

CURRENT ISSUES IN WOMEN'S HISTORY

Edited by
Arina Angerman, Geerte Binnema,
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Jacqueline Zirkzee

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY



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Preface

Current Issues in Women's History is a selection from the papers presented at the International Conference on Women's History held in Amsterdam from 24-27 March 1986. At this conference, over a hundred lectures and workshops were presented by women from about thirty different countries. That women's history is a dynamic and promising field of research became very clear during the four well-attended days. The lectures offered were richly diverse in their contents because the organisers had made no restrictions as to possible themes, methods or periods. The conference was marked by its many discussions about differences in approach, amplified by the fact that the 800 or so participants came from many different countries and disciplines. All this made the conference a lively and also a unique event. As far as we, the editors of this collection, know, a conference on women's history with representatives from so many different countries has not taken place before. For this reason, and because we wanted to make the papers presented accessible to a wider audience, we decided to publish a selection from the wide range of research papers.

In keeping with the intention of the conference, we did not start from a specific notion of women's history. Our main criterion was that a particular piece of research was innovating or challenging in the presentation of its question, its use of sources or its theoretical orientation. Another criterion was that the research contained sufficient clues to be interesting for non-specialists in the relevant field. In order to see if our choices were justified, we often turned to specialists for advice.

Women's history in its present state can definitely not be called a crystallised field of research. Its history has known continual clashes of a theoretical nature, often emanating from differences in political ideas which in their turn are brought about by differences in class, culture and ethnic background. We believe that the confrontations at the conference connected with these different backgrounds will make an essential contribution to the changing and narrowing down of the questions and methods employed. This goes in particular for the heated discussions at the conference about the white nature of women's history. These made once again apparent that the West shows the dogged tendency to universalise, consciously or subconsciously, its findings with respect to the non-Western research areas. This is why in this collection we had hoped to compensate for the underrepresentation of non-Western contributions at the conference. Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in doing so. We found Selma Leydesdorff prepared to write about the different items of discussion in the introductory article to the collection as a whole, which makes her the only author to have found a place in *Current Issues* not on the basis of a lecture.

The idea of compiling this collection not thematically, but by accentuating the possible similarities and/or differences in approach, was inspired by our view that the various developments within women's history should be placed side by side. In order to make this diversity and these similarities appear as clearly as possible, we asked each author to discuss explicitly the choice of her research subject, her research question, the place these two have in the relevant historiographic tradition, and finally the way in which she dealt with her source material. On the basis of the ways in which the authors incorporated these guidelines into their articles, we have formulated in the following paragraphs a number of current issues as we see them. The cross-connections that we found enable us to give a further illustration of recent developments within women's history.

One of the first research themes of women's history involved research into the actual presence or absence of women in power structures and organisations, and the degree to which women could make their influence felt inside or outside of these structures and organisations. The causes of the powerless positions that

women, according to the results of such research, often appeared to have been especially found in the general, seemingly unchangeable power structures that men were felt to personify. Research into social structures and institutions on the one hand and the possibilities of women to function within such structures on the other hand is still carried out today. However, the idea that there is an immediate connection between being female and an *a priori* limitation of opportunities has been abandoned. The new nature of this research often appears from the fact that more questions are formulated which are time- and situation-related, and that those opportunities are investigated that actually were open to women. New source material has led to surprising changes in existing opinions. Londa Schiebinger, in her article about an eighteenth-century astronomer, shows for instance that it is no longer merely important to rescue great women scientists from obscurity. What matters is to reconstruct precisely how social trends such as professionalisation and modernisation encouraged or discouraged women to fight for a position in the academic world.

Lucia Bergamasco examines what effects changes had in the theological opinions of seventeenth-century Puritan preachers on the place intended for women within this religious community in New England. On the basis of letters and religious writings of two preachers' daughters, Bergamasco shows that the changed views meant that preachers' daughters received a thorough intellectual education and in addition were brought up with strong moral beliefs regarding their tasks in society. In their upbringing, we trace diffuse patterns of expectation with respect to being female, which formed the basis of emotional conflicts at a later age.

Päivi Setälä, like Bergamasco, adjusts the image of uninfluential women, but her location is Ancient Rome. In addition to discussing the existing legal rights for women in general, Setälä shows by means of a brickstone analysis that a group of land-owning women did succeed in exercising economic and political influence.

Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra is another author who takes a critical look at the prevailing image of women. Her paper - about the popular theme of witchcraft - shows that the question why women were overrepresented at large witch-trials cannot be explained only by characterising the relevant period as misogynist, but that a careful analysis of the religious and social context forms a necessary step towards a further explanation of this phenomenon.

Not only have the individual opportunities and obstacles for women - discussed in the previous paragraphs - always appealed to people's imagination, but there has also always been an interest in their collective performance. Initially, research concentrated on the struggle of feminist movements as such, and the degree to which the women involved had succeeded in bringing their demands to fruition. In the first instance women researchers looked for recognition of their own feminist ideals and in that light judged the feminist nature of women's movements from the past. They described a feminist fight in terms of a united movement against an unequivocal oppression. Soon it became apparent that such a description was not valid. They realised that the fight of a feminist movement cannot be judged by contemporary, universally validated, feminist standards but that it would have to be examined in the context of its own time and place. From the paper of Lydia Sklevicky, for instance, it becomes clear that the fact that the women's organisation in Yugoslavia was incorporated into the structure of the state machinery was highly decisive for the possibilities of this organisation. On the one hand, this incorporation gave the organisation a clear basis, on the other, it made its functioning exceedingly dependent on state politics. The official existence of this women's organisation within the party could be used rhetorically by the government to show that oppression of women no longer existed in its socialist society. This led to an area of tension between the rhetoric of party officials and the space that was actually given to the women's organisation.

To what extent feminist motivations can be the products of their time becomes clear from the paper by Amy Swerdlow. The Women Strike for Peace movement, active in the early 1960s in the USA, made motherhood the stake of its political fight against the arms race. This argument enabled the movement not only to involve very many women in its fight but also to achieve the necessary political effect. Swerdlow indicates how much the effect of the appeal to motherhood was connected with the socio-political circumstances of that period.

If the articles of Sklevicky and Swerdlow show two women's movements concerned with the realisations of their respective interests, to Mineke Bosch the key question is quite a different one, namely the extent to which the participants in a movement manifest themselves individually. By means of the many letters

which a number of women within the International Women's Suffrage Alliance wrote to one another, Bosch creates a lively picture of the way in which their personal and business interests were interwoven.

From Margot Badran's article it becomes clear that the Western assessment of the origin of women's movements does not in any way apply to Egypt. In the West, their origin is attributed to the increasing separation of private and public spheres, whereas in Egypt it appears that feminism arises when the strict isolation of women begins to lessen. Badran also undercuts the notion that Egyptian feminism is a movement initiated by the West. She supports her claim by previously unused source material and interviews.

The idea that there is no clear-cut distinction between the powerful and the powerless, and that such oppositions are not always immediately evident, has made women historians look for different sources and new means of analysis. Since language contributes to constitute social opinions and ideas about power relations within the mental framework of people, analysis of meaning and of changes in meaning can give insight into the ways in which a certain culture does or does not restrict women. By comparing different texts about a certain subject we can reconstruct global images which in their turn demonstrate feelings about being female or the feminine. That the ideas of contemporaries may vary about this is apparent from Jo Anne Preston's paper. She compares the motivations that women themselves formulated for wanting to become schoolteachers to the motivations educationalists ascribed to them. In New England in the period 1835-80, there were pleas to employ more women as teachers, because their female qualities would make them suitable. The women themselves, however, showed little motherly inspiration in their letters; instead they gave reasons such as the wish for economic independence and an interest in science and literature.

A century later, in the 1930s, British educationalists expressed entirely different opinions when they discussed the suitability of the spinster as a schoolteacher. Alison Oram shows that educationalists in the Depression used the argument that spinsters were 'embittered, thwarted women with overtones of sexual frustration' and for that reason were highly unsuitable as teachers. In their

attempts to exclude spinsters from teaching, experts could avail themselves of opinions formulated by the rising sexology.

Anne Laurence analyses how psychological disorders are couched in concepts in professional writings and ego-documents of 'patients'. With her analysis, Laurence tries to gain insight into the traditions within which these concepts are handled. The tradition in which an author finds her/himself is decisive for the meaning which she/he assigns to a certain disorder. For instance, a lawyer, obliged for the sake of his profession to ascertain the personal responsibility of the patient with a psychological disorder, would attribute a different meaning to the disorder than the patient herself, who would seek to understand the how and why of her disorder. Seventeenth-century women saw their psychological disorders in a religious context, for which they used terms such as 'demonic temptation' and 'divine inspiration'. For the twentieth-century woman historian this context does not make the task of charting the experiences of these women easy.

