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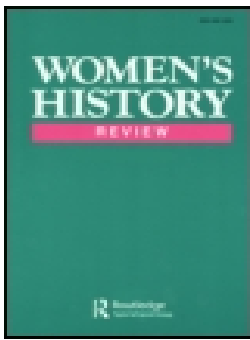
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## Women's History in Many Places: reflections on plurality, diversity and polyversality

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## Women's History in Many Places: reflections on plurality, diversity and polyversality

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### ABSTRACT

This piece addresses the key questions posed by Chen Yan and Karen Offen in their joint position paper on the current state of women's history and its place at the cutting edge of historical practice. Having made the case that women's and gender history has had a significant and multi-level impact (empirical, conceptual, methodological and theoretical) on that practice, my article observes that acknowledgement of this is still very limited among those not centrally involved in the field. It notes the tensions between the aspiration both to identify and pursue women's and gender history as discrete fields of scholarly endeavour and the aspiration for women and gender to be treated as topics/categories which should be constitutive of all historical inquiry. It goes on to consider the relationship of women's history to gender history, to post-colonial and cross-cultural scholarship, and to recent work in spatial histories. It argues that in the first case the two approaches are mutually reinforcing, and that in the other two cases women's and gender history has been at the leading edge of these developing fields and is uniquely positioned to make innovative contributions there. The capacity of women's and gender history to continue as a leading edge area of historical practice will be grounded in its ongoing commitment to reflexivity about problems and limitations in the field, and to sustaining its key insights into the links between the personal and the structural, the global and the local, and the material and the cultural.

My contribution to the discussion opened up by Karen Offen and Chen Yan draws on my own experience as a historian of women, genders, feminisms and sexualities with particular interests in the Middle East, especially Iran, since c.1750, and in histories of empire since c.1700. It also draws on my involvement with comparative history, with interdisciplinary women's studies, and with the study of the concepts, methods and theories that sustain historical practice, which has taken me beyond the chronological and geographical confines of my other work. My experience is shaped by my membership of a generation who developed as historians in the UK through the 'history from below' revival of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, the 'cultural turn' of the 1980s and 1990s, and the more recent postcolonial turn.<sup>1</sup> This piece responds to the questions addressed in the main

position paper, with particular reference to cross-cultural, trans-national, and post-colonial themes and approaches. It refers to work published or translated into English, but is fully appreciative of important work on the history of women and gender which has appeared in various languages from the work of Chinese, Japanese and Turkish scholars, to histories of women and gender in Europe and Latin America written in indigenous languages.

This analysis of the achievements of women's history over recent decades identifies three crucial and demonstrable levels of impact. At the *substantive level* existing scholarly practice has been modified by the recuperation of ignored or marginalized ideas and information regarding women and gender for use in historical research and writing. The study of ancient slavery or modern labour movements, like accounts of religious practice or monarchical governance, has been transformed by work based on evidence about the distinctive roles and perceptions of women, men, families, and sexualities.<sup>2</sup> At the *conceptual level* such information has led to a rethinking of terms regularly used by historians to depict and comment on past societies. Notions of 'work', 'politics', 'nation', 'family' and 'religion', to name just a few concepts regularly used in historical writing, acquire changed meanings once that evidence is taken into account.<sup>3</sup> At the *level of general analysis* the 'big stories' of, say, the making of western European Christianity, conversion in nineteenth-century Africa, or nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'industrialisations' and modern politics are also transformed once due attention is given to the gendered character of production, governance, or culture.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, from an early stage in its development, work in women's history has challenged the underpinning structures and intellectual tools of modern historical practice, including basic assumptions about periodisation and organising concepts, and continues to do so. The arguments of Kelly on notions of a 'Renaissance', and Walby on patriarchy, or of Clark on the history of Christianity and Anagol on Indian history illustrate the challenges and contributions.

