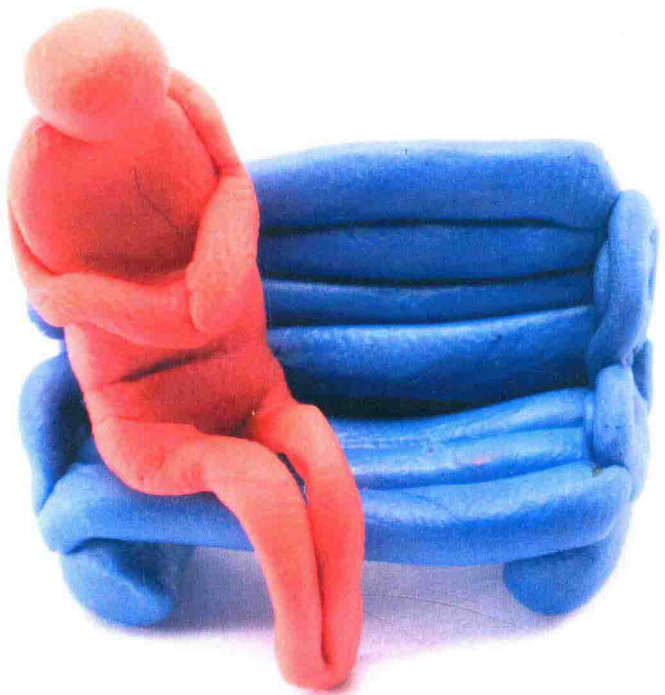


SONYA O. ROSE

# What is Gender History?



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polity

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# What is Gender History?

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is primarily about what gender historians do. It is not a history of gender, but rather it is about approaches to the field and their development, and considers some of the topics in history that have concerned gender historians. I have tried throughout to focus on gender or the meanings and expectations concerning what it means to be male or female. It is not a book about women's history, although there is some discussion of the field and its contributions to gender history. The primary purpose of this volume is to provide an introduction to the subject both for students who have had some training in history but have not previously encountered gender history as a field, and for students who have studied women and gender in other disciplines but have not had the opportunity to learn about how historians approach these topics. The book takes up certain controversies that have developed among scholars of women's and gender history, it provides an overview of some of the complexities in studying gender history, and it considers new directions in the field. This should make it useful to more advanced students and scholars who might find such an overview of value.

Chapter 1 provides basic definitions of the terms "gender," "history," and "feminist history." It charts the development of gender history from women's history and discusses its uneven influence on scholarship. Chapter 2 complicates the

distinction between sex and gender and considers histories of the body and histories of sexuality. Chapter 3 takes up gender and its intersections with race and class using as examples among other topics, slavery, and colonialism. Chapter 4 introduces the reader to the study of men and masculinity, discussing different approaches to the topic and emphasizing the changing understandings of masculinity over time as well as the various ways that manhood is understood and practiced in a given historical period. Chapter 5 illustrates how historians of gender have contributed to questions that have been central to historians generally. It focuses especially on colonial conquest, revolution, nationalism, and war and covers examples from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Chapter 6 examines some of the controversies over approaches to studying gender in history, and introduces the reader to some of the new directions being taken, including psychoanalytic and other approaches to subjectivity, and transnational or global histories. It serves, as well, as a review or reminder of some of the other issues and topics covered in the book.

The book is written as an engaged overview that attempts both to synthesize how scholars have approached the field and to give fairly detailed examples of historical scholarship on particular topics of concern to gender historians. It is impossible for such a book to cover everything in a domain of inquiry as diverse and rich as gender history, and thus I have attempted to provide the reader with a sense of the kinds of questions gender historians ask and how they have gone about answering them. While the text draws heavily from work on North America and Britain, I have also attempted to provide examples from across the world. As my own work specializes in modern history, especially the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this is the focus of much of the book. However, I have also included some discussion of the exciting work done by scholars whose work is on periods ranging from the thirteenth through the eighteenth centuries. I wanted to give some idea of the histories of particular topics from a variety of regions and/or countries and time periods, and although such examples might seem to lack historical context – because their histories will simply be less familiar – it is my hope that the reader will nonetheless be able to learn from

them some of what these gender historians have discovered in their research.

