background of feminist engagement and may depict its results. All three related topic clusters provide an opportunity to reflect on cross-border communication between social groups, their mutual perceptions, transfers and interactions, as well as the genesis of political, social and communicative spaces beyond the nation. Central questions are the relation between national entities and transnational spaces, the functions, coherence and internal structures of transnational spaces, and in particular their inherent hierarchies.

Transnational Initiatives, Networks, and Women's Institutions

Part one of the volume builds on the ample research on European and international women's movements. It revolves around enquiries of how and to what ends politically engaged women from different countries formed networks, and how this impacted their engagement. Contributions centre on the question of whether and how these movements, initiatives and institutions can be newly assessed as transnational spaces. How were national and international initiatives related? To what extent did transnational spaces develop their own dynamics shaped by mutual perceptions and coordinated actions beyond national structures and identities? How did they manage diversity? Who took initiative and who defined the rules for cooperation? Who was excluded and who was included?

Karen Offen introduces this first part of the volume with reflections on a fundamental question: can the category 'transnational' be applied to the early international women's movement, even though its representatives did not yet employ the term. Historical scholarship is pressed to justify anachronistic terminology. It seems, though, that its use is often unavoidable, since historians' implicit and explicit questions about the past always stem from their own present. Also, from a theoretical and methodological point of view, employing anachronistic terms allows for clearer analytical terminology, as the linguistic horizon of the contemporaries is often ambivalent, contradictory and multifold.

The history of the international women's movement since the late nineteenth century has been described in terms of a development from internationalism to transnationalism. The Iranian-American sociologist Valentine Moghadam, for example, defines contemporary transnational feminist networks as 'structures organised above the national level that unite women from three or more countries around a common agenda'.²⁰

Offen, on the other hand, uses the example of the International Council of Women (ICW), founded in 1888, to demonstrate that this definition of transnational feminist networks already applies to parts of the early international women's movement. 'For decades, these women used the term "international" much in the same way many use the term "transnational" today.' This is also true of the first president of the ICW. 'Mary Wright Sewall did not understand "international" as solely intergovernmental and she was in fact what we would now call a transnational actor in a rapidly globalizing civil society.' Her engagement was guided by humanistic and universalist ideals, well illustrated by her vision of a 'Permanent International Parliament of Women' and by some of the themes discussed at the ICW conferences in Washington (1889), Chicago (1893), London (1899) and Berlin (1904): peace and disarmament, transnational marriages, and trafficking in children and women. The ICW emphasised the transnational dimension of these problems, and 'redefined ostensibly national issues as what we would call transnational issues'.

Offen's contribution also illustrates the limitations and difficulties of such a transnationally oriented women's rights movement. First of all, the national orientations within the women's movement itself need to be mentioned. English and German feminist activists, such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Helene Lange, were well aware of the differences between national women's movements in different parts of the world, emphasising the specificities of even closely related movements like those in England and the United States. An international climate characterised by mounting tensions, armament, nationalism, and regional conflicts (Boer War, Spanish-American War, Boxer Rebellion, Morocco Crisis) exacerbated the problem. In addition, language problems appeared, as several languages competed for the status of world language prior to the First World War, in particular French and German. Even among elites, only a very few women, like Mary Wright Sewall, had mastered several languages.

Such conditions of transnationality are also the subject of Anne Cova's contribution on the French, Italian and Portuguese sections of the ICW. The leaders of these sections all belonged to the upper-middle class or aristocracy of their countries; they were well educated, had a great deal of free time and money, and often had direct contacts to the political elites of their respective countries. These assets were important resources for transnational work, which demanded not only a knowledge of languages but also private means, since women's associations suffered from constant financial hardship. Many of the leading women in the ICW and its national sections, therefore, were not only activists but also patrons of the transnational women's movement.

Cova's contribution also demonstrates that a transnational history of women's movements can benefit greatly from a combination of comparative approaches with transfer analysis, and from a focus on the interaction of national and transnational factors. All three national sections under study originated from outside impulses. ICW conferences functioned as catalysts in these processes. Transnational personal relationships and networks in which individual women occupied central roles were always a crucial factor. This applies to the roles of the American Mary Wright Sewall for France, the French Avril de Sainte-Croix for Portugal, and the Canadian Sophie Sandford for Italy. In the end, these impulses only yielded results because they met the interests of national women's organisations which hoped that transnational connections would win them more influence and legitimacy within their own national contexts. Connections made in the American-shaped ICW advanced common concerns and similarities between its three reform-oriented and pragmatic women's organisations. National contexts remained highly significant, especially during the interwar period, when the political systems of the three countries were so different, and Italy and Portugal's organisations made substantial concessions to fascism and military dictatorship. As opposed to their German sister organisation, however, the Italian and Portuguese sections of the ICW did not terminate their work under the dictatorships, and they were able to maintain their international contacts, especially with France.

