

A Women's History for Anabaptist Traditions: A Framework of Possibilities, Possibly Changing the Framework

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Women's history as a professional field developed during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the heyday of modern feminism. Scholars of religious groups incorporated women's history more slowly, often led by local and community historians.¹ In part, the delay resulted from some early feminists' hostility toward religion, since so many patriarchal religious societies opposed feminism. Many religious women found it difficult to maintain their faith and research women's history at the same time. Historians of Anabaptist women participate in these trends, sometimes without recognizing the connections. Acknowledging mutual influence between mainstream women's histories and Anabaptist women's histories would enrich both fields.²

In the professional domain of academic history, women's history has become a highly developed and self-conscious field of study.³ This larger field may have more relevance for the writing of Amish and Mennonite women's history than the

historical works on those groups published thus far, since those works so often overlooked women. A comparative analysis between Anabaptist women's history and women's history is a beneficial exercise. An awareness of the sequence of maturation in the larger field may serve as a guide or framework for what may occur in the histories of Anabaptist women.

New historical studies are focusing on Anabaptist women's experiences and their impact on family, community, and religious life. The development of an Anabaptist vision of women's history is in its infancy and scholars are developing new paradigms.⁴ However, growth in Anabaptist women's history may not follow the same trajectory as women's history. Furthermore, the study of women from ethnic and religious minority groups has the potential to inform and even challenge established interpretations and assumptions in the larger field.

As a first step, historians of Amish and Mennonite women need to analyze where their subjects fit in the discussions of women's history.⁵ For example, American women's history has followed a discernable sequence of stages, beginning with the collection of biographies and proceeding to critical analyses of women's social experience, followed by the exploration of the ways in which gender orders domestic and public life. This article charts the evolution of Anabaptist women's history by using the history of American women's history as a comparative framework, and offers suggestions for further research and theoretical development.⁶

Women were always present in Anabaptist communities, and their experience differed in significant ways from Anabaptist men. Given these assertions, an uncomfortable conclusion follows: Too often, Anabaptist women are simply left out of historical accounts. Mennonite scholars who decide to cast their lot with women's history face an interesting dilemma. Women's history has an agenda, which is to write women back into history. Writing women back into history is a highly political act and the critiques formulated by women's historians both inspire and offend. Many of the younger scholars of Anabaptist women's history share this agenda. It is still unclear how the many manifestations of being "the Quiet in the Land" in Mennonite and Amish culture have affected women historians. Two Mennonite women poets have noted how they could not write until after their fathers died.⁷ It takes courage (a loud voice) to write about events and people, however distant, when many people in one's home community may have connections with those events and people. It may also take a starting point, that is, a site to place one's work not only within the lexicon of Mennonite history but also within the broader framework of women's history.

When compared to the historical work on women of other denominations, Mennonite historians arrived late, and in terms of historical training in feminist theory and understanding gender as a category of analysis, were often ill equipped for the task.⁸ Thus, a gap exists in the historiography of Anabaptist and related groups. But are there any maps for these apparently uncharted waters? Happily, all trained women's historians are familiar with the general patterns of women's historiography. One starting point was an early article by University of Wisconsin historian Gerda Lerner.

The Lerner Framework: Compensatory History

In 1975 Gerda Lerner wrote a reflective article in a relatively new journal, *Feminist Studies*, entitled "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges."⁹ She set out a framework for understanding the new field of women's history and attempted to predict where the historical study of women might lead. Her prognostications turned out to be remarkably prescient. In some ways the historiography of Anabaptist groups in 2000 is comparable to the situation of American women's history in 1975. In other ways, Anabaptist women's history, by responding to more recent trends in the historical field such as gender theory and postmodernism, has gone beyond Lerner's vision of what was then a newly developing field. Although Anabaptist women's history offers challenges to the larger framework, an awareness of the maturation sequence in the larger field can serve as an initial guide to potentialities in the histories of Anabaptist women.