I am indebted to a host of feminist historians whose work has inspired me over the years. I cannot hope to list them all here, nor will they necessarily find their work specifically cited in the text. Many of them, however, will be included in the topically organized list of selected readings at the end of the book. Thanks also are especially due to Andrea Drugan at Polity, who has been a model of what an editor should be – supportive, encouraging, and quick to respond to various drafts and queries, and to Justin Dyer, for a heroic and truly helpful job of copy-editing. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for Polity and my London friends, Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Bill Schwarz, for listening to my concerns as I worked on this book. Special thanks go to Sue Juster for suggesting examples of particularly interesting scholarship on gender in Colonial North America. Most especially, I thank Guenter Rose for his patience and support and for putting up with the angst I experienced as I found writing this book to be a much more difficult and complex undertaking than I had anticipated.



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# 1

## Why Gender History?

In answering the question posed by the title of this book, “what is gender history?” I hope to convince the reader that gender both has a history and is historically significant. To begin, we must first consider what might seem self-evident but is, in fact, complex – how to think about history itself.

History is comprised of knowledge about the past. This means that history is the product of scholarship concerning the past. At this point the reader might wonder, isn’t history *the past*? Common sense would tell us that if someone is interested in history, that person is interested in what has happened before the present day. But it is important to be clear that the past is *reconstructed* through historical scholarship – the knowledge produced by historians. This suggests that the process of reconstruction is all-important in the knowledge that is produced. What we know about the past is dependent upon the questions historians have asked and how they have answered them. What has been the focus of their interest? What have they deemed to be important to study about the past? How have they gone about studying it? How have they interpreted the evidence they have unearthed? To complicate matters, the answers to these questions themselves have changed over time. Historians are not outside of history, but are shaped by it and by the political, cultural, social, and economic climates in which they live and work. Thus, history itself has a history. This is important

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background to keep in mind as we begin to explore the topics of gender and gender history.

Although historians have differed and continue to differ in their approaches to their subject, they would all share the following assumption: the conditions within which people live their lives and the societies which shape those conditions change over time. These changes are many and varied, and the rates at which transformations occur also are variable. But the presumption of change or transformation is fundamental to historical scholarship. Not all historical scholarship, however, charts and accounts for changes. While some historians are concerned to show how events and certain processes were instrumental in transforming a society or an aspect of society, others are interested in exploring the processes producing continuities over time, and still others are involved in projects that describe aspects of life in a particular period or set of years in the past. But although such historians may not focus on change *per se*, they assume that the characteristics of the lives they unearth and write about are products of social and cultural processes that take place through time.

Gender history is based on the fundamental idea that what it means to be defined as man or woman has a history. Gender historians are concerned with the changes over time and the variations within a single society in a particular period in the past with regard to the perceived differences between women and men, the make-up of their relationships, and the nature of the relations among women and among men as gendered beings. They are concerned with *how* these differences and relationships are historically produced and how they are transformed. Importantly, they are also concerned with the impact of gender on a variety of historically important events and processes. In order to more fully explore the concerns of gender historians and how they “do” gender history, it is crucial to consider the meaning of the term “gender.”

Scholars use the concept of gender to denote the perceived differences between and ideas about women and men, male and female. Fundamental to the definition of the term “gender” is the idea that these differences are socially constructed. What it means to be man and what it means to be

woman, the definitions or understandings of masculinity and femininity, the characteristics of male and female identities – all are the products of culture. Why use the term “gender” rather than the term “sex”? Why speak of the differences between men and women, or males and females, as gender differences rather than sex differences? In very recent years and as the next chapter will discuss in more detail, sex and gender have been considered synonyms and frequently are used interchangeably in popular discourse. But the term “gender” was originally used by feminist scholars to mean the cultural construction of sex difference, in contrast to the term “sex,” which was thought to mean “natural” or “biological” difference.

Before the last decades of the twentieth century and the growth and impact of scholarship on women and gender in numerous disciplines, including anthropology, history, and sociology, it was popularly assumed that the differences between men and women were based in nature and that these “natural differences” accounted for or explained the observed differences in women’s and men’s social positions and social relationships, their ways of being in the world, and the differences between them in various forms of power. Importantly, the hierarchical nature of the relations between men and women was assumed and not questioned. The presumption that the various differences between women and men were based in nature rather than being products of culture meant that it took particular historical circumstances to occur for scholars to begin to think that gender had a history or histories and that gender mattered to history.

