

WOMEN'S HISTORY:

INNOVATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY EMPOWERING EQUALITY

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HIST501: Historiography

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Until the middle of the 20th century the history of one half of the human experience, Women's History, had been largely ignored so uncovering it required innovative methods and an interdisciplinary approach which led historiography to new ways of encountering the past and empowered changes in American society. With inspired tenacity historians, mostly women, located primary sources, filled in gaps by analyzing data and untangled the effects on women in traditional periods of history. The result was an enviable scholarship and greater societal equality. Women's history, however, was criticized by some for over-reaching with quantitative analysis and "unpatriotic" revisionism while others argued their subjects were too narrowly focused. For me, Women's History brought validation to my choice to be a full-time caregiving father. Histories written about women supported the argument in my first book, *Dads Behaving Dadly: 67 Truths, Tears and Triumphs of Modern Fatherhood*, that fathers had always been competent caregivers and my role as an at-home dad was not any more mystifying than my wife's role as a corporate executive.¹

Women's History began during the civil rights activism of the late 1960's when "...the 'second wave' of American feminism interacted with the burgeoning interest in social history to stimulate a rich array of scholarship proclaiming the importance of women's lives."² "For many,"

¹ Hogan Hilling and Al Watts, *Dads Behaving Dadly: 67 Truths, Tears and Triumphs of Modern Fatherhood* (Melbourne, FL: Motivational Press, 2014), 20-21.

² Gary J. Kornblith and Carol Lasser, "More than Great White Men: A Century of Scholarship on American Social History," *Magazine of History* 21, no. 2 (April 2007): 11, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/213727276?accountid=8289>.

John Pettegrew wrote in a retrospective of historian Linda Gordon's career, "women's history and the women's movement happened as one..."³

The goal was "remedying the absence of women from historical accounts."⁴ Women started by "taking the questions from our own activism and applying them to the past."⁵ However, to accomplish this required innovation and interdisciplinary thinking to locate primary sources, fill in any gaps with quantitative data and reimagine traditional views on periodization.

Historian Gerda Lerner, "the single most influential figure in the development of women's and gender history since the 1960's"⁶ was among the first to begin searching for primary sources no one believed existed. Most writing by women, it turned out, was archived under their husband's name. Researchers sifted through records on women's organizations, churches and other government documents that were scattered and illogically organized.⁷ Using an interdisciplinary approach, they found other documents such as employment records, newspaper articles, diaries and even fiction that provided valuable insight into the lives of women. "Not only did we show there were vast, and mostly unused, primary sources available virtually in

³ John Pettegrew, "From Radicalism to Perspectivalism: US Feminist History, 1970–2010, and the Example of Linda Gordon," *Journal of Women's History* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 132, accessed October 9, 2020, doi: <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy2.apus.edu/10.1353/jowh.2018.0006>.

⁴ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 367.

⁵ Anne Firor Scott, Sara M. (Sara Margaret) Evans, Susan K Cahn, and Elizabeth Faue, "Women's History in the New Millennium: A Conversation across Three "Generations": Part 2," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 213, accessed October 9, 2020, doi:10.1353/jowh.1999.0013.

⁶ Linda Gordon, "Gerda Lerner, 1920-2013," *Radical History Review*, no. 117 (October 2013):159, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://doi:10.1215/01636545-2210702>.

⁷ Gerda Lerner, *Living with History / Making Social Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 48, accessed October 7, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=454819#>

every major community in the United States,” Lerner wrote, “but we made these sources easily accessible.”⁸

Despite this treasure of primary sources, it was not always enough to get the fullest picture possible of the history of women. The emergence of the computer offered an opportunity to organize vast amounts of data such as demographics, voting trends and family structures allowing for a quantitative analysis.⁹ Armed with this data, women’s historians could fill in the gaps of knowledge about their subjects.

