

The “Missing” Element in Today’s Feminist Studies: The Long View of Women’s History

Women’s historians (including both women and men), most of whom would categorize themselves as feminist historians, are completely revising our picture of the past, not only for the United States but around the world. When I am asked to explain women’s history to people who hold a conventional idea of history, mostly the product of their earlier education, I provide the following capsule summary. This is not a sound-bite-length summary, but the subject is complex:

Women’s history encompasses the history of humankind, including men, but approaches it from a woman-centered perspective. It highlights women’s activities and ideas and asserts that their problems, issues, and accomplishments are just as central to the telling of the human story as are those of their brothers, husbands, and sons. It places the sociopolitical relations between the sexes, or gender, at the center of historical inquiry and questions female subordination. It examines the closely intertwined constructions of femininity and masculinity over time in one or more cultures, looking for evidence of continuities and changes. It also exposes and confronts the biases of earlier male-centered historiography, asking why certain subjects and choices of themes for study were favored over others and posing new questions for investigation. Women’s historians have expanded the scope of research on women and gender both temporally, from prehistory to the present, and geographically, from dealing only with the West to encompassing the globe.

Not only do we now know more about what women did and said in many diverse settings and periods, but we have also come to understand the ways in which various societies have constructed gender and the myriad ways in which it informs all societal organization. We have come to appreciate how these constructions work and how they are intertwined with class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, and other categories that mark the human condition.

The list of fascinating publications by feminist historians continues to expand week by week. At the college and university level, however, some lip service may be paid to women’s history—and to the history of feminisms (women’s political and intellectual history)—by feminist scholars in other fields of knowledge, but seemingly few of them actually take the time to read the proliferation of books and articles, encyclopedias, and documentaries that have appeared since the 1970s. Few works in women’s history are assigned in women’s studies programs that do not have one or several resident historians to offer a full menu of women’s history courses. What is worse, high-school students have virtually no exposure to this new knowledge unless their history teachers have already developed some expertise in the field. Such expertise can only be acquired through immersion.

When I speak about women’s history at women’s clubs and other public gatherings outside the university, the audience generally includes indignant women who exclaim: “This is so interesting! Why didn’t we learn about this in school?” or “I would have been much more interested in history if we could have learned about these women.”

Without exposure, even immersion, in women’s history, women—who have long constituted over 50% of the population—have no memory of their female forebears, no sense of heritage, no pride in their womanhood, to draw on. What is worse, many young women today don’t even understand why memory of women’s past should be important to them. Didn’t “women’s lib” start in the Year Zero, they say? Isn’t the

future all that counts?

Without knowing our past, without having “memory,” we do not have the tools we need for confronting the future. Without understanding how and why the subordination of women “works,” we continue to have difficulty unraveling its effects in the present or pushing back against those who object to women’s emancipation, who do not believe that “women’s rights are human rights.” Look at today’s headlines and you will see who our opponents are.

Reinventing the wheel, reopening the search for antecedents, is not an option. We must learn from the past and from the work of the wonderful scholars in women’s history. Amnesia, not lack of history, is feminism’s worst enemy today!

The past as reconfigured by women’s historians in the last forty years has much to teach us. Anyone who doubts this should consult the newsletters of the International Federation for Research in Women’s History, which are now all online at www.ifrwh.com. Feminist scholars in all fields should consult the women’s history journals: *Journal of Women’s History*, *Gender & History*, *Women’s History Review*, *Aspasia*, to mention only those that are published in English. It is easy to find out about the women’s history findings that are being produced around the globe. The American Historical Association also publishes a very helpful pamphlet series, which provides background and bibliography in a variety of fields in women’s and gender history. Websites and blogs abound and the knowledge they encompass is there for the taking.

For feminist scholars in other fields, as well as budding feminist historians, teachers, and parents—and for those who still say, “I’m not a feminist, but...”—I would highly recommend acquiring and consulting two indispensable reference works. The first is the four-volume *Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* (2008), edited by Bonnie G. Smith, and the second the two-volume *Feminist Writings from Ancient Times to the Modern World*, edited by Tiffany Wayne (Greenwood/ABC Clio, 2011). Let the adventure begin!

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