Gender history developed in response to the scholarship on and debates about women’s history. As a field of study, women’s history began to flower only in the late 1960s and flourished in the 1970s, continuing to this day as a crucial component of gender history. But even before this, histories of women had been written, so that the development of the field from the 1960s may be considered a revival or renaissance, but in a new context that encouraged its formation as an academic field of study. Histories of women written before the twentieth century generally concerned such figures as queens and saints. For the most part the lives of ordinary women went unrecorded and unremarked upon except for

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the work of a few important predecessors to contemporary women's history who wrote during the first half of the twentieth century. These important predecessors included Eileen Power, Alice Clark, and Ivy Pinchbeck in Britain and Julia Spruill and Mary Beard in the United States. Disregarding their work, professional historians considered the activities of women as mothers and wives, servants, workers, and consumers irrelevant to history. The histories of women written before the late 1960s and 1970s were generally not integrated into professional or popular histories of the time.

Why was it that women had been ignored by "mainstream historians"? A primary reason, one recognized early on in the development of the new women's history, was that women had been neglected as historical subjects because historians viewed history to be almost singularly about the exercise and transmission of power in the realms of politics and economics, arenas in which the actors were men. The rise of women's history and its development contributed to a rethinking of historical practice that was taking place among social historians who considered knowledge about the everyday lives of ordinary people as important to making sense of the past. But social historians, too, ignored women as historical actors because they mistakenly understood men, especially white, European, and North American men, as the universal agents of history. For example, "workers" were imagined as male figures, and so labor history neglected women's work in the fields, workshops, and factories as well as in their homes.

Historians of women began to discover that women as well as men had been labor and community activists, social reformers, and political revolutionaries, and they demonstrated how women's labor contributed to their households and to the economy more broadly. Importantly, women's historians eventually challenged what had been a narrow definition of politics and power, broadening their scope to include arenas of life outside of governments and political parties, particularly in people's "private lives." These scholars delved into topics that had previously been considered "natural" rather than cultural or social, such as family violence, prostitution, and childbirth. These challenges to traditional historical practice came out of the very historical

developments contributing to the rise and progress of women's history.

Women's history as a field of inquiry was a product of the women's movement, or what has been called "second-wave feminism," distinguishing it from the feminist movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which sought to gain the vote for women as well as raising a number of other issues relating to women's inequality. Feminism was central in stimulating interest in and generating analytical approaches to the history of women. While those who consider themselves to be feminists today may not be in total agreement about precisely what the project of feminism should be, most would agree that fundamental to feminism is the belief that women should have the same basic human rights as men. Feminists argue that generally women are disadvantaged relative to men. They suffer such disadvantages because of how gender has patterned their social worlds. The idea that women everywhere should have the same advantages as men led feminist scholars to want to recover the previously untold story of women's lives in the past, to uncover the reasons for women's subordinate status, and to wonder about the apparent omission or exclusion of women from the historical record. As two US-based European historians, Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, wrote in the introduction to their aptly entitled collection, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, published in 1977, "The essays written for this volume seek both to restore women to history and to explore the meaning of women's unique historical experience."<sup>1</sup>

While the women's movement generally stimulated interest in women's history, the paths taken by feminist scholars varied depending upon the national context in which they worked. The place of women in the profession of history internationally differed with their institutional cultures – some were more open to women scholars than others. Women's history developed relatively quickly in the United States, for example, as women scholars began gaining institutional support in some universities early in the 1970s. In Britain, institutional support developed later, and feminist-inspired historians there began to do women's history from outside of the academy. But into the late 1980s women's history still lacked academic respectability, and even today

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feminist historians are struggling to have women and gender incorporated into some areas of historical writing. In France and Germany, women's history has been even slower to gain the acceptance of professional male historians.

Although women's historians all were motivated by feminism, the substance and direction of women's history as a field developed somewhat differently in different national settings.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, the concept of "separate spheres" became highly influential. In search of the roots of women's subjugation and to recover the texture of and influences on women's lives in the past, scholars depicted them as living and acting in a distinct space and or realm of activities centered on their families and households. As Linda Kerber has noted, historians discovered the use of the term "women's sphere" in their sources, and that discovery, in turn, "directed the choices made by twentieth-century historians about what to study and how to tell the stories that they reconstructed."<sup>3</sup> In an enormously influential 1966 essay about American women's lives in the years 1820–60, Barbara Welter described what she called the "Cult of True Womanhood," an ideology prescribing that women should live by and for the virtues of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."<sup>4</sup> Welter focused her inquiry on white, Northern, middle-class women, using as sources such written material as advice books, sermons, and women's magazines. Although as the field of women's history changed and diversified it was to be criticized by scholars for being based only on prescriptive literature and for its attention to only one group of women, Welter's analysis kick-started what was to be a dominant emphasis in the US field generally into the 1980s. While being descriptive, it also was critical of the patriarchal relations that confined women and defined their lives, and like other works of the women's history revival, it emphasized women's oppression. Importantly, Welter suggested that the cult inspired diverse responses, and coupled with larger societal changes, including the abolitionist movement and the Civil War, women expanded their activities beyond the narrowly domestic realm.