In Lerner's 1975 analysis, she traced two early stages of women's history. In the first, which she called "compensatory history," scholars were intent on proving that women participated in historical events. Historians searched for women whose life and work deserved wider recognition. They sought pioneers and achievers, in a sort of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Women" approach. One result of these searches was the publication of the *Notable American Women* biographical collections.¹⁰ This "women worthies" strategy validated women as subjects of historical interest and inquiry. There was an atmosphere of "delighted discovery" as scholars found "previously unknown women" and delivered them from historical obscurity to the light of academic day.¹¹

Somewhat similar to the beginning efforts of U.S. women's historians, a first generation of scholars collected and published stories about Mennonite women. They represent the essential first step on the women's history path. For example, Mary Lou Cummings edited a collection of biographies entitled *Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women*, published in 1978. Cummings' book is a heartfelt attempt to write Mennonite women back into history.¹²

Ruth Unrau published *Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women* in 1986, eight years after *Full Circle*, in which later contributors seemed more receptive to expressing feminist objections to patriarchal church structures.¹³ For example, Robert Kreider, reflecting on his mother's life, noted, "She was secretary of Girls Activities, a vigorous organization that was shut down because the men thought women were beginning to lose a sense of their subservient place."¹⁴ Lois Duerksen Deckert said of her mother, "In this day and age, my mother would have been a strong feminist."¹⁵

Two recent publications share an agenda similar to the writers of *Full Circle* and *Encircled*. *She Has Done a Good Thing: Mennonite Women Leaders Tell Their Stories* is an autobiographical collection of a first generation of women leaders. Many of the women featured were born in the 1940s and 50s. They came of age during an era marked by the women's movement and the Vietnam War. A questioning and willingness to overcome patriarchal church attitudes and objections is explicit in many accounts. For example, Carol Suter, a lawyer, writes, "In the secular

world, I see women almost reaching parity in many arenas. Leadership opportunities abound, and in many ways being female is now an advantage. Sadly, that is not yet so in the Mennonite world.”¹⁶ Similarly, *Quiet Shouts: Stories of Lancaster Mennonite Women Leaders* is a collection of short biographies in which author Louise Stoltzfus places each woman’s story within a broader church context.¹⁷ The story focuses on individual women, but historical processes are also recognized. Stoltzfus’s definition of “leadership” is informed by feminist influences. Within the structure of biographical narrative, she explores how women worked within church structures to provide leadership in quietly acceptable ways. These are not the first generation of visible leaders and preachers, as found in *She Has Done a Good Thing*. Rather, the reader learns about Minnie Eberly Holsopple Good who wrote her preacher husband’s sermons, and Amanda Musselman, Lydia Stauffer Sauder Mellinger, and others who led early missionary ventures in Pennsylvania. The women represented in *Quiet Shouts* almost always worked behind the scenes and were rarely recognized as leaders in their time, even though they founded churches and directed church-related agencies and organizations.

Community people wrote the early Mennonite biographical literature. They represented a desire to recognize and praise women’s service to their families, churches, Mennonite organizations, and small farming communities.¹⁸ These books reclaim Anabaptist women’s history and their authors lay the groundwork for future historians. Throughout Mennonite enclaves across North America, community historians and archivists are continuing to uncover Mennonite “women worthies” of the past, and this is an ongoing and worthwhile task. In the case of Anabaptist women’s history, it seems that the phases of women’s history are not so much sequential and progressive, as the Lerner framework details, as they are overlapping and complementary.

The Lerner Framework: Contribution History

Following compensatory history, in which scholars rediscover the presence of women in the historical narrative, Gerda Lerner placed “contribution history.” In this stage, historians describe women’s contributions to topics, issues, and themes already deemed important. The main actors in the story remain men; women are subordinate, “helping” men accomplish their work. The tone can be reproachful: how could men not acknowledge women’s contributions? Like other religious groups, much of the historical literature for Anabaptists has tended to focus on women’s contributions to churchwide movements, institutions and church building efforts, and mission work. The line between compensatory and contributory history becomes blurry. One way to distinguish compensatory from contribution history is the focus on biography. Contribution history both includes and moves beyond the collection of biographical material, whereas compensatory history’s main feature is the biographical narrative.

