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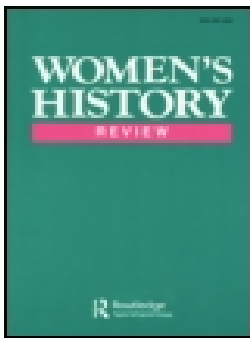
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INTRODUCTION



## Women's agency, activism and organisation



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### ABSTRACT

Agency, activism and organisation have been central and constant themes in women's and gender history. They provide useful lenses through which to study women's interaction with the social world. Both separately and in combination, they constitute a valuable analytical framework for the study of women's lives, culture and experience in past societies by foregrounding and articulating historical challenges made to patriarchy, social structure and the status quo. Agency highlights the individual action/social structure explanatory dichotomy whilst activism and organisation help focus on the specific ways in which women have challenged, resisted, overthrown or gained entrance to social structures and institutions that had tended to ignore, exclude, disadvantage or penalise them.

Agency, activism and organisation have been central and constant themes in women's and gender history. Both separately and in combination, they constitute a valuable analytical framework for the study of women's lives, culture and experience in past societies by foregrounding and articulating the historical challenges made to patriarchy, social structure and the status quo. The concept of agency provides a valuable approach to the theorisation of women's history since it highlights the individual action/social structure explanatory dichotomy, yet places emphasis on what Margaret Archer has called the 'primacy of practice' in interpretations of historical change and continuity.<sup>1</sup> The recovery of women's historical practice from obscurity formed an early and major strand in women's history scholarship, highlighting the ways in which women have been both 'partly formed by their sociality' yet have at the same time demonstrated 'the capacity partly to transform' the social structures in which they have lived.<sup>2</sup> This approach goes some way to providing a counter-balance to 'victimisation' models of women's history by focussing on narratives of resistance and challenge to, or subversion of, social norms. It allows women to be seen as 'instrumental agents of those forms of power that were potentially seen to determine them'.<sup>3</sup> Theorising agency in this way leads inevitably to a consideration of the specific ways in which women have organised themselves and have participated as activists to challenge, resist, overthrow or gain entrance to social structures and institutions that had tended to ignore, exclude, disadvantage or penalise them.

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In recent decades, as has been observed in the pages of this journal, the field of feminist historiography has taken multiple 'turns', dividing into potentially conflicting strands yet resulting in a richer and more complex body of scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Important questions continue to be asked about axes of social difference, challenging assumptions of women's homogeneity and placing an increasing focus on the intersections between multiple 'hierarchies of difference', including gender, race, class, sexuality and ethnicity. Intersectionality, as June Purvis has recently observed, provides a useful way of thinking about the 'multiple forms of simultaneous domination' experienced by women and by men in the past.<sup>5</sup> It consequently helps highlight the multiple ways in which agency, activism and organisation have been harnessed to confront and challenge those forms of domination. Thus women's history scholarship has opened up lines of enquiry beyond the recovery of narratives of (frequently) privileged women's achievement in changing society.

Nevertheless, agency, activism and organisation continue to provide useful lenses through which to study women's experience and interaction with the social world. Inspired by the centenary of the Women's Institute, which was being celebrated that year, the Women's History Network adopted this thematic framework as the organising structure for its 2015 Annual Conference held at the University of Kent in Canterbury. In thirty-six panels and three plenary lectures attended by over one hundred delegates, the conference explored the plethora of settings and arenas in which agency, activism and organisation have been explicit or implicit guiding principles in women's lives in a wide variety of geographical, temporal, political and other contexts. Many papers reflected the overlaps and intersections between the organising themes. This special issue of *Women's History Review*, based upon that conference, has brought together papers that explore these themes either separately or in combination, looking at the divergent ways in which women have demonstrated agency, been involved in activism and have organised themselves together to change their world.

As Sue Anderson-Faithful observes, individuals' agency has sometimes been realised through the dominance over or constraint of others. Using sociological theory to investigate the 'sites of prestige and power' inhabited by Mary Sumner, the founder of the Mothers' Union, the largest women's organisation in the Anglican Church, Anderson-Faithful uses Bourdieu's analytical categories of habitus, field and capital to scrutinise Sumner's negotiation of her own activism in the public arena in the context of the constraints of her social and cultural circumstances. Sumner's agency and activism are investigated in relation to her negotiation and appropriation of the social structures and institutions where power is invested. Thus this nuanced discussion demonstrates that individuals can be, at the same time, both empowered agents of, yet constrained by, the social structures they inhabit.

In contrast to Sumner's agency enacted in the public arena, Lucy Bland explores agency as demonstrated by women in personal and private contexts. Women's sexual agency has been a key strand in recent historical investigation and, as Kathryn Gleadle aptly reminded us in a retrospective in this journal some time ago, oral history methodologies have been used with success to restore narratives of women's sexual agency.<sup>6</sup> Bland exemplifies this point in her exploration of the racial prejudice targeted at women who conducted sexual liaisons with black American GIs in Britain during the Second World War. These women's agency was, as Bland demonstrates, not restricted to their defiance of contemporary

gendered sexual and racial taboos but was also expressed in their determination to raise the babies born as a result of the relationships themselves.

