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CONFERENCE REPORT

Archiving, Recording and Representing Feminism: The Global  
History of Women's Emancipation in the Twentieth Century  
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*Archiving, Recording, and Representing Feminism: The Global History of Women's Emancipation in the Twentieth Century.* Second meeting of the International Standing Working Group on Medialization and Empowerment, held online, 10–12 December 2020. Conveners: Christina von Hodenberg and Jane Freeland (German Historical Institute London), alongside partners at the Max Weber Stiftung India Branch Office, the German Historical Institute Washington DC, the German Historical Institute Rome, and the Orient Institute Beirut.

Bringing together twenty-nine scholars from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America, this conference explored how processes of narrativization and the cataloguing of knowledge – whether in the media, the archive, or in historical practice – have shaped the development and understandings of women's emancipation. The conference was organized as part of the international research project 'Knowledge Unbound: Internationalization, Networking, Innovation in and by the Max Weber Stiftung', which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

The first panel asked how historians can work within and around archival spaces to recover the history of women's emancipation. Claudia Roesch (GHI Washington DC) examined the case of the German family planning association Pro Familia. Although the personal papers of Hans Harmsen, one of the co-founders of Pro Familia, can be found at the German Federal Archives in Koblenz, the records of the three other (female) co-founders have not been retained. Roesch argued that although this has resulted in a historiography dominated by Harmsen, by paying attention to the spaces and roles historically inhabited by women in organizations, historians can address this imbalance. Jane Freeland's paper examining the East German women's group the Weimar Women's Tea Parlour (Frauenteestube Weimar) similarly explored how the history of women's activism under socialism has been shaped by the Cold War, the trajectories of Western women's movements, and the memory politics of reunified Germany. In contrast, Freeland showed how focusing on women's

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'on-stage' and 'offstage' voices, their goals and political work, might help historians resist these normative forces.

The focus of the second panel was feminist archival practices, with four papers examining the strengths and limitations of visual and digital sources and methodologies for writing the history of women's activism. Maissan Hassan (Women and Memory Forum, Cairo) outlined the implementation of a feminist curatorial strategy where the creation of emotionally engaging narratives of women's work were prioritized over linear histories in an exhibition on Egyptian women's labour. As Hassan showed, this approach not only helped to engage audiences with the struggles of women activists, but also drew attention to the everyday documents and objects that might otherwise be ignored by historians. Monica di Barbora (Istituto per la storia dell'età contemporanea, Milan) similarly critiqued the hesitancy among historians to take visual sources seriously, who instead prefer to use them as supporting evidence to written sources. Rachel Pierce (University of Borås), meanwhile, examined the use of historical visual sources in a digital context. Tracing how the metadata connected with images of Swedish women's rights activist Kerstin Hesselgren changes depending on the collection, Pierce demonstrated the way digital spaces can contribute to a decontextualization and de-radicalization of women's labour. D-M Withers (University of Sussex) focused on the value of business archives for a history of feminist knowledge production in twentieth-century Britain. Working within the archives of Virago Press, a key feminist publishing house formed in 1973, Withers was able to reconstruct the processes by which feminist ideas were formalized and organized over time. Till Grallert's (Orient Institute Beirut) comment centred on the role of the digital as a mediator between researcher and archive, and on the importance of digital literacy for the future of feminist archiving and research.

The first day ended with a keynote lecture by Durba Ghosh (Cornell University), who explored the tension between the need for social movements to create their own archives to preserve and legitimize their legacy, and how doing so can feed into normative historical narratives that erase the radical and diverse histories of women's political engagement. Following the historical traces of various activists over time, Ghosh argued that despite explicit attempts to fashion

their own political image, activists' legacies are often taken up in ways that affirm patriarchal, nationalist narratives. Moreover, she asked whether by attempting to make sense of the past, history writing also contributes to the deradicalization of past activist movements.

Day two began with a joint keynote from the internationally acclaimed artist Sheba Chhachhi (Delhi) and the media anthropologist Laila Abu-Er-Rub (Merian-Kolleg ICAS:MP, Delhi). The presentation reflected on their collaborative work to build a feminist archive of Chhachhi's photographs. From the early 1980s, Chhachhi participated in and documented feminist street protests against dowry practices and domestic and communal violence against women. More recently, Chhachhi's practice has moved to 'annotated installation': staged portraits of feminists surrounded by objects that reflect their lives and activism. In this way, Chhachhi reflects on the way photography – although seemingly a neutral, objective record – can perpetuate power imbalances through exclusion, silence, and (mis)interpretation. Chhachhi's current project with Abu-Er-Rub aims to preserve the contextualization and prevent the misuse of her images by constructing a long-term repository. However, as Abu-Er-Rub outlined, there are considerable challenges inherent in such a project, ranging from multilingual annotation, a lack of metadata standards, technological and funding limitations, issues of data protection, and the power of corporate giants who control search engines and hosting platforms.

