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# A COMPANION TO GENDER HISTORY

EDITED BY

Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks

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Teresa A. Meade and  
Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks



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# Introduction

TERESA A. MEADE AND  
MERRY E. WIESNER-HANKS

On the international stage, gender is everywhere. Political analysts and politicians pore over the “gender-gap” in attempts (sometimes futile) to design ways of pitching campaigns to win the women’s vote while still holding onto the men’s. One of the most significant movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Islamic fundamentalism, builds its appeal in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia on the basis of an intense anti-Western rhetoric, buttressed by the imposition of severe restrictions on women’s freedom. Fundamentalist movements within other world religions, including Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity, lay out sharply distinctive paths for male and female adherents. There is today a widespread market for girls and women from many of the world’s poorest countries to work as forced laborers outside their homelands, as sexual commodities for procurers from some of the richest countries, and as subjects for pornography on internet sites worldwide. Recent protests against the World Trade Organization zeroed in on the exploitative strategies of industrialists who profit from the use of primarily women and girls as sweatshop laborers in Southeast Asia, Latin America and hidden in the back alleys of European and North American cities. Finally, as we discovered when attending the international Women’s World Conference in Kampala, Uganda, in 2002, feminist opposition to women’s oppression is by no means centered in Europe and North America. In Uganda, not only does the main national university have a whole building devoted to “the department of women and gender studies” (while few universities in the West accord women’s studies departmental status or even separate offices), but a major division of the government bureaucracy is the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development.

The prominence of gender in historical scholarship matches its visibility on the world political stage. Almost twenty years ago Joan Wallach Scott argued in the pages of the *American Historical Review* that history was enacted on the “field of gender.” Scott defined gender there as “a social category imposed on a sexed body,” and stated, in a line that has since been quoted by scholars in many fields, that “gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power.”<sup>1</sup> She was indebted, as she noted in the article’s many footnotes, to the pioneering work of scholars before her who were

opening a path into the investigation of women's history, and she acknowledged that the very process of recovering the role of women in the formation of human society was still in its infancy. Scott's essay, however, gained considerable attention because it articulated the centrality of gender, not simply women, as a subject of historical inquiry, an argument that was being made by many other historians at the same time. Both of these inter-related fields of inquiry, women's history and historical gender analysis, have exploded over the last twenty years, and gender – understood as a culturally constructed, historically changing, and often unstable system of differences – has become a standard category of historical analysis for many younger historians, and a fair share of older ones as well.

What has also happened in the last twenty years is that in the same way that current gender issues have assumed a global scope, women's history and historical gender analysis have increasingly become international enterprises, both in terms of scholarship and scholars. While the footnotes in Scott's article – and most other theoretical discussions of gender from the 1980s – were numerous and wide-ranging, almost all of them referred to studies focusing on the United States or Europe. This was not the result of any narrowness of vision, but of what was available at the time. In some ways this imbalance continues, and can be seen in the fact that another volume in this series of Blackwell's Companions to History is devoted solely to American women's history, understood primarily as the history of women in the United States. For some parts of the world in some periods, we are only beginning to gain basic information about the lives of women, the relationship between males and females, and the interconnection between socially accepted masculine and feminine ideologies. However, new research has begun to challenge understandings of gender derived primarily from the western experience, and there is now enough material from all over the world to make this Companion to Gender History truly global.

This collection of essays seeks to contribute to the history of women, to study their interaction with men in a gendered world, and to posit notions of the role of gender in shaping human interaction over thousands of years. When thinking about how to organize such an enormous project, we decided that it would be useful for readers to have both thematic essays that provide conceptual overviews of the ways in which gender has intersected with other historical topics and categories of analysis, and more traditional chronological-geographic essays that explore gender in one area of the world during a specific period (though these are of necessity very broad). We assembled a group of authors that was similarly wide ranging, including scholars from most of the English-speaking world, including Canada, Britain, Australia, India, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as scholars for whom English is not their first language. We also gave the authors a relatively free hand to explore their particular topic in the way they saw fit, recognizing that investigations of some societies or pertaining to given historical epochs are only beginning to see descriptive studies about women, while others are rich in highly theorized and sophisticated analysis of gender. Rather than bemoan these differences, we see them as providing a good example for you as readers to see how a new historical field is developing and assess the ways in which insights in one area can challenge received wisdom and standard generalizations in another.

One of the key points emerging from this collection is that no generalization about gender has applied to all times or all places. Indeed, even Scott's definition of gender



as “a social category imposed on a sexed body,” while acceptable twenty years ago when scholars were asserting the difference between “cultural” gender and “biological” sex, is today highly contested. Biological markers such as genitalia and chromosomes are not perfectly dichotomous, but may involve ambiguous intermediate categories; generally individuals in such situations are “assigned” a sex at birth, sometimes with the aid of surgery to remove or reconfigure the inappropriate body parts. Thus their sex is determined by the cultural notion that there are only two acceptable categories, so that in these cases gender determines sex rather than the other way around.

