

What is Women's History?

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Why Women's History?

- Grew out of feminism and feminist consciousness:
 - There is another story to be told
 - History can relate to power in the present
- To restore women to history and history to women is to empower women
 - with mythologies, stories, heroines, and strategies

What is Feminism?

- Simple definition:
- Women and men are inherently equal even while women and men are inherently different from each other
- Feminism is the commitment to creating a world in which a person's human rights and possibilities are not limited because of his or her gender (and in the larger sense, by any other element of identity – race, class, sexuality, etc.)

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **Compensatory History/Contribution History**
- **Separatist History**
- **“Women as Minority Group”**
- **“Women-centered” History**
- **Gender and Sex as Categories of Analysis**

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **Compensatory History/Contribution History**
 - 1960s
 - Find the missing women and document their contributions
 - “Great Woman approach”
 - “and women” approach

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **Separatist History**
 - Expressing anger over the erasure of women
 - All women are linked by being women
 - Write the history of female institutions to find how women “really are”
 - Focus on difference (and on exclusion)

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **“Women as Minority”**
 - Women are a subculture in society
 - Inspired by ethnic studies, esp. African American historians' work
 - Women are an identifiable class and share the same experience

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **“Women-centered” history**
 - Re-imagine history through women's eyes
 - What would matter most to women?
 - Women's core experiences – being a daughter/sister/wife/mother – are all women's experiences
 - Focus on the lifecycle study

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **Gender and Sex as Categories of Analysis**
 - Differentiating between Gender and Sex (and sexuality)
 - Historical causation is complex
 - Draws from Feminist and Postmodernist Theory

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's History

- **Current Mode:**
 - Informed by Third Wave feminism
 - Does not assume sisterhood and equality within gender
 - Confronts the political uses of history directly
 - Acknowledges victimization but rejects the identity of “victim”
 - Focuses on strategies of resistance and survival (“agency”)

Issues and focal points

- **“Separate Spheres”**
 - Public and Private
 - Is the Public “male” and the Private “female”?
 - If so, why?

Issues and focal points

- **Female Oppression and Female Agency**
 - To what extent are women victims of oppression at the hands of men (or patriarchy)? To what extent are women free to shape their own lives?
 - Why do women themselves adopt (or internalize or even promote) their oppressors' arguments?

Issues and focal points

- Women's Culture
 - Does it exist?
 - Would female culture exist without patriarchy and exclusion?
 - What is the relation between female culture and gender consciousness?

Issues and focal points

- Gender Difference/Gender Equality
 - What are the differences between men and women?
 - Where do the differences come from? (nature/nurture, innate vs. learned)
 - Does inequality stem from difference?
 - Should the goal of feminism be to increase or decrease difference?

Issues and focal points

- Epistemological Issue of Women's History
 - If we are feminists, can we be "objective historians"?
 - What counts as knowledge and who gets to decide?
 - Is women's history only polemical?

Why does women's history matter?

- For history as a field of study
 - Challenges periodization and structures of history
 - Challenges accepted interpretations
 - All "invisible" things are important to historians
 - History is the art of uncovering the previously-invisible

Why does women's history matter?

- Women's history gives women power
 - Knowing your own history is power
 - Finding your own heroines is power
- Who doesn't have a history? What is the fate of the person without a history?

The Challenge of the Feminist Roots of Women's History

- The feminist movement has been dominated by white female experience
 - Be a woman first, and then be anything else after
 - Privileges gender over any other category like race, ethnicity, class, sexuality
 - But those things can be more important than gender in a lot of situations
 - Treats gender in an additive rather than a transformative way => (let me explain...)

Additive Identities



Additive vs. Transformative Identities

- Additive:
 - “pop-bead”
 - female + Black (Rosa Parks) = female (Emma Goldman) + Black (Martin Luther King)
- Transformative:
 - Rosa Parks is differently a woman from Emma Goldman and differently Black from Martin Luther King.

So... what IS Women's History?

- The lives that women have lived
- The variations in women's experiences
- The commonalities in women's experiences
- The challenges women have faced and overcome (and how they did so)
- The challenges that continue to confront women today