

REPORT ON THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF WOMEN

Executive Summary

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The report consists of a brief literature review on women's history at an international and national level. The study was conducted within the framework of the project "Women's History Archive – Cyprus Library Online for Gender" which is implemented by the Promitheas Research Institute in cooperation with the Center for Gender Equality and History, and the University of Cyprus. Considering that the project refers to the establishment and preservation of an archive covering women's history in Cyprus during 1878-1960, and having in mind that this archive is the first coherent effort toward a systematic data collection, gathering and organizing of historical material on the contemporary socio-political history of Cypriot women, the ultimate purpose of the report was to place the archival project into a wider theoretical and historical context.

In any case, whether one refers to building an archive specialized on the history of Cypriot women, or to conducting a study on the relevant literature, such as this one, the first question to be raised should be what is women's history. If it seems obvious, namely that women's history refers to the study of the presence and activity of women as historical subjects, the questions deriving from this answer—which are not so obvious—refer to how, when and why has women's history developed as a separate discipline with its own history and bibliography. In other words, why does one speak of a distinct history of women? Is there such a thing as a distinct history of men?

The first part of the report—titled "Women's History: The Origins"—examines precisely the above questions, by looking at the history of women's history, and of gender history, as disciplines. In other words, the report initially enlists some of the most important milestones in the development of women's history, starting from the way social movements, such as women's social, political, and labour rights movements, along with intellectual movements, such as the development of social history, operated as preconditions for the emergence and establishment of women's history as a separate discipline of historiography. At this point, the focus lies on the USA and Britain, and secondly on central Europe, because of the rich tradition of these regions regarding women's history at an academic level; a tradition that shaped to a great extent the field of women's history in the rest of the world.

More particularly, the report starts from a turn toward the academic study of women's history which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s in countries such as the USA, Britain and France; a turn that shaped

the development of women's history as a discipline. In an overview of the first courses and the first academic publications on women's history, the first part of the report discusses some of the key assumptions and methodological debates within the relevant discipline. For example, women's history claimed the existence of women as historical subjects with their own collective memory, past, and identity, while it also claimed the social and changeable qualities of gender relations, as opposed to the perspectives of the mainstream historiography which presented those relations as "natural" and unalterable. Furthermore, one of the main positions of women's history that emerged as a realization was that official historiography abounded with references to "great" men, generals, philosophers, politicians and scientists, but included minor references to "great" women. Even less, or completely non-existent, were the references to the majority or the "ordinary" women.

In this context, women's historians understood that what was perceived as history of nations or history of humanity was in fact a male-centered version of history which was legitimized as "universal truth". Nevertheless, although women's absence from the mainstream historiography as well as the importance of this absence had a central place within the relevant literature, the historians of the discipline realized quite soon that the problem was not a problem of women not having a history, but rather, that the data and the sources referring to women were systematically ignored as historically irrelevant and not worthy of reference. This led to one more presumption of women's history as discipline, namely that the process of writing history and producing historical knowledge wasn't so "neutral" after all since it was to a great extent the reflection of power relations.

Although the 1970s were marked by the systematic detection, reappraisal and gathering of relevant material and bibliography on women's history, the 1980s, 1990s, and after, were marked by the enrichment and broadening of the discipline with critical perspectives and new subjects. On the one hand, the entering of new subjects such as black women, homosexual women, and women of other nations and regions beyond the American and European paradigm, questioned the one-sided understanding of "women" as an analytical category, whereas the dialogue between women's history and a variety of historical disciplines and philosophical movements led to the development of gender history. The latter is a wide term referring to the relations between genders, the history of gender as a historical construction, the history of masculinity and femininity, the expectations and the norms of past societies regarding gender, the way gender hierarchies and power relations were formed etc.

As a result, the first part of the report concludes by claiming that women's history has not only provided the world with a range of historical sources and analyses on women's past, but it also worked

as the precondition for the emergence of gender history in general, and the history of men and masculinity in particular. The case of Cyprus, however, continues to lack the essential steps toward the development of a scientific historiography on women's and gender history. This is the focus of the second part of the report, titled "The Contemporary History of Women in Cyprus", which focuses on the local level, namely the development of modern and contemporary history of women and gender in Cypriot historiography.

In this context, the report observes that what dominates the mainstream historiography on Cyprus is mainly a stereotypical, male-centered narration from which women are either absent or presented in the margins of history. On the other hand, the studies specialized in women's modern and contemporary history are minimal. These observations are true for both the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot community. In other words, the development of women's studies and gender studies in Cyprus during the last decades seems not to have resulted in a dialogue with women's and gender history as a discipline, while traditional or mainstream historiography doesn't seem to be influenced by the lens of gender.

Nonetheless, as shown in the relevant report, over the past years, one can observe a small increase in the writings related to the contemporary history of Cypriot women. These efforts were either scientific efforts, coming from historians or scholars in the wider range of the humanities, or they came from amateurs linked to women's movement, who connected their activist background with an interest in women's history. Overall, the history of education and educated women as well as women's biographies were quite developed, in comparison to other subjects of women's history. Moreover, although they are not particularly specialised in women's history as such, there are a few studies—very few—that bring into light some aspects of women's history due to their engagement with wider subjects of social history.

Finally, the report results in some observations that are important within the context it was conducted, that is, for the building of an archive on the history of Cypriot women. Particularly, despite the lack of bibliography which would focus on the history of Cypriot women as such, it is quite obvious that the traces of women's history can be found in primary sources. There is a great number of archival material—e.g. periodicals, announcements, albums, testimonies, and private archives—to be studied in terms of women's history. Additionally, a bibliography which deals with the wider subject of social, political, and intellectual history of Cyprus, whether written by historians or coming from other disciplines—such as anthropology, ethnography, sociology—must be further scrutinized to detect unknown aspects of women's history.