The article of Annelies van Gijzen gives a revision of the literary-critical significance that is attributed to courtly literature. After a careful analysis of the stories of Pygmalion and Narcissus, Van Gijzen concludes that the courtly genre merely reveals the self-confirmation of male heroes instead of their reverence of women.

In her paper, Anna Clark analyses aspects of the spoken language of working-class women as they can be traced in reports of defamation cases around 1800. By analysing the meaning of terms of abuse, Clark finds that their use is a gauge for the social stratification in a working-class neighbourhood in London. Because of the sharpening of the divisions between the lower and the lower-middle classes, the norms of the middle classes began to play a crucial part in determining the social stratum to which a person belonged. Since, according to these norms, to be the object of verbal abuse was harmful to a woman's reputation, women were more inclined to take the matter to court if they had achieved higher positions on the social ladder.

Three of the articles in this collection are historiographical and/or methodological in nature. Maria Grever pleads the recognition of a women-historical tradition. Many women in the past wrote history; they often unjustly passed into oblivion. Women wrote history, for instance in the form of historical novels, on the one hand

because they had no access to the contemporary institutions of scholarship and on the other because the novel form offered better opportunities for formulating aspects of the lives of women. Thus the writings of women historians *avant la lettre* are interesting not only because they contain information about the women described, but also because they throw light on the possibilities for women to manifest themselves as writers.

Helga Grubitzsch's article deals with the other side of Grevers' story. In the dominant male historical tradition, research is almost always presented as being sex-neutral. At a closer inspection it turns out to concern merely the male perspective. Grubitzsch finds that this androcentrism can even be found in historical works that are explicitly about women. Because every woman historian has to deal with sources and historiography written by men, Grubitzsch gives a careful analysis of *Les femmes de la Révolution* by J. Michelet to display in how many different ways androcentrism can manifest itself.

It is still a fact that the Western academic tradition tends to describe non-Western societies by means of Western categories. Feminist researchers show a similar tendency to universalise their discoveries, as has already been pointed out in the discussion of Badran's paper. In her article, Willy Jansen wonders to what extent Western scholars are justified in investigating the history of non-Western women; an issue which came up repeatedly at the conference. She is amply aware of the biases of Western historians or anthropologists. As a result of a discussion of Western historical and anthropological research of Algerian women she argues that, provided certain aspects of ethnocentrism are recognised and explicitly incorporated, Western scholars can avoid biases in their research.

We think that these articles may offer sufficient ground for further consideration of research methods and points of view within women's history and that these proceedings of the conference may lead to a follow-up. Finally we would like to express our gratitude to everyone who has contributed to the realisation of this publication. First of all, the women who devoted themselves for two years to the organisation of the conference. The *Landelijk Overleg Vrouwengeschiedenis* (The Dutch National Network of Feminist Historians) formed, from its membership of students and researchers

of women's history, the organising committee of this presentation and exchange of current research in women's history. Secondly, we should like to mention Ciska Pattipilohy for her role in judging non-Western contributions; and Carla Laan and Karen Peters, who unfortunately had to abandon their editorial work prematurely. Thirdly, all the authors who had to meet our many requirements and who have done so in a very pleasant manner, and those who assisted us with all our English correspondence: Bram Dijkshoorn, Gerard Steen, and Els Klijnsma, who also did part of the language editing. Furthermore, all those who freely gave their time to advise us concerning the contents of this collection: Nelleke Bakker, Margret Brüggmann, Lilian de Bruijn, Fia Dieteren, Saskia Grotenhuis, Pauline Hagemeijer, Anton van Hooff, Els Kloek, Susana Menendez, Arthur Mitzman, Marijke Mossink, Brita Rang, Marion de Ras, Dineke Stam, Marja van Tilburg, Petra de Vries, Mirjam Westen and Jolande Withuis. We are also very grateful to the institutions whose financial contributions to this collection have been indispensable: the Prins Bernhard Fonds, the University of Amsterdam and the Women's Advisory Committee at the University of Amsterdam.

