

TOWARDS GENDER HISTORY

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The main theme of this issue is gender history, which in Polish is also referred to as history from the perspective of gender (*historia (w perspektywie) płci*)¹ or the history of gender (*historia rodzaju*)². The plurality of Polish terms reflects not only the problem with the linguistic accuracy of the translation of the English original, but also the coexistence of paradigms, intellectual traditions, and disciplines which is a characteristic of these studies. The past seen from the perspective of gender is the subject of interest for both female and male representatives of almost all disciplines and trends in the contemporary humanities and social sciences, as well as in feminist circles searching for the historical roots and the legitimisation of anti-discrimination movements. Polish studies on the history of women go back to the early 1990^s. This was when Anna Żarnowska made an attempt to create and consolidate a milieu of male and female historians interested in studying the history of women in various contexts: political and social history, the history of education, high culture, professional aspirations, everyday life, customs, or the women's movement, to name just the main fields of studies. What was supposed to differentiate the modern history of women from earlier research was the question about the importance of cultural and historical gender and about the dynamics of the cultural gender order, that is

¹ J. Górny, *Historia kobieca czy historia płci? Badania Karin Hausen nad dziejami porządku płci*, „Porównania”, 2011, vol. 8, no 8, pp. 61–72; M. van Tilburg, *Historia kobiet czy historia „gender”? Poststrukturalistyczne inspiracje w badaniach nad dziejami płci*, transl. E. Domańska, „Historyka: Studia Metodologiczne”, 2000, vol. 30, pp. 27–37.

² Vide: E. Pakszys, *Między naturą a kulturą: kategoria płci/rodzaju w poznaniu. Studium epistemologii naturalizowanej w perspektywie feministycznej*, Poznań 2000; I. Löwy, *Okowy rodzaju. Męskość – kobiecość – nierówność*, transl. M. Solarzka, K. Polasik-Wrzosek with M. Borowicz, Bydgoszcz 2012.

a departure from the essentialist interpretation based on the assumption of a biological determination of the difference between women and men³.

The result of the studies which have been conducted for over twenty years are the collective monographs (which are now canonical) known under the common title *The Woman and...*, which can be regarded as the first attempt to present a synthetic history of women in the 19th and 20th centuries⁴. The evolution of the titles over the nine volumes is revealing; they placed the history of women in the successive contexts of: society, politics, education, culture, work, free time, family and marriage, and finally the sexual revolution, covering all the main areas of the history of women, which has been developing very dynamically over the last twenty-five years⁵, as reflected in the growing number of publications, conferences, and research projects.

However, the influence of the findings of the history of women on the main trends in Polish historiography, which is dominated by the traditionally understood issues of the political history of the state and nation, remains small and virtually limited to the area of social and cultural history. The ghettoisation of the history of women, which is a phenomenon we are still dealing with in Polish studies, largely results from historians' distrust towards studies which are seen mainly in ideological categories⁶. However, a characteristic feature of the early stage in the development of a discipline is that it is both male and female researchers who identify the history of women with gender history. Regardless of the opinions of critics, the identification of gender history and the history of women seems to be an inevitable phase of the discipline's development. This identification, let us add, is made by female and male historians of the subject for whom the main research priority is to expand fact-based knowledge and filling the gaps in the knowledge of women's past; whereas a critical reflection on historiographical interpretation, including the consequences of not only a lack

³ M. Solarska, *S/przeciw-historia: wymiar krytyczny historii kobiet*, Bydgoszcz 2011.

⁴ M. Nietyksza, *Profesor Anna Żarnowska – Główne nurty badań*, [in:] A. Żarnowska, *Kobieta i rodzina w przestrzeni wielkomiejskiej na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku*, ed. A. Janiak-Jasińska, K. Sierakowska, A. Szwarc, Warszawa 2013, pp. IX–XX.

⁵ On the subject of the condition of Polish studies and the future of the history of women, vide: *Dzieje kobiet w Polsce. Dyskusja wokół przyszłej syntezy*, ed. K.A. Makowski, Poznań 2014.

⁶ A quick review of opinions expressed by various historians on the subject of the history of women, feminist criticism, and the category of gender leads to the conclusion that accusations of an ideologisation of studies and violation of the principles of objectivism are based on *a priori* judgements conditioned by their worldview rather than on a knowledge of the methodological and empirical achievements of the discipline.

of women, but also the consequences of referring to biological determinism as an explanans in studies on the history of women, comes second, if at all.

The next stage of the development consists in transforming the history of women into gender history, which includes an expansion of the research area, but mainly involves the use of analytical categories such as cultural gender, heteronorm, or biopolitics, leading to new historical interpretations which also cover the issues of politics, society, ideas, mentality, sexuality, everyday practices, and mainly the relations of power. From this perspective, gender history becomes an internally diverse area, despite the dominant position of studies on the history of women and groups defined by their gender and sexuality. It is as a result of this re-conceptualisation that academic history has grown accustomed both to the category of gender (which, alongside class and race, is considered a classical analytical tool today) and to history oriented to studying phenomena from the perspective of cultural gender⁷.

Gender history defined in this way is not present in Poland yet⁸. The change of the status of gender studies in the global historical discourse occurred roughly at the same time when the foundations of the Polish history of women in its present modernist form were being built. Considering the local specificity of the development of historical studies in Central and Eastern Europe, which are characterised by a distrust of both theoretical reflections and open political declarations, it should not be surprising that it is still a long way before Polish gender history forms and develops. The specificity of Polish studies consists in a clear separateness (paradigmatic and epistemological) of historical and feminist studies, which bring competing, far from complementary, conceptualisations of the past;⁹ this, incidentally, is true not only for gender history.

Resolving the deadlock which leads to the ghettoisation of the history of women is a project which requires leaving behind the paradigms dominating historiography, performing basic studies in the spirit of non-classical historiography, and turning to interdisciplinary research projects, as well as using the category of gender as a tool for interpreting classical historical themes and problems. The latter include studies on the influence of changes in the methods of defining cultural gender, heteronorm, sexuality, etc. on the social roles, strategies, and activities of men; examining the gender order in the context of

⁷ E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne*, Poznań 2006, p. 18.

⁸ S. Markowska-Kuźma, *Why there is no gender history in Poland?*, „Dialogue & Universalism”, 2010, no 5–6, pp. 9–18.

⁹ D. Kałwa, *Historia kobiet versus studia gender – o potrzebie interdyscyplinarnego dialogu*, [in:] *Historia – dziś. Teoretyczne problemy wiedzy o przeszłości*, ed. E. Domańska, R. Stobiecki, T. Wiślicz, Kraków 2014, pp. 115–125.

other categories defining an individual's social place; using the construct of gender, especially the binary opposition of male/female, in political discourses and practices, the history of social and political structures, life strategies, and normative networks built on the fundament of or in connection with the concepts of femininity and masculinity.

First attempts at a new problematisation of gender studies have already taken place, which is an optimistic prognosis of changes not so much in historiography as in the humanities, whose female and male representatives show an increasing need to revise history¹⁰.

The articles in this volume together form a specific, subjective, and unique summary of the development of the history of women, and at the same time a postulative vision of future gender history. The female authors invited to participate in this project, mainly historians, belong to various milieus and research traditions but have a common awareness of the fluidity of the boundaries between contemporary humanistic disciplines, of the need to ask questions which go beyond the catalogue of conventional historiography and research exploration, as a result of which peripheral topics transform into key and universal problems.

¹⁰ Revisionist interpretations of Poland's past are not a speciality of gender studies but a much broader phenomenon which requires a separate analysis.