Beyond these three levels, the work of scholars aware of women and gender in a range of disciplines has generated concepts and theoretical insights with potential to transform the whole field of historical practice. These include analyses of patriarchies and sexualities as conceptual categories useful to historians as well as socio-political structures which have shaped human existence in different times and cultures, the conceptualisation of men as gendered subjects, and the development of queer and postcolonial theory. Deconstructive strategies for approaching material from various periods and places, alongside woman-centred critiques of categories like 'experience' challenge many of the assumptions behind conventional social and political history.<sup>5</sup> Like Karen Offen, I do not regard the development of 'gender' as a category or question for historical analysis as diminishing the need for, and relevance of, the question or category 'women.' Rather, I would suggest that (1) women's history has provided the conceptual and empirical stimulus for the relational approach from which gender theory has emerged, and (2) since that emergence the two ideas have had a fruitful if fraught relationship. It is important to note here how Anglophone historians of women have *initiated* important theoretical and conceptual developments in social and cultural theory rather than just responding to, or adapting, existing thinking. Bradford's studies of gender, race, and capitalism in South Africa, or Sinha's development of the notion of 'imperial social formation', like Najmabadi's work on modernity and hetero-normativity in Iran, exemplify innovative conceptual/theoretical work on the past solidly grounded in women's and gender history.<sup>6</sup>

It can thus be argued that the achievements of women's history range from the production of important studies of specific situations in the past, to the enhancement of historians' conceptual and methodological toolkits, and the creation of new analytical and theoretical frameworks.

Turning to the second question, I would suggest that what has *not* been achieved is the mainstreaming of either the empirical or the conceptual and methodological contributions made by women's history to historical scholarship over the last few decades. It is certainly possible to identify the impact of work in women's history through citations of that work, and through more frequent reference to women as part of the past which historians investigate. It is less easy to argue that the mindset or practices of historians in general have been significantly modified, or that women's history has a normal or guaranteed place in history curricula, or in general and survey texts on the history of particular periods, places or themes. Returning to the three levels used earlier to evaluate the impact of women's history, practitioners have been willing to acknowledge the recuperative work of women's history but have proven far more resistant to the conceptual and analytical implications of that work for *all* historical narratives and interpretations. Insofar as it is recognised, women's history is most often treated as an acceptable specific specialist field or interest for those historians who choose to pursue it, rather than as a *constitutive element within historical practice* which ought to inform *any* investigation or interpretation of the past. Insofar as that is not the case, it is more likely that women's role in any past society will get some degree of rather unspecific recognition from those who identify as 'social historians', and from some cultural historians. Mainstream economic histories are still unlikely to incorporate analyses of the care and maintenance work done mainly by women in families and households in their approaches to the history of work and production, commerce and consumption.

Much historical scholarship dealing with government, 'high politics', or political movements, has not found it necessary even to consider the forms and perceptions of women's inclusion or exclusion from these areas, let alone foreground it. Indeed, one eminent historian of modern Iran, himself the author of insightful analyses of the social bases of political change there, reacted publicly and angrily to suggestions that women could and should be incorporated within such analyses, arguing that attempts to do so collapse into mere social description.<sup>7</sup> Practitioners in the field of intellectual history have been similarly reluctant to give due attention either to issues of women and gender or to women's roles as intellectuals in the past. Turning to an area in which I work, despite the leading edge scholarship on women and empire, mainstream histories and conceptualisations of empire are still written without incorporating consideration of women's involvement either as colonial subjects, or as agents of colonial power.<sup>8</sup>

It would be useful to undertake thorough research into possible explanations for the disparity between the manifest quantity and quality of work in women's history and the limited extent of its acknowledgement, let alone use, in the wider domains of historical practice. There are interesting paradoxes to consider here, since there are obvious tensions between the aspiration to integrate women's history at the core of *all* historical practice and the aspiration to ensure full recognition and analysis of the particularities of women's activities and experiences in past societies. To make particular people or issues visible is of course to identify them as specific topics for historical research, writing or teaching, and hence to separate them out for such purposes. Nonetheless it is important