The most comprehensive work on the history of Mennonite women, which

could be considered contribution history, is the volume by Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness, 1683-1983*.¹⁹ Rich's general history of women's experiences in the Mennonite church from the 16th through the early 20th century shows women challenging the church hierarchy and creating new avenues of female influence within the church. Rich's thesis is that women doing "women's work" in Mennonite churches have contributed significantly to the work of the church. It is clear that she felt Mennonite historians overlooked women and, therefore, missed a vital part of church history. Implicit in Rich's accounts stands an argument for recognizing the contributions women have made to the church as wives, mothers, cooks, quilters, and homemakers.

Articles and books by trained historians also documented women's contributions. Lois Y. Barrett, Keith Sprunger and Jennifer Hiatt Umble recorded how women, fully one-third of the martyrs in *Martyrs Mirror*, the chronicle of early Anabaptists who were persecuted for their beliefs, were instrumental to the Anabaptist movement.²⁰ James C. Juhnke examined how women took advantage of new opportunities as Sunday School teachers, missionaries, teachers, writers and activists when the church developed denominational institutions at the turn of the twentieth century.²¹

Compensatory and contributory histories provide the base for further historical research. And further historical research is needed. Looking ahead in 1975, Lerner anticipated greater theoretical sophistication and the use of gender as an analytical concept. Two later trends in women's history build upon compensation and contribution approaches: social history and gender theory.

Social History

A third phase in the development of women's history was the investigation of everywoman—the female version of social history. Drawing on the social movements of the 1960s, social historians used new methods and theories to recover the histories of neglected and oppressed groups. The Civil Rights movement helped create a new African-American history, and modern feminism led directly to new histories of women. No longer could historians legitimately limit themselves to politics, wars, public events, intellectual life, and diplomacy.

Women's historians joined in these challenges to the very definition of history. Unlike the earlier scholars who engaged in compensatory and contribution history, social historians were not content merely to add women to the historical picture. Instead, they repainted the whole canvas.²² For example, a question women's historians often raise is that of periodization. If women's historians were to rewrite the *Mennonite Experience in America* volumes from a gender perspective, how would the series differ?²³ In addition to raising the question of periodization, women's historians no longer focused on great women who won recognition in the public sphere. Social movements, women's private lives, social relations, work arrangements, and other topics garnered the interest of women's historians.

Many early women's historians sought the roots of feminism in the multitude of reform groups of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which women comprised the majority of rank-and-file members and were key leaders and agitators. Abolition and suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott; the Women's Christian Temperance Union; women of the Progressive Era, such as Florence Kelly, Margaret Sanger, Alice Paul, and Jane Addams; Labor Movement advocates, such as Helen Gurley Flynn and Mother Jones; and modern feminism—all these topics and many more have received much attention from women's historians. These histories go a step beyond contribution history because they often contain a critique, either implicit or explicit, of the dominant patriarchal culture in which these women lived.

In similar fashion, historians of Anabaptist women borrowed from the social history lexicon and used new methods to draw on source material, such as census material, diaries, and oral interviews. And they borrowed from modern feminism. One of the few published scholarly works that contains a critique of Mennonite-style patriarchy is Sharon Klingelsmith's classic article, "Women in the Mennonite Church, 1900-1930."²⁴ Her article represents a questioning of the notion that many women have been satisfied to work for the church without recognition. To prove her point, Klingelsmith delved into the history of the Mennonite Women's Missionary Society (MWMS).