Even more distinctly transnational and global than the International Council of Women was the women's network that **Julie Carlier** discusses – the International Women's Union (IWU) of 1893 – which succeeded the British Women's Progressive Society founded in 1890. Her contribution shows the stark differences and rivalries but also the personal overlap among the various international organisations of the early women's movement. The IWU focused on women's suffrage and pacifism, and was therefore significantly more radical than the ICW, which took a vague stance towards women's suffrage. Unlike the ICW, which only admitted one association for each country, the IWU allowed several organisations per country – and even individuals – to become members. Its organisational structure was therefore more flexible and led to quicker expansion, promoted by diverse overlaps with existing networks and organisations, among them the ICW. Soon the network reached out beyond Europe and North America to include women's rights activists from Persia, India, Japan and Brazil. However Carlier's contribution also reveals that a higher degree of transnationality could lead to a higher degree of instability, as illustrated by the fact that the IWU existed for only a few years

(1893–1898), while the ICW, which was structured more like an umbrella organisation for national associations, exists to this day.

Carlier's contribution also examines how national and transnational factors interacted with each other. Incentives to establish transnational connections often grew out of national motives, as examples from the United States and Belgium show. The motives of American women's rights activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Clara Bewick Colby for joining the IWU must be viewed against the backdrop of an increasing 'interpenetration of feminism and Christian reform' which marginalised radical feminism within the American suffrage movement. This led American feminists to intensify their search for allies in the more radical European women's movement. Carlier cites other examples, some from Belgium, to show that joining the IWU was above all accompanied by the wish to enhance the political capital of the respective organisation in its national realm, in order both to strengthen their influence on their governments and to gain clout vis-à-vis competing women's organisations. The empowerment that came with transnational networking made it easier, for example, to enlist women's rights activists from other countries as authors for a national association's news media. Membership in an international organisation could further be deployed to improve the association's portrayal of itself and its membership drives.

Strategic interests in transnational networking were sometimes stronger than the programmatic differences between the national networking organisations. 'National contexts and transnational connections', writes Carlier, 'could be contradictory. The empowering effect of joining a movement of international solidarity could overrule national differences in ideology and strategy.' Using examples from Belgium, the Netherlands and France, Carlier shows that this dynamic within the IWU produced transnational connections and interweaving between socialist and 'bourgeois', and between moderate and radical women's organisations. From a transnational perspective, therefore, the differentiation between these subgroups needs rethinking.

These and similar questions point to the central problems of transnational political and civil society networks, and the possibilities they offer, but also to their inherent limitations, power relations and hierarchies. **Susan Zimmermann's** contribution elucidates these themes. It focuses on the early-twentieth-century debate on women's suffrage within the socialist women's movement, a debate characterised by tensions between gender and class, as well as by a latent conflict of goals between the emerging expansion of voting rights for men in many countries on the one hand and the struggle for women's suffrage on the other. The left wing of the

social democratic women's movement in Germany attempted to resolve this conflict by demanding the maximum: universal and equal voting rights for men and women. This position, championed by Clara Zetkin, expanded male suffrage to preclude any delay of women's suffrage – a delay which many comrades, particularly in Austria, had agreed to. She simultaneously rejected any limits on women's suffrage, as well as any collaboration with the women's suffrage movements of the bourgeoisie. Her initiatives were aimed most of all at the men of the socialist movement, who were offered 'unconditional class solidarity ... in exchange for the promise of unconditional gender solidarity'.

This strategy prevailed and became binding in 1907 at the Congress of the Second International in Stuttgart, countering moderate voices from Austria, Switzerland and England, as well as Germany. As Zimmermann shows, this success came about primarily through Clara Zetkin's organisation of the first separate international women's conference in the run-up to the Stuttgart Congress. Here, the European socialist women's movement committed itself to the uncompromising demand for universal women's suffrage and to the maximalist strategy of the German comrades, even though it did not suit all countries equally. The strategy was most acceptable to socialist women in countries which, like the German Reich, had already established universal male suffrage, because in such cases a delay of female suffrage in favour of male suffrage no longer made sense. In fact, the introduction of limited voting rights for women would have been experienced as an exacerbation of the political inequality between the classes and therefore as a step backwards.

