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## Title:

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'Gender: Key Concepts'

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## Chapter:

### Introduction

In her 1992 study of gender and class in nineteenth-century England, Sonya O. Rose defined gender as:  
a multi-faceted concept that refers simultaneously to the relations between women and men; to their relative positions in society; to ideas about what it means to be woman or man and the qualities of person that make one more or less womanly or more or less manly; to identity and subjectivity.  
(Rose 1992: 11)

The term gender, she clarified, referred simultaneously to "social positions, social relations, and ideas about people and to their ideas about themselves" (Rose 1992: 11). Most importantly, Rose also historicized gender. The attributes associated with gender distinctions, she pointed out, were relative to time and place and so were in a constant state of flux.

Gender history is based on the assumption that gender is a social and cultural construct that changes over time. Therefore, what it means to be defined as a man or a woman has a history. Gender historians investigate the differences between men and women, the nature of their relationships, and the nature of the relations among men and women as gendered beings as these change over time and across place. They are concerned with how differences and relations are historically constructed. They are also concerned with how gender has had an impact on significant events and processes in the past (Rose 2010).

Gender has a history, but history as a profession is also gendered. In *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, Bonnie Smith (2000) argued that the professionalization of history and the simultaneous modernizing of its scientific methodology, epistemology, practice, and writing has been closely tied to evolving definitions of masculinity and femininity. History was seen to be by and about men because, as a modern academic discipline, its onset coincided with the advent of the nation-state and the ideal of "separate spheres," which was intrinsic to middle-class gender ideology at the time. It came into being when only men were afforded the full rights of citizenship and accorded a place in the public sphere. Assigned to the seemingly inactive private sphere, women were seen to have performed no activities worth recording and had no access to academia.

This is not to say that women did not write histories. Rather, it is to claim that the histories they wrote centered on topics (women, social life, high and low culture) and genres that were beyond the scope of male-centered activities (economics, politics, business, and war). Women's histories were deemed "amateurish," "redundant," and "superficial" and were excluded from accounts of the development of the history profession (Smith 2000: 6). Smith contends that, from the 1970s, feminist historians may have wished for a reconceptualization of the discipline to reflect women's contributions. They may have hoped for an end to "fantasies of male historiographic parthenogenesis, of an exclusively male subject of historical truth, and of the importance of male-defined procedures and topics" (13). Some historians have suggested such a reconceptualization of the discipline. For example, Smith proposes incorporating women's "amateur" histories into mainstream historiography while historian of gender in Japan, Vera Mackie asks how periodization would be affected if historians focused on key matters affecting women's lives (Mackie 2017: 349). Others, such as Peter Novick (1988), have resisted gender considerations, claiming that these would politicize the field and therefore undermine the truth value of history.

While acknowledging the gendering of the profession, as well as subsequent attempts to regender it, this brief article focuses on how gender as a concept has been considered by those contributing to the modern historical profession.

### **Gender in History over Time**

Gender history arose out of women's history. When thinking about how and when the concept of gender became significant in history, it is necessary to understand how and why women's history developed over time to the point that the focus on sex was joined, if not replaced, by that on gender.

Before the 1970s and the women's movement, when women's history became a historical genre, there were women historians and histories of women. There were, for example, mini biographies of worthy women and, later, more substantial biographies of prominent figures, mostly religious or political luminaries. These histories were limited. As Natalie Zemon Davies pointed out in her groundbreaking 1976 essay, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," as useful and "hopeful" as the "women worthies" were, they "wrenched" female activities from their historical contexts. They looked at women in isolation from men and therefore said little about "the significance of sex roles in social life and historical change" (Zemon Davies 1976: 83). While the biographies of prominent women were significant because they acknowledged that women could be significant public actors in their own right, they were also limited because they did not prompt speculation on sex roles in society and they were not integrated into mainstream historiography (Zemon Davies 1976).

Women did feature in other wider histories. From the nineteenth century into the twentieth, social histories—for example those of the laboring poor or prostitution—included descriptions of women's activities, or the activities of men and women. However, histories at this time were almost exclusively focused on "the exercise and transmission of power in the realms of politics and economics," realms dominated by men (Rose 2010: ch. 1).

In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist historians initiated the sustained process of recovering women's histories. To do so, they studied the impact of sex—which was considered to be a “natural” or a biological category—on women's lives. Like Renate Bridenthal's and Claudia Koonz's 1977 book, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, these histories asked: how does being a “woman” shape a person's experiences? Historians of women began to discover that women were active as political and social reformers, and that their labor contributed to their households as well as to the economy more generally. One such example is Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* (1973), which explored the impact of capitalism on women's lives and women's participation in socialist and feminist politics. Feminist historians inserted women into histories of what were traditionally considered to be masculine realms, but they also challenged existing narrow definitions of power and politics by including people's private lives. For example, they demonstrated that topics that had previously been considered “natural” such as family violence, prostitution, and childbirth were in fact socially and culturally constructed. Feminist scholars argued that women had suffered disadvantages historically because of how gender had “patterned their social worlds” (Rose 2010: ch. 1). They reconceptualized social, economic, and political histories by inserting women's experiences into these.