to make the case that one important use for such separate historical studies of women should be to inform the overall perspectives taken by historians on, say, sixteenth-century Ottoman religion, twentieth-century Italian political movements, medieval urban life, or ancient Roman slavery. Historical practice as a whole benefits most when there are practitioners who investigate and interpret women's past lives and activities as a distinctive field, and when their work is properly recognised by other practitioners in the shaping of their own particular projects and interests. The real mark of healthy influence is when there are historical conversations both among those who work on women's history (now a rich historiography) and also between such practitioners and those who take other approaches to the past (still a very limited historiography). Whether in the form of proper consideration of women's history in work centred on other themes, or the appearance of articles on women's history in journals other than those which specialise in that field, such crossovers and conversations are to be encouraged.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the third question, I would argue that the heat and dust raised by the controversies which posed 'women's history' *against* 'gender history' a decade ago has now died down somewhat, and that this is a good thing. After critical reactions to the possibility that 'gender history' might once more conceal women whose lives and activities practitioners of women's history have made so much effort to make visible, explore and explain, more considered reflection suggests that the two approaches can be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive alternatives. The growth of historical scholarship which deals with men as gendered persons has become possible largely as a result of woman-centred, feminist, and queer research and theory that explore and conceptualise gender and sexuality as *constitutive elements* of human societies past and present. More specifically, one of the strengths of women's history is that it both identifies the differences and specificities of women's past lives and activities, and positions such specificities in relation to the lives and activities of men. Indeed it might be said that the very notion of 'difference' entails specifically *relational* uses of the category 'women', just as the notion of women's historical agency entails consideration of their *interactions* with men. From the analysis of industrialisation and monarchy, to histories of religion or colonial masculinity, scholarship in women's history embodies this relational and interactive approach.

A few examples from recent Anglophone scholarship on various parts of the world will illustrate this point. Leslie Peirce's path-breaking study of the women of the Ottoman court in the early modern period considers the wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of Ottoman rulers as political actors, as cultural patrons and as dynastic players.<sup>10</sup> It analyses royal women's exercise of these roles and their powerful agency, positioning them in relation to male relatives and court or government officials, and analysing the specificities of their position within the Ottoman elite from that relational and interactive perspective. Mrinalini Sinha's elaboration of the concept of the 'imperial social formation', which has reconstituted studies of relationships between metropolises and colonies, is also underpinned by an emphasis on the distinctive and interactive roles of men and women within that formation.<sup>11</sup> She explores how the dynamics of empire are articulated through differences and intersections of race and gender created through the distinctive agency of men and women. Deborah Valenze's study of women and industrialisation in nineteenth-century England, like Davidoff and Hall's foundational work, advances the study of women by situating them *analytically as well as empirically* in families, classes

and communities shaped by difference and interdependence, as well as by women's distinctive experiences. Their works parallels that of Gullickson on France, Friedl on Iran, or Moitt on Antillean slavery and many more socio-political studies of women.<sup>12</sup> Shula Marks' analysis of relationships between a young Zulu woman, a female English Fabian educator and an African woman social worker in 1940s South Africa uses comparable strategies. It unpacks the gendered, classed and racialised interactions of these three women with one another and with the sphere of male-dominated medical and political authority, exploring the realities and limitations of their agency. Another example would be Catherine Hall's subtle and authoritative exploration of the dynamics of racialised colonialism, and gendered religious endeavour in relationships linking England and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