The editors

May 1988

Translated by Lonette Wiemans

Selma Leydesdorff

Politics, identification and the writing of women's history

In spite of the great differences in the ways in which women's history is made and studied, there nevertheless appears to be a great deal of common ground. Time and again there is that moment of recognition, that feeling that all women are involved in the same things. Great women leaders from the past make us feel proud; we admire their fight for equal rights and we feel that we recognise something in their struggle with the contradictions in their lives. Do we not all feel ambivalent about the conflict between what is expected of us as women and what we really want in society? Feelings of identity, however, depend on whom it is that we study, for we are also quite capable of feeling appalled by women in whom we do not recognise anything of ourselves, women with whom we cannot possibly identify and whom we do not really understand at all. Apart from the identification with great women another kind of identification is possible. Many of us feel great involvement with unknown women, women who have disappeared nameless in history. No matter how quantitative our approach to them may be, there are moments at which all those anonymous women emerge from obscurity. This may be when we study an old manuscript, when we hold an old garment or when we read a statement from a contemporary author. Almost all women historians involved in studying women from the past are familiar with these moments of identification, disapproval or pride. Their research can be seen as a passionate exploration and a desire to increase knowledge.

If one element can be said to have characterised the Interna-

tional Conference on Women's History, it was this exchange of enthusiasms. Most women researchers identify with the object of their research. This leads to a situation in which canons of scholarship dissuade researchers from any such identification. Women researchers are therefore often, somewhat belittlingly, said to be 'emotionally involved'. Yet it is this very identification with women forerunners that marks the common ground by means of which the ties with the vast field of the women's movement keep coming up for discussion. Again and again the exchange of views proves possible, even where specialist subjects are concerned. Systematically, women historians attempt to discuss the traditions which generated differences, and they all realise that there is no point in imprisoning themselves in the subdisciplines of history.

The first part of this introduction will deal chiefly with the differences in the ways in which women's history is written. Where do these differences come from and how do they relate to national traditions? Next I shall look at how these differences are related to the degree of integration of women's history into the academic world, and what consequences this integration has had for the way patterns of identification are dealt with within the practice of women's history.¹

I believe that it is necessary to take a closer look at the issue of conscious and unconscious patterns of identification within the practice of women's history, primarily because the search for identification has, from the onset, been one of the foundations of feminist historiography. In the course of time, however, attitudes towards such a strong involvement have changed; new questions as well as new fields of interest have come up for discussion within women's history. All this has made identification difficult, if not impossible.

I am aware with everything that I am writing at the beginning of this collection that an overall vision is impossible, even though this was so much the underlying aim at the conference. Of course, my views have been defined by Western practice, and of course I am a product of the way in which women's history has slowly gained a place at the universities in the Netherlands. It was exactly the consequences of what was described as Western academicism that were criticised at the conference by women from non-Western countries where women's history has not (yet) acquired this status.

Differences

In spite of the fact that feminist historians have exchanged their ideas internationally practically from the start, the differences in the research papers presented at this conference appeared to be nationally determined. Historiography remains linked to national, historical traditions. In some countries, historiography is interwoven with legitimisation by the authorities, in other countries, more with social movements. Women's history in Germany, for instance, shows obvious traces of a national historiography trying to come to terms with the atrocities of the past. In Germany, much research is carried out into the ways in which Nazism oppressed women. It is interesting to compare this German tradition of women's history about Nazism to the literature from the United States on the same subject. In the United States, the focus of research appears to have shifted from the question how oppression works - the (justified) repetition of the charge against fascism - to the issue of how the great mass of women faced fascism. This latter question is then asked from an explicitly feminist perspective.

In Great Britain, women's history has, from the start, been closely linked to labour history and is therefore strongly oriented towards the position of women within the labour process - the relation between paid and domestic work and the problems surrounding the organisation of women. In Italy, women's history has developed parallel to the women's movement as very much a cultural tradition. This will be apparent from the fascinating periodical *Memoria*. And in France, with its philosophical tradition, women's history has been influenced by modes of thought that other feminist historians can only grasp with great difficulty. Here too, the national character of historiography is present: in the bicentennial year of 1989 women are involved on a large scale in the historiography of the French Revolution.

To us, Dutch historians, the variety of all these different approaches at the conference seemed at first kaleidoscopic. Soon, however, it became apparent that the differences were not only on a national level, but that every form of feminist historiography implies a political stand, leading to different scholarly views. This became especially apparent in the lectures given by non-Western women. They made clear to what extent historiography can be