Klingelsmith characterized the missionary movement as the "first step in allowing women to look beyond the home and family and to take their place alongside men in the work of the church."²⁵ From its very inception, however, the MWMS faced opposition. Many board members of the Missionary Society (all male) told Clara Eby Steiner, the leading organizer of the MWMS, that they would tolerate a woman's society only if the leaders were wives of ministers. In this way, they hoped men would control the society.²⁶

More important than male opposition was the women's reaction. After the MWMS folded in 1921, Steiner, reflecting on her experience, wrote, "I suppose if I were not a woman I would have thrown some of my conviction across some of the scenes."²⁷ The Klingelsmith essay is important because here, for the first time in writing, does one hear women who were disappointed by their limited opportunities.²⁸ Historians today need to overcome the reluctance to place women within their historical contexts and they need to acknowledge the barriers women faced within their homes, churches and communities. If historians omit that which they consider unpleasant, they will distort the lens of history.²⁹

Another relatively new area that has influenced historians of Anabaptist women is labor history, the largest subfield in social history. Among other topics, labor history focuses on the everyday work lives of ordinary people, the type of work performed, and the long struggle for improved working environments including the various union movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. The work lives of Anabaptist women have also come under historical scrutiny. Katherine Jellison and Steven Reschly, via a careful examination of United States Department of Agriculture surveys, have shown how Lancaster County Amish women's household

production during the 1930s exceeded that of their non-Amish neighbors. When compared to their non-Amish neighbors, Amish women's purchases of food and clothing were limited. Their on-farm production and reluctance to purchase ready-made items and food products may have protected their families and farms from the economic problems associated with the Depression.³⁰ Kimberly D. Schmidt's dissertation, by focusing on women's changing work responsibilities from 1930 to 1990, analyzed how the interplay between economic forces and religious ideology shaped two Mennonite farming communities.³¹ A number of papers from the *Quiet in the Land?* conference highlighted how women's on-farm work sustained their families, farms and communities.³² Since Anabaptist women have historically been valued as producers for the home, farm and market, this is one area for further historical inquiry.

By using social history methodologies, historians have expanded the topic base of Anabaptist history. Relying on oral sources and church documents such as bulletins and council minutes, Marlene Epp has reconstructed the immigration and urbanization experiences of Canadian Mennonite women. Along with Frieda Klippenstein, her work shows how Canadian Mennonite girls were in the vanguard of the urbanization process because after seeking work as domestic servants in cities they often stayed and helped to form the first urban churches.³³ Epp's more recent work focuses on the female-headed families who migrated from Russia to Canada and Paraguay after World War II. Epp along with other historians are turning to oral sources in an effort to expand the topic base of what is included in written history.³⁴

Another outgrowth of social history is the focus on material culture, that is, the use of physical artifacts to interpret the past. In Anabaptist women's history, analysis of material culture has inspired the study of women's dress.³⁵ Among Anabaptist groups, conservative dress was a way of promoting group solidarity and identity in addition to visually confirming communal nonconformity with the world. Any move away from dress regulations was a move toward "worldliness" and threatened the solidarity of the community and separation from the world. A number of Mennonite scholars have argued that some Amish and Conservative Mennonite women were more constricted in their dress styles than men. Marlene Epp explained that at the turn of the century, "Resistance to the plain dress was particularly acute when it was apparent that standards were applied more rigorously to women than to men."³⁶ Schmidt has documented how changes in plain dress can reveal underlying community tensions, both religiously and economically.³⁷ Beth Graybill has argued that it was easier for men in "transitional" groups (those that assimilated into American society more than the most conservative Amish groups) to "pass" into the rest of society as their clothing was not as distinctive.³⁸ Within Anabaptist circles younger scholars, trained in social history methodologies and theories, are just beginning to enlarge the topic base and perhaps even challenge accepted interpretations of Anabaptist history.

Gender Theory

The fourth component of women's history, according to Lerner's framework, is theory, generated by the emphasis on social history. According to historian Joan W. Scott, the social movements of the late twentieth century led many historians to examine intersections of class, race and gender. Not surprisingly, for feminist historians, gender is a primary category of analysis. Many feminist scholars, including Scott, maintain that gender is not interchangeable with the terms "sex" or "sexual difference." Feminist historians reject the notion that biology is destiny, as well as any belief in a "universal femininity." Instead, social and cultural forces that are historically specific to time and place construct gender.³⁹