My comments quite consciously include illustrations taken from a range of very diverse societies, many of which have been part of the unequal global structures of material, political, and cultural power which have shaped the world since the sixteenth century. They are my point of entry into a discussion of the fourth question about the significance of recent developments in post-colonial, imperial and cross-cultural history for the practice of women's and gender history. As noted earlier, scholars like Sinha, Najmabadi, Kandiyoti and Mohanty have been the pioneers of path-breaking conceptual and methodological work in those fields, drawing on their work in women's history and reconfiguring the fields to which they contribute.<sup>14</sup> This work faces in two directions, challenging the ethnocentrism of some women's history while also interrogating the neglect of women in, and gender blindness of, much work on empire and race. For feminist practitioners of women's history who had focused on the disadvantaged, exploited, unequal and disempowered position of women in western Europe and North America it has been challenging to confront histories of white women's racial and colonial power and privilege. However, that confrontation has proved to be productive as well as challenging, as seen in the critical engagement of Boydston or Najmabadi with Joan Scott's canonical discussion of gender as a category of historical analysis, or the work of Fox-Genovese and Beckles on slavery.<sup>15</sup> Practitioners of women's history can draw on their experience of relational and interactive approaches to the category 'women', deployed since the 1980s to address the complex interactions of gender and class in women's lives, in order to be equally attentive to women's varied positioning in colonial and racial hierarchies. From Clare Midgely's interrogations of women and empire to Few and Socilow's work on Latin America, or Antoinette Burton's sophisticated studies of the British *raj* in India there is ample evidence of the capacity of women's history for creative adaptation to the challenge of ethnocentrism.<sup>16</sup> There is no cause to be complacent about this issue, since ethnocentrism is a comfort zone to which it is easy to retreat, but there is visible evidence of the possibility of change.

There have also been important developments in the discussion of concepts and methods to support work on specific topics. Although it can be argued that work on African-American women has privileged their racialised situation over that of other subordinated groups in the US, it has produced valuable empirical and theoretical insights relevant for historians of women in other gendered structures of colonial or racial subordination. In particular the development of the notion of intersectionality as an analytical tool, which originated in African-American feminist thought, has also been useful to scholars working on other societies, and on concepts or comparative studies of empire and



nation.<sup>17</sup> It allows scholars to research and analyse connections and tensions between different markers and relations of power and subordination without resorting to the construction of restrictive and un-illuminating hierarchies of oppression or exploitation. It aligns with studies of women in various African and Middle Eastern societies which analyse interactions between gender, status and age/lifecycle hierarchies, a topic also examined by a number of historians of medieval women. These hierarchies sustain relations of power and inequality whose presence significantly modifies ethnocentric western assumptions about the primacy of gender and class, and analyses of the operations of colonialism.<sup>18</sup> The notion of intersectionality allows practitioners of women's history to sidestep sterile arguments about the relative force of different unequal power relations without simply retreating into descriptive empiricism.

Developments in theory and method, which is a more contentious matter for those trained in historical practices than for those whose formation has been in the social sciences, is nonetheless vital if women's history is to sustain a cutting and growing edge. It becomes even more so in a context where practitioners of women's history cannot ignore critiques of ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism. Serious cross-cultural and comparative work in our field, which allows us a fuller appreciation of specificity, as well as enabling more meaningful discussion of common themes or patterns, needs the support of clear thinking about the concepts and methods which will be most relevant to that work. Knowing which ideas and analyses are 'good to think with' is an essential component of effective and discriminating women's history in the era of post-colonial thought and the recent 'provincialising' of histories of Europe **and** North America. In view of the marginalisation of women and gender perspectives in key texts on this theme, interventions which position those perspectives more centrally will be vital for the credibility of this scholarship.<sup>19</sup> It would diminish the potential for what could be a creative development in current historiography if older patterns of blindness and bias are replicated. For those historians who are wary of engagement with theory it is interesting to look at the arguments of Zillah Eisenstein for the notion of what she calls 'polyversality'.<sup>20</sup> While she undoubtedly develops a distinctive concept to aid the cross-cultural discussion of women, she grounds her work in reflections on actual history and politics, and on the need for general analyses of global patriarchies to incorporate understanding of the colonial past and on global socio-cultural diversity.