Examining history in traditionally established periods did not fit with the experiences historians were discovering about women. “[E]vents that further the historical development of men... have quite different, even opposite, effects on women.”¹⁰ This meant the very concept of periodization had to be wholly reexamined. Traditional periods of war, colonization, and enlightenment, as examples, had to be viewed differently for all of humankind. “Treating women as the majority,” declared Lerner, “means that our awareness among women must permeate all our thinking.”¹¹

Women’s History also had a profound impact on the history profession. The scholarship of Women’s History exploded after the 1960’s. Whereas only 13 books were published on Women’s

⁸ Gerda Lerner, *Living with History / Making Social Change*, 49.

⁹ Michael Bentley and M. Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 132, accessed October 8, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=235279>

¹⁰ Joan Kelly, *Women, History & Theory: the Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19, accessed October 8, 2020, EPUB, <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy1.apus.edu/2027/heb.02073>.

¹¹ Gerda Lerner, "U.S. WOMEN'S HISTORY: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (2004): 24, accessed October 9, 2020, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy2.apus.edu/10.1353/jowh.2004.0084>.

History up to 1960, there were 150 books published between the three years of 1998 and 2000 alone.¹² According to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, the percentage of women earning master's degrees in history in 1966 was 28% but grew to nearly 50% by 2014. Similarly, the number of Doctoral degrees in history rose from 12% earned by women in 1966 to 43% in 2014.¹³

Historians and the work they did was not all that Women's History transformed. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, women made up nearly half (47%) of the total U.S. workforce in 2016 compared to hovering above a quarter (29%) in 1948.¹⁴ Income equality also improved. In 1979, women earned approximately 62% of what men earned, improving to 81% in 2018,¹⁵ still a long way to go. The division of labor in households shifted with more women in the workforce earning better wages. According to a 2011 report from the U.S. Census, 32% of fathers with children under 15 whose wife worked were the primary caregiver of their children, up from 26% a decade earlier.¹⁶

¹² Lerner, "U.S. Women's History," 12.

¹³ "Gender Distribution of Degrees in History," American Academy of Arts & Sciences, accessed October 9, 2020, <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/gender-distribution-degrees-history>.

¹⁴ "Women in the Labor Force: Civilian Labor Force By Sex," U.S. Department of Labor, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/facts-over-time/women-in-the-labor-force#civilian-labor-force-by-sex>

¹⁵ "Earnings and Ratios: Gender Earnings Ratios by Weekly Earnings," U.S. Department of Labor, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/facts-over-time/earnings-and-earnings-ratios#gender-earnings-ratio-by-weekly-earnings>.

¹⁶ "One-Third of Fathers with Working Wives Regularly Care for Their Children," U. S. Census Bureau, released December 5, 2011, accessed October 12, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/children/cb11-198.html>

Despite the advancements in historiography, Women's History had its critics. Most glaringly was on quantitative analysis. While offering historians an opportunity to generalize large social groups, quantitative analysis was vulnerable to multiple interpretations. The book *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* by Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, as one example, "stumbled very badly" when it drew broad generalizations about slavery based on very limited economic data.¹⁷

Revisionism also brought backlash. Some accused Women's History of inflating the contributions of women to create social change rather than present an unbiased portrait of the past. They feared America's achievements would be diminished and "undermine young people's patriotic pride."¹⁸

Further criticism found Women's History was too narrowly focused in breadth and scope. Topics such as race and ethnicity in Women's History had been growing but class, occupation, family life and pre-20th century women were almost entirely ignored by scholarship up to the year 2000.¹⁹ Other critics charged the scope of Women's History should expand to gender history which was "more democratic"²⁰ declaring "it immediately removes the taint of bias."²¹

¹⁷ Laurence Veysey, "The 'New' Social History In The Context of American Historical Writing," *Reviews in American History* 7, No. 1 (March 1979): 8, accessed October 6, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2700953>.

¹⁸ Kornblith and Lasser, "More than Great White Men," 11-12.

¹⁹ Lerner, "U.S. Women's History," 20-21

²⁰ Bonnie G. Smith, "Women's History: A Retrospective from the United States," *Signs* 35, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 734, accessed October 9, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/648517>.

²¹ Alice Kessler-Harris, "Do We Still Need Women's History?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 14 (December 7, 2007):3, accessed October 9, 2020, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/214647611?accountid=8289>.