It is important to recognize how constructions of gender shape our understanding of the world, both in terms of consciousness and behavior. Historian Alice Kessler-Harris has called gender "a complex and multi-layered system of social organization."⁴⁰ This system gives order to relationships of power and affection and makes this order seem natural and inevitable. However, recent work by Royden Loewen proves how transient and subject to change gender definitions are. His examinations of changing gender definitions among *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites in Meade, Kansas, should alert Mennonite scholars to the fact that gender definitions change over time.⁴¹ Other preliminary research show how gender definitions were often reinforced by women-centered practices and rituals such as the Breadmaking ritual among Old Order River Brethren and dress regulations among Old Order groups.⁴²

Some scholars have argued that women of Anabaptist groups enjoyed an exceptionally high status, mostly because of their on-farm and in-house productivity. Perhaps the emphasis on the home as the central organizing unit within Anabaptist communities, both historically and in modern times, empowers women as suggested by scholars Richard Wright and Royden Loewen.⁴³ Loewen found in his study of *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites that women across the generations did indeed enjoy high status within their families and communities. Conversely, though, gender theory suggests that they were not thereby powerful persons, able to direct and control their lives in a variety of settings. As Gerda Lerner observed within the context of black women's history, "The status of persons is determined not in one area of their functioning, such as within the family, but in several." Historically, black women have had high status within their families but not within the rest of society.⁴⁴ Was the experience of Anabaptist women similar to that of black women, that is, was it framed by a gender system that limited their access to power and economic resources? Or, did the rural setting and coinciding emphases on farm and household production and childbearing empower Anabaptist women whose work was so highly valued? This could be an area in which Anabaptist women's history offers challenges to the broader framework.

Teachers of women's history often discover that their students usually grasp how race can organize a social system. Students have more trouble seeing how gender serves the same purpose. Historians have identified several locations of

especial usefulness in unmasking the gender system of a given society. They examine economic structures as channels of energy and ambition, political paradigms that legitimate male power and limit expressions of resistance, family life as a vehicle for molding culture and values, and how sexuality serves as a symbolic and literal regulatory device. These areas of theory will be growth industries in the history of Anabaptist women. Work in these subjects will encounter resistance and hostility. For example, the gay experience is a strong subfield in the larger women's studies world, but so far Anabaptist scholars have ignored the topic. Still, it is crucial to ask how a gender system frames the choices and possibilities of men and women. What are the reward systems, including psychic rewards, that help keep inequality in place? These questions will play an increasing role in the work of historians of Anabaptist groups. Already some scholars are moving beyond the Lerner framework in their treatment of Anabaptist women's history.

Beyond the Framework

Many of the scholars working in the field of Mennonite and Amish history are recent graduates of secular institutions. Some have received training in women's history and much of their scholarly work centers on women's historical experiences. Three books, Arnold Synder and Linda Huebert Hecht's *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, Rachel Waltner Goossen's *Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front*, and Royden K. Loewen's *Family Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* are similar in their efforts to reclaim women's history. Although the books range from sixteenth century Anabaptists to mid-nineteenth century pioneering women to twentieth century women who protested against World War II, the authors combine elements of contribution history with social history methodologies and gender theory analysis. These women's histories show how women contributed to their communities and yet they go far beyond a straightforward "contribution" history.

Profiles of Anabaptist Women, an edited collection, examines how common women contributed to the early Anabaptist movement. Snyder and Hecht's work draws on a number of documents including court records and testimonies taken under torture to reveal the centrality of women to the Anabaptist movement. Their analysis shows how the Anabaptist movement was a movement of "little" people, not great men. The editors assert that women's private, almost invisible, work and household functions helped keep the secretive and underground movement alive in the face of harsh persecution.⁴⁵

Loewen traces three generations of Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites from Russia to immigration and settlement in Canada and the United States. His work is a powerful synthesis of social, economic, and ethnic histories with gender analysis. Despite the inroads of individualistic evangelical Protestantism and urban differentiation, both of which lead to religious divisions, old goals of continuing an agrarian

community founded on nuclear family households and simple commodity production continued in parts of the community. Through these changes and continuities, the tendency toward matrilineal residence and injunctions toward fairness in partible inheritance indicates formal recognition of women's value to communal preservation. Loewen's integration of women's experience in his finely-grained community studies is the most successful attempt so far to make gender analysis part and parcel of mainstream Mennonite history.