Discussion of the significance of the relevance of recent developments in imperial history and cross cultural comparison for women's history opens up the question of spaces, and networks, referred to by our final question. Imperial historians have developed an interest in the constitutive role within the imperial social formation of people's movements through 'imperial space' as migrants, missionaries, convicts, settlers and slaves, within which there is important specific work on female members of all these groups.<sup>21</sup> If women's history has gained by engaging with this strand in global history, it likewise has its own specific resources to offer to the making of spatial histories. One of the foundational areas in women's history has been recognition of the key role of spaces of all kinds in the construction of female/male relationships and differences. From critical engagement with Habermas's gender-blind conceptualisation of the public sphere (or space as it is named in French) to close studies of women in relation to household, community and other spaces, practitioners of women's history have done creative work in this area.<sup>22</sup> They have explored and analysed the spatial dynamics of women's roles in consumption,



in faith practices, in leisure and entertainment, and as cultural and intellectual practitioners in societies across the globe. This work has deepened our understanding of the gendered character of the making of, and movement through, space in different cultures and periods and of spatial aspects shaping the activities of women as performers, activists, philanthropists, sex workers, believers and authors or artists.<sup>23</sup> The recent special issue of the journal *Gender and History* on the theme of 'men at home', despite its title, reveals the importance of women's history in the development of spatial histories. Covering situations ranging from modern Iran to late medieval Italy by way of Mozambique and US plantation slavery, the articles in the issue demonstrate the contribution of women's history to histories of gender, space and socio-cultural change.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, one of the exciting and inspiring aspects of women's and gender history, in Anglophone scholarship and elsewhere, is its capacity to move between the dynamics of the intimate and biographical and those of the global and trans-national. The origins of these histories in strong awareness of various forms of female difference and agency has underpinned a powerful practice of studying the presence of the global in the household, of the familial in the imperial, and of the personal in political contexts small and large. Women's and gender history has also demonstrated the capacity to respond to the challenge of studying women across time and space by extending its conceptual and methodological as well as its empirical range. In the process practitioners in the field have become leading-edge conceptual and methodological contributors and innovators. While it is important to avoid complacency and to recognise the limitations and problematic aspects of our practice as historians of women and gender, we should have the confidence and the self-reflective perceptiveness to work constructively on our limitations and problems. It is on that basis that the practice of women's history can remain at the cutting edge.

## Notes

1. An interesting take on the experiences of that generation is provided by G. Eley (2005) *A Crooked Line: from cultural history to the history of society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), which gives serious consideration to the role of women's and gender history.
2. E.g. R. Lal (2005) *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); B. Bush (1990) *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650–1838* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); C. Bynum (1987) *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the significance of food to medieval women* (Berkeley: University of California Press); B. Hanawalt (1988) *Women and Work in Pre-industrial Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press); J. Scott & L. Tilly (1978) *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt Rinehart); L. Davidoff & C. Hall (1987) *Family Fortunes* (London: Hutchinson); I. Silverblatt, (1987) *Moon, Sun, and Witches: gender ideologies and class in Inca and colonial Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
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4. M. Erler & M. Kowaleski (Eds) (2003) *Gendering the Master Narrative: women and power in the middle ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); A. Shepard & G. Walker (Eds.) (2008) Gender, Change and Periodisation, *Gender and History*, 20 (3) pp. 453–462; K. Honeyman (2000) *Women, Gender, and Industrialization in England, 1700–1870* (London: Macmillan); S. Rose (1986) Gender at Work: sex, class and industrial capitalism, *History Workshop Journal*, 21 (1) pp. 113–132; K. Canning (1992) Gender and the Politics of Class Formation: rethinking German labor history, *American Historical Review*, 97(3), pp. 736–768; J. Scott (1988) *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press); J. Boydston (2008) Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis, *Gender and History*, 20 (3) pp. 558–583; S. Morgan (2005) Rethinking Religion in Gender History: theoretical & methodological reflections, in U. King & T. Beattie (Eds) *Gender, Religion and Diversity* (London: A&C Black), pp. 113–124; J de Groot & S. Morgan (2013) Beyond the 'Religious Turn'? Past, present and future perspectives in gender history, *Gender and History*, 25 (3), pp. 395–422; J. Kelly (1986) Did Women have a Renaissance?, in J. Kelly *Women, History, and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); P. Anagol (2008) Agency, Periodisation and Change in the Gender and Women's History of Colonial India, *Gender and History*, 20 (3), pp. 603–627.
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