As women's histories proliferated, some feminist scholars became concerned that histories of women were being produced in a way that isolated them from men's histories. They worried that this pattern would lead to a “ghettoization” or marginalization of feminist scholarship (Rose 2010: ch. 1). A number of US-based European historians, including Joan Kelly-Gadol and Natalie Zemon Davies, called for integrated work on women's and men's histories. Zemon Davies in her aforementioned 1976 essay asserted: “it seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus exclusively on peasants” (Zemon Davies 1976: 90). Gender history seemed to her to be the best means of achieving what she claimed was the aim of many women's historians, that is, to “make the relations between the sexes more just” (Zemon Davies 1976: 89).

This call to gender history was formalized with Joan Wallach Scott's theoretical intervention, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” published in the *American Historical Review* in 1986. Scott advocated conceptualizing gender in a theoretically rigorous manner to more effectively advance the field. She critiqued usage of the term “gender.” Previously, she wrote, “gender” was employed as a substitute for “women.” It was part of a strategy by feminist scholars to gain academic legitimacy. It was used to denote the “scholarly seriousness” of the work because the term “gender” was considered more neutral and objective than “women” (Scott 1986: 1056). “Women” named the aggrieved, thereby carrying with it a statement about inequality and a commentary on power. Gender was thought to be more in line with the scientific terminology of the social sciences and so it dissociated itself from “the (supposedly) strident politics of feminism” (1056).

The term “gender” could be used in other ways. It suggested that information about women was necessarily information about men; the study of one implied that study of the other. Used in this way,

“gender” rejected the utility of separate spheres as an interpretive framework and denied the legitimacy of biological explanations. Instead, this usage posited gender as a cultural construction, as a social category imposed on the body. This approach to gender revealed a history of the ways in which ideas about appropriate roles for men and women—men’s and women’s subjective identities—were socially and culturally constituted. Furthermore, as studies of sex and sexuality proliferated, “gender” offered historians a convenient means of differentiating sexual practice from the social roles assigned to women and men. The use of gender, Scott wrote, “emphasizes an entire system of relationships that may include sex, but is not directly determined by sex or directly determining of sex” (1986: 1057).

Scott’s article was considered contentious by some. Her invocation of poststructuralist theories about the instability of language or discourse—thereby rendering even the category of “woman” as an unstable social construct—left some feminists feeling that the means for creating a common ground for women on which to base their feminist politics was weakened. Overall, her proposition that gender was a primary way of signifying relationships of power, that it was a critical means by which power is expressed or legitimated, had an enormous impact on historiography.

## **Interpretations**

Gender as a concept is constantly in a state of flux. It has, therefore, invited multiple, sometimes competing, interpretations. This final section of the article surveys some of these.

Scott’s conceptualization of gender as a purely cultural construction has been contested on numerous grounds since it emerged in the 1980s. These critiques have, in part, centered on gender’s perceived relationship with the individual’s physical body and their interiority.

In the 1980s, Scott’s definition of gender as a social category imposed on a sexed body appealed to many historians who were keen to assert the difference between “cultural” gender and “biological” sex. This binary—male and female, masculine and feminine—was reflected in real-life developments. For example, from the 1950s, some individuals who felt that they had been assigned the wrong sex at birth had access to surgical procedures which could change their sex. These gender-dysmorphic persons, as medical discourse categorized them, could become transsexuals. They could make their sexual identity fit their mental gender identity (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks 2004: 3). Such a sexual transformation conformed to a binary understanding of sex and gender: male and female, masculine and feminine.

Since the 1980s, this straightforward dichotomous view of sex and gender has been challenged. A first challenge came from black women historians in places such as the UK, USA, and Netherlands. There, debates raged about the dominance of white perspectives on women’s history. American feminist theorist bell hooks’s early works, including *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), encapsulated the essence of these debates. hooks argued that mainstream white feminists only theorized about the oppression they experienced by virtue of their sex. In doing so, they failed to acknowledge that other women, for example, nonwhite women, were subject to multiple interlocking categories of oppression. For some women, the experience of being a woman was

intrinsically shaped by other factors, including race and class. These layers of oppression were inseparable. Through their work, theorists such as hooks preempted African American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's coining of the term, "intersectionality" (1989); a related concept which has had significant impact on feminist theorizing since (discussed later).

Another challenge to the dichotomous view of sex and gender was when people began to describe themselves as transgendered. They were neither male nor female, or both male and female. They resisted modern society's efforts to limit the possibilities to two. Whether transsexual and transgendered, subscribing to two possibilities or more, people have challenged society to think more critically about the usefulness and relevancy of the terms "women" and "men" as they highlight the mutability and fluidity of these categories (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks 2004: 3–4). This challenge has had an impact on many academic disciplines, history included.