Goossen details the World War II experiences of women who embraced the conscientious objection label, participated in Civilian Public Service work, and supported male conscientious objectors to the war. She shows how women contributed to the CPS movement as CPS camp nutritionists, and nurses; "C.O. girls;" and wives, mothers and sweethearts of CPS men. However, her story also contains a gender critique. Women objected to the war on the basis of both religious belief and humanitarian conviction. Their recounted stories show women appropriating language and experiences reserved for men. The stories also underscore the fact that some Americans did not enthusiastically support the Good War.⁴⁶

Snyder and Hecht, Loewen and Goossen show how women were involved in major historical events, such as the Anabaptist movement, community settlement and development, and World War II. The focus of these books is multiple and contains elements from all categories of the Lerner framework. Again, it seems that within Anabaptist women's history, the steps from the Lerner framework are not sequential as much as they tend to overlap and complement each other.

Challenges to the Framework

Developments in women's history can guide the progress of scholarship in Anabaptist women's history in four areas: compensatory history, contribution history, social history, and gender theory. The process of scholarly exchange between the larger field of women's history and Anabaptist women's history is not a one-way street, however. Anabaptist women's history has the potential to inform and challenge, even modify, this women's history framework.⁴⁷ Is it possible that Anabaptist descendants have different gender constructions than our dominant American culture? Were relationships between men and women based on different ideas about femininity, masculinity and gender, and if so, how did these understandings uniquely shape Anabaptist women's lives and history? More generally, how does being a member of an ethnic and religious minority forge women's experiences?

Lerner's framework started with biography. The earliest efforts to reclaim Mennonite women's history were short stories and biographical collections. From an Amish and Mennonite sensibility, however, it might be better to start with family and community studies. Examinations of how a community ethos and ethics (the Amish *Ordnung*, for example), which are embedded in family life and functions, could inform a myriad of research topics including family and community

sustainability, gender relations and hierarchies, the connections between traditional religious groups and patriarchy, and the sexual divisions of labor.⁴⁸

Gender constructions among Mennonites and Amish may indeed differ from those of the dominant American culture. Some accounts of Mennonites and Amish describe how plain the women were. These accounts also note how Mennonite and Amish women were valued for their productivity and not beauty. For example, in 1945 Eva Harshbarger observed:

By all the rules listed in American magazines on "How to Keep a Husband," the Mennonite farm women should have lost their husbands long ago, for their complexions are weather-beaten and innocent of makeup, their shoulders are stooped from hard work, their abdoments [sic] protrude from child bearing and poor posture, their clothes are, if not actually dowdy, at least not worn "with style," hair-dress is extremely simple But what would a Mennonite farmer do with a glamour girl for a wife? . . . He much prefers his "woman" who knows how to be a helpmeet to a man, who is not afraid of hard work.⁴⁹

Another report describes Mennonites as a miserly and unattractive people.⁵⁰ Beauty and adornment were not valued. Instead, a capacity for farm work and producing and raising healthy children were key elements in how women were valued in this farm-centered culture. A feminist might argue that being valued for one's productivity on the farm and one's tangible contributions to the community are far more rewarding than the size of one's wardrobe and cut of one's hair. And yet, plain clothes with hair tightly bound under prayer coverings, in author Sue Bender's words, "shows nothing, masks attractiveness."⁵¹ What difference did deliberate plainness make to women's lives? Did it provide freedom for women who no longer had to worry about meeting arbitrary standards of beauty? On the other hand, perhaps cape dresses and prayer coverings were symbolic manifestations of subdued women whose creativity and self-expression were stifled. There are a few modern accounts of younger modern women who resent having to wear the plain dress and prayer coverings. One woman interviewed in 1992 said, "I keep it [the prayer covering] in my car. I get to church and I put it on my head, and I come out of church, I stick it in my car. It's not a big tradition with me. But it is to a lot of other people, so I do it."⁵² The dress issue is not without attention in scholarly Mennonite circles. Mennonite poets have written about enforced plainness and inhibited glamour.⁵³ Some of Beth Graybill's most recent work focuses on Conservative Mennonite women and the multiple meanings of dress. Graybill places her work squarely within a feminist theory discussion. Although a contemporary ethnography, her work points the way for historical research which include analyses about the interconnections between gender constructions, glamour, and work in Mennonite and Amish communities.⁵⁴