"Women's sphere" in nineteenth-century US history was analyzed by some feminist scholars in the mid-1970s and into the early 1980s as the source of what became described as a

“women’s culture.” Scholars developing the idea of “women’s culture” were not focused primarily on analyzing how and why women were victims of a patriarchal society. Rather, they were interested in exploring the centrality of the relationships among women in history. In an important essay, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, for example, argued on the basis of her analysis of numerous letters and diaries that in order to understand women’s lives in nineteenth-century America, it was crucial to examine their relationships with one another. Women, she argued, as relatives, neighbors, and friends, spent their everyday lives together. Women’s friendships were characterized by devotion and solidarity, and were emotionally central in their lives. She further suggested that some Victorian women’s relationships involved physical sensuality and possibly sexuality as well as emotional affection from adolescence into adulthood. For Smith-Rosenberg, women’s sphere was not just a separate one, it had “an essential integrity and dignity that grew out of women’s shared experiences and mutual affection.”<sup>5</sup> Nancy Cott moved the idea of “women’s sphere” onto new ground in her analysis of the development of the ideology of domesticity and women’s sphere from 1780 to 1835. The title of her book, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, was meant to underscore the double meaning of the term “bonds” as both constraints and connections.<sup>6</sup> Using diaries in addition to prescriptive literature, she revealed some of the oppressive consequences of the ideology of domesticity, but more importantly she showed that a sense of sisterhood was nurtured within women’s sphere, as a consequence of which some women became politically conscious as women and organized to promote their rights.

In Britain, feminist historical research was stimulated by both the women’s movement and socialist or Marxian-inspired social and labor history. In the 1970s and early 1980s, feminist historians were keen to understand how women’s lives and activities were simultaneously affected by sex-based and class-based divisions. Sheila Rowbotham’s significant publications in the 1970s were influenced both by Marxism and by feminism. In her 1973 *Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World*, she argued for the necessity of understanding the “precise relationship between the patriarchal dominance of men over women, and the property relations



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which come from this, to class exploitation and racism.”<sup>7</sup> In *Hidden from History* published in the same year she surveyed the impact of capitalism on the lives of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and critically explored women’s participation in both feminist and socialist projects.<sup>8</sup> Sally Alexander’s mid-1970s feminist-inspired research critically addressed Marx’s ideas about the capitalist mode of production.<sup>9</sup> She argued that the sexual division of labor, articulated by and reproduced within the family when the household was the unit of production, continued to shape industrial capitalism as industrial methods were transformed in nineteenth-century London. Alexander maintained that this dynamic involving the impact of the household division of labor on industrial transformation should be central to feminist historical research.

A significant study by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris of northern British working-class women’s participation in the struggle for the vote, published in 1978, carefully explored the connections between their suffrage activism, their work and family lives, and their involvement in trade unionism.<sup>10</sup> Based on interviews with the daughters of these suffragists as well as a wealth of archival sources, Liddington and Norris’ study reconstructed the suffrage activities in which these women engaged, often in the face of the hostility from the men in their lives, and their cooperation with one another in carrying out their domestic duties so that they could continue their political work.

Making use of the social and economic historians’ concept of “family economy,” Laura Oren showed that the sexual divisions within the household caused women’s diets as well as their children’s to suffer relative to men.<sup>11</sup> Women stretched household expenses that husbands allotted to them from their pay to assure that their husbands were well taken care of, while men kept pocket money for themselves to use for their own necessities as well as pleasures. Oren concluded that the wife’s management of the household budget served as a buffer both for her husband in hard times, and for the economy and industrial system more generally.

Although the study of working-class women was a predominant focus of women’s historians in Britain, the ideology of separate spheres and the split between the primarily