Historical and anthropological research from around the world has also provided evidence of societies in which gender was not based on body parts or chromosomes, but on a person’s relationship to reproduction, so that adults were gendered male and female, while children and old people were regarded as different genders, and one’s gender thus changed throughout one’s life. Then again, in some societies gender may have been determined by one’s role in production or religious rituals, with individuals who were morphologically (that is, physically) male or female regarded as the other gender, or as members of a third gender. Barbara Andaya provides examples of such a third gender when she discusses the *bissu* of Southeast Asia, and Deirdre Keenan when she notes the presence of two-spirit people among some Native American groups. Such historical instances of non-dichotomous gender systems occasionally provide examples, as Robert Nye notes, for those in contemporary society who are increasingly critical of the standard schemata of binary sex and gender roles.

Much of such criticism of the binary gender system and a further contestation of the meaning of gender has come from the transgender movement. Individuals whose external genitalia and even chromosomal and hormonal patterns mark them as male or female may mentally regard themselves as the other, and choose to live and dress as the other, a condition the medical profession calls “gender dysphoria.” In the 1950s sex-change operations became available for gender-dysphoric people who could afford them, and they could become transsexuals, thus making their physical sexual identity fit more closely with their mental gender identity; by the 1980s more than forty clinics in the United States were offering such operations. (This enterprise is shaped by gender in complex ways, as the vast majority of those who undergo sex-change operations go from male to female.) But at what point in this process does a “man” become a “woman”? When he loses his penis? Gains breasts? Or is she a woman before the process begins because she self-identifies as a woman? In the 1980s some people also began to describe themselves as “transgendered,” that is, as neither male nor female or both male and female, and resisted efforts to limit the possibilities to two. But should such individuals be allowed in spaces designated “women only” or “men only”? Such questions are not simply academic speculation, nor do they relate solely to public restrooms. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which has been held for more than thirty years and draws about ten thousand attendees, has been deeply divided about the question of transsexuals and transgendered persons. Are “real” women – those who will be admitted – only (in the words of the festival organizers) “women-born-women”? Or is excluding transsexuals and transgendered persons an example of the very type of sexist discrimination the festival opposes?

Transsexuals and transgendered persons highlight the nebulous boundaries and permeable nature of the categories “women” and “men,” and challenge us to think carefully even when using these common words. The enormous differences among men and women based on factors such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, and region have also led scholars to question whether the term “women” (and by extension “men”) is a valid analytical category, or whether these differences are so great that there really is nothing that could be labeled “woman” whose meaning is self-evident and unchanging over time. Not only in the present is gender “performative,” that is, a role that can be taken on or changed at will, but it was so at many points in the past, when individuals challenged existing gender roles or when, based on the individual’s class or racial status, he or she was not viewed as included in category of “men” or “women.” Many of the essays in the collection discuss high-status women, for example, who ruled over men despite cultural norms that decreed female inferiority and subservience, as well as low-status women who were never included in ideas about women’s purity and weakness. Similarly, they discuss men whose class status allowed them to engage in behavior that would in other men be judged “effeminate,” such as wearing cosmetics, or whose class or racial status kept them from being regarded as manly. Nupur Chaudhuri, for example, discusses the intertwining of gender and racial understandings in colonial India, where colonial authorities viewed Englishmen as vigorous and “manly” while Bengali men were dependent, soft, and “feminine.”

Several of the essays thus provide evidence of more fluid gender roles – whether positive or negative – but others point to ways in which many types of historical developments served to rigidify existing notions of masculinity and femininity. According to Verena Stolcke, the history of European exploits abroad and of colonization schemes may not have included large numbers of women, but notions of masculinity underlay the participants’ sense of conquest. Whereas conventional history has given us the positive view of the masculine legend, a gendered account might divest masculinity of its rugged individualism and, in the case of the imperial project abroad, connect masculine imagery with racism and exclusivity. Sean Redding’s essay demonstrates how Europeans colonizing Africa sided with the most retrograde aspects of the colonized, and imposed male domination in ways it had not previously existed. The frontier narrative, from crossing the great plains of North America to forging into the jungles of Africa to subduing the Indian subcontinent, has been a mainstay of triumphalist historical narratives and the core of the western literary canon. Linda Kealey, Patricia Grimshaw, and Charles Sowerwine question the heroism of the American frontier mythology that credits the backwoodsman with single-handedly clearing the forest, building the roads, and, eventually, paving the way for the rise of industry and national unity at home, and neo-imperialist pre-eminence abroad.

As they provide evidence for both fluidity and rigidity in gender structures, the essays also provide evidence on both sides of the debate about women’s agency and oppression. Merry Wiesner-Hanks and Susan Besse document the ways in which the family served simultaneously as an institution protecting and supporting patriarchy, and a location of real female power. Ursula King notes the ways in which religious doctrines and institutions were both restrictive and liberating for women, while Guity Nashat and Judith Tucker explore this in greater detail with regard to Islam. According