Recent research has suggested that women in traditionally conservative groups may not experience gendered limitations in the same way as women in theologically conservative groups, such as fundamentalist Christians. Anabaptist groups gen-

erally define themselves on a continuum from the most conservative Old Order Amish and other plain groups to those who have assimilated into mainstream American and Canadian culture, such as General Conference Mennonites. The in-between groups, those who are neither assimilated nor Old Order, can be referred to as transitional groups.⁵⁵ Women in transitional groups, such as Conservative Mennonites, may still wear the prayer coverings and cape dresses and yet may also drive cars, watch television, and participate in the work force, much like any other American female. These women may face the harshest confines of all, as their groups desperately seek ways and means to maintain social stability.⁵⁶ Initial research has found that transitional groups require women to uphold traditions and religiously sanctioned folkways. The same emphasis on tradition is not placed upon the men.⁵⁷ There is no linear progression from conservative to feminist, as the larger field may assume.

The men's studies movement is well underway, recovering internal warriors and pugnacious masculinity. Gender systems shape both men and women. It may be that men in pacifist groups have a different experience of aggression and masculinity.⁵⁸ What is the relationship between aggression at home and competitiveness in the marketplace? How does a conscientious objector find his internal warrior? And what difference does it make for Anabaptist women? Traditionally, Anabaptist men were not encouraged to prove themselves in battle. War was not and is not a male rite of passage in Anabaptist cultures. Goossen's work on C.O. women may pave the way for research on how male conscientious objectors to World War II and other wars sought alternatives to John Wayne and Clint Eastwood-style images and symbols of masculinity. Could it be that a rejection of violence in the public sphere led to a rejection of aggressive behavior at home? Perhaps marital relationships and child rearing practices were notably less violent among pacifist groups. Or does the patriarchal nature of the Mennonite and Amish culture limit the pacifist critique to the public arena?⁵⁹ Historian Marlene Epp, in a preliminary examination of Canadian conscientious objectors during World War II, shows how the COs used martial imagery to describe their alternative service assignments. They borrowed from the cult of masculinity to combat public images of their cowardice and did not challenge the Mennonite gender system, claiming to be warriors fighting on other fronts rather than effeminate and emasculated pacifists.⁶⁰

Among Anabaptists, the critique of the state is not limited to war but is accompanied by a general non-state or even anti-state sensibility. Again, Goossen's work points the way to further scholarly exploration. How has membership in a religious minority that rejects state institutions and affiliations shaped the female experience? For example, most Americans think of social welfare in terms of state structures. In contrast, many Anabaptist groups do not participate in government-funded programs such as welfare, Medicaid, and Social Security, even though they pay taxes. Instead, they rely on community and family helpfulness and compassion. The classic example is that of the barn-raising. Anabaptist women, therefore, are likely less enmeshed in the gendered structures of state formation and preservation, especially in relation to welfare, that has generated so much recent historical

study and debate.⁶¹

In the larger world, individualism is often seen as a male trait while concern for social connections belongs to women. Is there a different balance in communal societies? American religious individualism, as traced in *Habits of the Heart*, may not be so stark among the Amish, for example. The tightly woven kinship networks and multifaceted community interactions of traditional groups may mitigate the deleterious effects of rampant individualism, as at least one sociologist has theorized.⁶² Both women's and men's place within Amish society is defined by work and also by connections to and places within family, home, kinship networks, and church structures. Anthropologist Gertrude Enders Huntington found that both men and women in Amish society are not considered to be fully adult until they take on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood: "Baptism initiates the individual into the community; marriage, and the birth of the first child, makes him [and her] a complete, full member of the church."⁶³

Historians of Anabaptist women need not slavishly follow the framework of American women's history. It can serve as a guide without being a master. Women's history has the potential to challenge accepted historical interpretation in all aspects of Amish and Mennonite history. As women's historians confront and expand traditional questions of analysis and theory, they broaden our understanding of history: who makes it and who defines it. Our hope is that this article will provoke new insights both about women's place within Anabaptist history and about how Anabaptist women's history fits into the wider women's history framework. The first steps were to discover how Anabaptist women contributed to their communities, as housewives and bearers of children, and as participants in major events. Historians have also started to explore the many ways in which gender operated in Anabaptist communities.