Women's reproductive lives and health are also at the heart of Jesse Olszynko-Gryn's investigation into the development of pregnancy testing services by feminist activists in 1970s Britain. In providing grass roots pregnancy testing as an alternative to the National Health Service provision, Olszynko-Gryn argues that feminist groups both empowered the women they served and 'demystified' medical procedures by 'domesticating' a process that had become the preserve of scientific laboratories and professional medicine. Yet, as the article argues, the most 'subversive' aspect of the service was not the testing itself but the woman-to-woman counselling and reliable information offered alongside it, which politicised the service and made it, according to Olszynko-Gryn, recognisably 'feminist' in contrast to the few available alternatives.

Moving from 1970s Britain to early twentieth-century Hungary, the politics of women's activism are also reflected in Judith Szapor's investigation of a 'momentous episode' in Hungarian history during the last months of the First World War. The Hungarian Women's Debating Club, which became closely associated with the suffrage movement, attracted members from an unprecedented breadth of political backgrounds, including previously apolitical aristocratic women. Many of the latter would later become involved in the counter-revolution. This, Szapor argues, may have accounted for the prominent role allocated to the club in the creation mythology of the right-wing National Association of Hungarian Women and the corresponding erasure from the club's record of the role played by liberal feminist, Rosika Schwimmer. Thus the shifting politics of women's activism, and the ways in which these are recorded—or not—in the historical record are key to this article.

The same potential tensions inherent in the relationship between some categories of women's organisation and wider feminist politics are also a focus of Catherine Bishop's analysis of the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women. The inter-war period, as Bishop shows, was characterised both by women's clubs and internationalism and many women became involved in transnational political movements. Tensions between those whose primary aim was political equality and those, such as the founder of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Lena Madelin Phillips, who believed that economic equality underpinned political equality, are revealed. At a time when 'maternal' feminist discourse was dominant, the campaign for women's careers and the stratagem of 'quiet diplomacy' that was adopted marks the organisation as non-radical in its brand of activism. As Bishop argues, the organisation trod a middle path between the 'motherhood rhetoric' of more conservative women's organisations, on the one hand, and any activity that might threaten the 'capitalist status quo', on the other.

The complexities of activism, together with international inter-war period perspectives, are likewise reflected in Jane Berney's investigation into the contribution of Stella Benson, novelist, to the campaigns against the state regulation of prostitution in inter-war Hong Kong. Like Mary Sumner, Benson made use of social and educational capital—networks and contacts—to negotiate her activism through her work with Hong Kong prostitutes yet she was similarly constrained by the restrictions of her own position—in this case as a professional married woman in a male-dominated and hierarchical colonial society. The potential damage that her campaigning might inflict on her husband's career (and thus her own livelihood) was a constant concern. Nevertheless, Benson's capacity for agency

contrasted starkly with that of the women she visited in the Hong Kong brothels whose position struck her as akin to slavery. Benson, Berney argues, despite the site of her activism being the other side of the world, was conscious of the achievement of women's 'citizenship' at home, which, she believed, entitled her to a voice and a platform.

Thus the analytical framework formed by the convergence of agency, activism and organisation allows interesting connections and contrasts to be made between the articles and the approaches taken by the authors. The relationship between small-scale or local activism and organisation and wider feminist politics is a common theme. In some cases, as for the Hungarian Women's Debating Club and the Business and Professional Women's clubs, this was a potentially ambiguous relationship and site of tension. In others, the achievements of first- and second-wave feminism appear to have provided activists and organisations with practical support and/or moral authority, forging important links between small-scale historical investigations and their wider political contexts. Women's individual agency has been shown to have often been a matter of negotiation with, and subversion of, the constraints of class, gender and other social constructs that mediate, but do not necessarily ultimately determine, access to authority and power. Women's sexual agency is demonstrated not only to be a point of significant intersection between the private and the public but also a site where broader social, political and professional powers have been contested. Thus women's agency, activism and organisation are always—explicitly or implicitly—political.

## Notes

1. Margaret Archer (2000) *Being Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 8.
2. Margaret Archer (2002) Realism and the Problem of Agency, *Alethia*, 5(1), p. 11.
3. Amanda Anderson (2000) The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency: feminist histories and the horizon of modernity, *Victorian Studies*, 43(1), p. 46.
4. Sue Morgan (2009) Theorising Feminist History: a thirty-year retrospective, *Women's History Review*, 18(3), pp. 381–407.
5. June Purvis (2018) 'A Glass Half Full?' Women's History in the UK, *Women's History Review*, 27(1), p. EN 51.
6. Kathryn Gleadle (2013) The Imagined Communities of Women's History: current debates and emerging themes, a rhizomatic approach, *Women's History Review*, 22(4), p. 532.

## Notes on contributors

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