In consequence, the international socialist women's movement which emerged around the Second International was pervaded by enormously strong hierarchies and power relations. 'The dominant forces in the Second International', writes Zimmermann, 'strove to impose progressive, even radical, gender politics on the "backward" and masculinist force in international socialism, and they did so against the background of universal male suffrage already existing at the core.' The universalism of the socialist women's movement therefore needs to be called into question. Traditions of inequality and dominance continued in international emancipatory movements as well.

Furthermore, Zimmermann's contribution shows that the socialist women's movement also needs to be examined in light of the national dynamics of internationalism. Zimmermann presents internationalism as a strategy of the radical left wing of the social democratic German women's movement, in order to prevail against anti-feminist reformist forces in their own ranks, including the comrades of the German-speaking Austrian Social Democratic Party. 'The study reveals clearly the extent', says

Zimmermann, 'to which internationalisation processes were driven by hopes and endeavors of shifting, through international politics, the balance of political forces within countries and how these processes involved transferring the struggle over genuinely national topics such as suffrage to the international arena. Particular political forces and groupings endeavored to use internationalisation as a means of strengthening their own political clout within the socialist movement as a whole.'

Pat Thane's contribution illuminates just how important women's suffrage, introduced after the First World War in many European countries, was for the political legitimisation and participation of women, for their self-confidence and for their struggle for gender equality. Not that its implementation would have led to a sudden increase in the numbers of women in the parliaments of the countries concerned,²¹ especially not in places where the majority vote posed high obstacles, like in Westminster. But that did not mean, as has often been claimed, that women rarely made use of their right to vote, or that their political activism subsided after the introduction of women's suffrage. The right to vote brought women's organisations and lobbies significant legislative power. The number of women's organisations and of women politically active in associations, unions and parties increased further after the First World War. But the campaigns and triumphs of women's suffrage strengthened the political confidence and engagement of women in the interwar period, even in those places, like France, where they had not won the right to vote.

Such border-crossing dynamics illustrate the importance of a transnational perspective for women's history. As Thane shows, the national, international and transnational dimensions of women's political involvement interacted ever more strongly in the twentieth century. Organisations founded after the war, such as the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), served as initial contact points and platforms for women's organisations around the world, boosting their networking across borders. Moreover, these organisations offered women access to a career. Women served as representatives in many of the national delegations in Geneva. In addition, the League of Nations maintained contacts with international women's organisations, thereby elevating their value. In this way, the League of Nations and the ILO quickly became focal points and important forums for transnational women's organisations and women's rights campaigns, which often succeeded in placing their issues on the agendas of the two Geneva organisations and in enlisting their support. Simultaneously, numerous new networks were founded, like the British Commonwealth League (1925), the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference (1928), and the All-Asian Women's

Congress (1931), which connected women from Western and non-Western countries. They not only mobilised sympathies with national independence movements in colonial areas but also generated substantial support for the concerns of the women participating in them. As Thane shows, numerous connections and alliances developed, in particular between British and Indian women during the interwar period when the independence of the Indian subcontinent increasingly claimed its place on the agenda. 'British women sought to influence British politicians to incorporate gender equality into constitutional negotiations, as Indian women sought to influence male nationalists.' These dynamics strengthened the nascent Indian women's movement considerably.

Transnational Biographies and Female Cosmopolitanism

As recent research has shown, transnationality can also manifest itself on an individual level.²² The nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an era of increasing mobility and migration, saw a rising probability of women encountering different local, regional and national contexts. This gives rise to the question of whether there is or ever was a specifically female form of cosmopolitanism, marked by conscious choice, ideological underpinnings, and a proactive demonstration of a certain attitude towards life. We can address this question by tracing international activists in the women's movement as well as women in professional groups that operate transnationally.

Biographies, like those of the feminist republican Frances Wright (1795–1852) and the women's rights activist Marguerite Thibert (1886–1982), which are discussed in the contributions of **Jane Rendall** and **Françoise Thébaud** respectively, exemplify the expanding horizon of women's lives. Among many others, these two examples demonstrate that political and societal involvement had the potential to contribute significantly to the internationalisation of women's biographies. The biographies of such worldly feminist activists raise interesting questions about a transnational history. Which factors and motives led women to cross borders? What were their experiences when they did? What problems did they encounter? What effects did a life spent in and between various contexts have on their identities? Did a self-understanding beyond national orientation evolve? How did the knowledge of women's rights and realities in various countries influence their ideas and their political involvement?

The biographies of Frances Wright of Scotland and Marguerite Thibert of France, despite being active in very different contexts, exhibit