Comparative analysis between men and women in gender history, they argued, could explore the tension between genders better than focusing on women alone.

Despite these vocal drawbacks, Women's History made a profound impact on many, including me. When I first left my career in 2002 to care for our children, I felt alone, awkward. Finding other at-home dads built my confidence and women championing equality inspired me. I began to advocate for involved fatherhood because I could see how it allowed women more options. As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg explained, "Women will have achieved true equality when men share with them the responsibility of bringing up the next generation."²² Women's History backed up Ginsburg (and me). Joan Kelly wrote "'natural' division of labor" did not exist because "men as well as women care for children and perform household tasks" making "the sexual division of labor...increasingly irrational."²³ Lerner added in her two volumes on the universal history of women, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) and *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1993), nothing inherent about biology (other than birthing and breastfeeding) accounted for the "traditional" division of household labor.²⁴ I added my voice to the cause of women's equality by talking to men. "Now dads," I wrote, "have opportunities and choices they never had before, making modern fatherhood possible."²⁵

Few schools of historiography of the 20th century made as strikingly innovative and interdisciplinary methods for discovering history and shaping society than Women's History.

²² Ruth Bader Ginsburg, interviewed by Lynn Sherr, "A Conversation with Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg," Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg Distinguished Lecture on Women and the Law, November 15, 2000, on C-SPAN, video, 27:09, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?162787-1/conversation-justice-ginsburg>.

²³ Kelly, *Women, History & Theory*, 11, 14.

²⁴ Gordon, "Gerda Lerner, 1920-2013," 163-164.

²⁵ Hilling and Watts, *Dads Behaving Dadly*, 21

From creativity in finding primary sources and rethinking periods of history, to the works of scholarship and the nearing gender parity in the profession, to the ever-growing shift toward gender equality, Women's History has forever altered the course of the future and history. "What we have done," Lerner proclaimed, "has been empowering to women and has, in general, enriched historical knowledge."²⁶

²⁶ Lerner, "U.S. Women's History," 25.

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Basic Criteria for upper level written assignments	F	D	C	B	A	Indicate the Score/Rationale and Explanation of how the grade was determined	100 pts. or %
	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Adequate	Good	Superior		
Introduction and Thesis Statement Introduction contains clear thesis statement	No clear introduction or thesis statement in introduction	Introduction or Thesis statement of limited clarity	Introduction or Thesis statement mostly clear	Introduction establishes thesis clearly to topic	Introduction contains clear thesis and relevance	10 (10) Good.	10
Organization and Body of essay used to present evidence in research findings; length-required pages	Evidence of research not passable or logical in sequence	Quality and quantity of evidence limited; sequence weak	Quality and quantity of evidence limited; sequence weak	Good quantity and quality of evidence ; sequence mostly logical	Quality and quantity are sound; sequence logical	20 (30) Good.	20
Historical analysis Evidence to support thesis statement or argument made	Demonstrated analysis skills not passable	Limited recognition of historical significance	Adequate recognition of historical significance	Very good recognition of historical significance	Thorough and perceptive recognition of historical significance	30 (60) A first-class examination of women's history and its historical significance. A first-class paper.	30
Conclusion Concluding statement used to summarize research findings	Conclusion not present or not consistent with facts presented	Conclusion has limited connection to facts presented	Adequate conclusion ; consistent with some key facts	Good conclusion; consistent with most key facts	Sound conclusion; fully supportable	10 (70) Good.	10
Writing Style and Grammar Effective use of language and punctuation	Use of language not passable nor proper use of punctuation	Limited use of proper spelling, grammar and sentence structure	Adequate use of spelling; grammar and sentence structure weak at times	Spelling and grammar used well; sentence structure awkward	Spelling, grammar and sentence structure all used effectively	10 (80) Good.	10

Use of footnotes and bibliography to credit primary and secondary sources; correct use of Chicago (Turabian)	Sources not evident and not properly credited	Limited use of footnotes and bibliography to credit sources	Footnotes and bibliography used, sources adequate	Good sources used; all sources credited	Excellent sources used; all sources well credited	20 (100) Good.	20
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Overall Score: 100/100