The next panel examined feminism at the intersection of law and the media. Focusing on the case of Rukhmabai in 1880s colonial India, Kanika Sharma (SOAS) argued that official legal archives contain few traces of women's own voices. Rukhmabai, a wealthy Hindu woman, contested the restitution of conjugal rights to her husband. Although the case was fought over her body, as Sharma highlighted, Rukhmabai's proto-feminist motives were never recorded in the legal archive, only in her letters to the media. The next paper by Alexandra Fergen (University of Oxford) dealt with a very different legal case from 1970s West Germany. In 1978, ten women sued the bestselling illustrated weekly *Stern* for its use of sexist cover images. While Hamburg's Regional Court dismissed the case, the legal battle sparked a media debate about the objectification of women. Next, Laura Lammasniemi (University of Warwick) analysed two 'alternative

legal archives' from early twentieth-century Britain. The meticulous records kept in the archives of the National Vigilance Association and the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene not only reveal the way middle-class women accessed professional roles at a time when these were officially denied to them, but also show that while some women used that power to challenge patriarchal legal structures, others used it to reinforce them. In her commentary, Isabel Heinemann (WWU Münster) drew attention to the way that the highly regulated, male-defined, and performative space of the courtroom contributed to the silencing of women's voices in the legal archive. The discussion centred on the definition of feminism, conservative women activists, and how historians can supplement legal texts with media sources.

The day concluded with a presentation by Luke Blaxill (University of Oxford) and Kaspar Beelen (Alan Turing Institute, London) on digital humanities research methods. Blaxill and Beelen are currently developing two online modules for the International Standing Working Group in order to familiarize historians of feminism with text mining and statistical methods. Text mining can be used to follow the development of the language of feminism in the media, to differentiate between the ways men and women have addressed certain topics over time, and to quantify absences in the archive. Blaxill illustrated this using the Hansard record of British parliamentary proceedings. He combined close and distant readings, zooming in and out to discern patterns in the corpus. While the computerized analysis of such large text corpora (from media, parliamentary, or legal sources) offers huge analytical potential, scholars need to be trained in their assemblage, use, and potential biases. Also discussed were the limitations generated by faulty scanning, copyright restrictions, and the scarcity of non-English-language corpora.

The final day started with a panel on archival practices, homing in on the act of collecting and its feminist possibilities. The panellists reflected on their double roles as creators and interpreters of archives. Reshma Radakrishnan (University of Erfurt) explored the limitations of official archives and their inability to fully capture the experiences and actions of women. Using oral histories and individual interviews, she reflected on women's experiences of making history and the active and engaged presence demanded by the interview

situation. Including museum collections among possible archival spaces, Sophie Kühnlentz (University of Cologne) asked how heteronormative gender roles can be challenged through curatorial practice. While showing awareness of the role of changing perspectives on exhibitions and curatorial choices, she emphasized that these concerns should not confine women's issues to women's museums, but instead lead to an overall reflection of gendered practices in the use of objects. Dipti Tamang's (Darjeeling Government College) paper similarly engaged with the challenge to existing archival practices, with a focus on the decolonization of knowledge. Her project focused on rewriting the women's history of the Darjeeling Hills by centring hidden conflicts and marginalized voices. Finally, the contribution by Christina Wu (Panthéon-Sorbonne) examined the history of feminism in 1950s Singapore, emphasizing the importance of language and of reading between the lines in order to understand women's reluctance to use the term 'feminist' in the context of colonial struggles. Fiammetta Balestracci's (LMU Munich) comment outlined the need to proactively and constructively consolidate smaller counter-archives and their specific narratives with the material in state and official archives.

The last panel investigated an intersectional approach to archives, asking how historical ideas of race and gender have shaped the keeping of records. The first contribution by Kirsten Kamphuis (WWU Münster) focused on the place of women in (post-)colonial Indonesian educational organizations. Rather than simply adding women to these histories, Kamphuis read magazines and other documents against the grain to unravel the contribution and thought of women activists. Johanna Gehmacher (University of Vienna) emphasized the need to consider not just what we find in the archive, but also how the archive itself is produced—how documents are consciously chosen, collected, and sometimes destroyed or excluded—in order to better understand the role of the past and archives in feminist movements. Anaïs Angelo (University of Vienna) explored absences in the archive, confronting the exclusion of Kenyan women who (unsuccessfully) ran for office. Instead of perpetuating a patriarchal and colonial narrative of political history read through state archives, Angelo's work shows the importance of finding new sources and archival practices that can challenge and complement existing records. Finally, Jennifer

Rodgers's (Caltech) presentation on the transformation of German birthing practices across the second half of the twentieth century emphasized the interstitial character of the transnational feminist archive of childbirth.

Across the three days, discussion ranged from questioning the ongoing importance of historical recovery to asking how to make sense of historical actors—especially when they do things we find confronting—and how to put feminist histories into a narrative form in a way that reflects the often complicated politics of women activists. Moreover, it became clear that recording and archiving remain practices that prioritize, label, and exclude. Based as they are in knowledge practices steeped in violence, power, and oppression, as historians of women and feminism, we must take up the challenge of finding inventive ways to recontextualize the material in order to redress the power imbalances engrained in different archival media, be they born-digital, aural, visual, or paper-bound.

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