Scott's theory that gender was purely a socially constructed category has also run into more recent claims about emotional and lived experiences as also constituting gender. For example, in his essay "Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History" (2005), Michael Roper argued that by excluding lived experience, emotional relationships with others, and conscious and unconscious processes by which the self both monitored and managed emotional impulses, Scott had omitted crucial aspects of gendered existences. Scott's model, Roper contended, was deficient because it made an analysis of subjectivity impossible given that it was too focused on gender as discursively and culturally constituted.

Given that it was inspired by developments in women's history, gender as a subject of historical analysis has also been critiqued as being too centered on women. Since the 1990s, however, research into masculinities has increased alongside that on femininities. For example, as studies of women and colonization grew—whether studies of white women's involvement in colonizing processes or colonized women's experiences such as those by Claire Midgley (1998) and Antoinette Burton (1994)—so too did works investigating imperial and colonial masculinities. Some of these, such as John Tosh's *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2005) revealed how gender fundamentally shaped imperialism by exposing the degree to which gender anxieties "at home" shaped attitudes to the imperial project. Others, such as Nupur Chaudhuri's (1994) research into the relationship between white women and Bengali men servants, exposed how far gendered and racialized views intertwined to produce divergent understandings of imperial and colonial masculinity. Gender research enables us to rethink our understanding of the making of modern masculinities but also reframes or deepens our knowledge about global circulations and empire relations.

This focus on the global context has also manifested in other ways in the field of gender history. As early as the 1980s, Susan Bell and Karen Offen drew attention to the fact that discussions about issues pertinent to women never respected national boundaries. Issues such as human rights, pacifism, feminism, abolitionism, were global in nature. Ideas and campaigns traveled across borders. They connected people across regions. Bell and Offen (1983) were referring to Europe and arguably gender theorizations, such as those of Scott, have had more impact on studies emerging from the so-called West. However, this is

changing. Gender history is now a global field. Scholars such as Teresa Meade and Merry Wiesner-Hanks recognize that the field is uneven: “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” (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks 2004: 2). Placed side by side, these studies enable us to see how the field is developing and “assess the ways in which insights in one area can challenge received wisdom and standard generalizations in another” (2).

Indeed, the spread of gender history to “non-Western” sites has allowed scholars to further break down a dichotomous view of gender and to continue to transform gender studies. For example, historians and anthropologists are now discovering that some “non-Western” societies operated in ways that challenged colonizers’ gendered systems. In a number of societies, gender was not based on body parts or chromosomes. In some cases, gender was based on an individual’s relationship to reproduction. In such societies, adults were in one gendered group and children and the elderly in another. Gender then changed over the course of a lifetime (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks 2004: 3). Meade and Wiesner-Hanks cite examples of research into other gendered cultures including: Barbara Andaya’s work on the *bissu* of Southeast Asia who are evidence of a third gender; and, Deirdre Keenan’s research into “two-spirit people” among some Native American groups. These precolonial instances of non-dichotomous gender have challenged how scholars understand histories of gender. They also provide examples for those in contemporary society who are devoted to challenging “the standard schemata of binary sex and gender roles” (3).

Still, limitations remain. In 2014, gender sociologist Raewyn Connell asserted that most scholarly gender analysis remained “in the conceptual world of Marx, Foucault, de Beauvoir and Butler even when it is talking about sexuality in India, identity in Australia, migration in the Mediterranean or factories in Mexico” (Connell 2014: 553). Yet, the construction and workings of gender in colonial pasts, as well as postcolonial presents, were, she said, part of “a global political economy of knowledge” (553). Colonizing regimes attempted to impose sexual and gender “norms” on colonized subjects, but they also used the colonized world as the “raw material for metropolitan feminist debates about the origin of the family, patriarchy, the gender division of labour, the Oedipus complex, third genders, male violence and war, marriage and kinship, gender symbolism—and now, of course, globalization” (553). Colonizer-colonized gender exchanges have had significant ramifications for postcolonial gender politics. For example, as Connell points out, powerful men in postcolonial regimes can, and do, fend off demands for gender equality by attacking feminism as a neocolonial incursion (555).

## **Conclusion**

The fluidity of conceptualizations of gender and ongoing efforts to uncover new histories of gendered relations means that there are numerous future possibilities for the field of gender history. More investment into intersectional frameworks is one such possibility. Since the highly publicized 2016 Hillary Rodham Clinton US presidential campaign, Clinton’s subsequent defeat, and the global phenomenon of the Women’s Marches (approximately five million people in 673 marches across 81 countries in January 2017), the

concept of intersectionality has featured heavily in feminist historical discourse. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and related to bell hooks's conceptualization of interlocking oppressions, intersectionality posited that an individual did not simply exist as a "woman" or a "man," or other gendered identity. Rather, identities were positioned in the intersections of different categories such as gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, and these intersectional dynamics were subject to change, according to situation and across time. Gender was but one layer of privilege or disadvantage. The Women's Marches produced a euphoric "sisterhood is global" moment, but they also exposed the ongoing disparity between the status and positioning of women and other minorities, nationally, internationally, and transnationally. Gender was a crucial aspect shaping people's experiences in the past, but it was not the only one and in some situations (arguably slavery, for example) it was not the most important.

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