But observers should not expect a full-blown alternative synthesis of Anabaptist women's history to appear overnight. Gerda Lerner's framework dates to 1975. At a 1994 symposium marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Schlesinger Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Lerner observed that women's history as a professional field is still relatively young, about 35 years old. History as an academic discipline is about 250 years old. By contrast, the patriarchal construction of history has held sway for perhaps 4,000 years. Lerner warned conference participants not to expect a grand synthesis for another century or so. On the other hand, Lerner stated, "There is no question in my mind that . . . the hierarchical, exploitative, competitive system, based on militarism and intergroup rivalry, which pitted [humankind] against nature, is doomed."⁶⁴

Anabaptist women's history is both a long-term project and an exciting, rapidly-changing field. Scholars can begin to share a common vocabulary, developed in the larger field of academic women's history, led by terms such as compensatory, contribution, social history, gender theory. Scholars can also challenge those paradigms with original work. The wheels of history grind slowly, but they do turn. As historians of Anabaptist women, we share Lerner's optimism about the expansive prospects for gender equity in Anabaptist historiography.

Notes

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¹ For example, community historian Mary Lou Cummings published the first collection of historical biographies almost ten years before Mennonite professional historians included women in their published work. See *Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1978).

² We are not limiting the term "Anabaptist" to the sixteenth century socio-religious movement. Instead, we are using the term to define women of Anabaptist traditions, in particular Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite and Church of the Brethren groups, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

³ There are numerous histories of women's history. See, for example, Linda Gordon, "U.S. Women's History," Revised Edition (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1997); Kathleen M. Brown, "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser. 50 (April 1993), 311-328.

⁴ The first academic conference on Anabaptist women's history, "The Quiet in the Land? Women of Anabaptist Traditions in Historical Perspective," took place in 1995 at Millersville University in Millersville, Pennsylvania. Essays from this conference will be published in *Anabaptist Women in Historical Perspective*, forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press. A second conference, "EnGendering the Past: Women and Men in Mennonite History," was held in October, 1998, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and resulted in a special edition of *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999).

⁵ Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd made a similar suggestion for Irish women's history in their article, "An Agenda for Women's History in Ireland, 1500-1900; Part I: 1500-1800," *Irish Historical Studies* 28 (May 1992): 5.

⁶ This article is certainly not the first time historians have advanced feminist interpretations of Anabaptist women's history. Frieda Shoenberg Rozen called for a study of women's status in "plain people's communities" of which Anabaptist women are certainly a part. She argued that determining the roots of women's subordination in plain groups would enhance social scientist's understanding of the "almost universal subordination of women." See "The Permanent First Floor Tenant," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 51 (October 1977): 319-28; quote 319. Other historiographical essays include Carol Penner, "Mennonite Women's History: A Survey," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 9 (1991): 122-135; and Al Reimer, "Where Was/Is the Woman's Voice? The Re-Membering of the Mennonite Woman," *Mennonite Life*, 47 (March 1992): 20-25.

⁷ A panel of women poets and authors discussed this topic during a round table session, "Women Writing Home," at the "Quiet in the Land" conference in 1995. Poets Di Brandt and Sarah Klassen both discussed how they felt silenced as poets until after their fathers died. Performance artist Johnna Schmidt included a section in "Prayers for Girls," a performance piece, on how difficult it was to find her voice as an artist in a small Mennonite town. Julia Kasdorf examines this silencing of women's voices in "Historical Imagination and Poetry by Women of Mennonite Backgrounds" in *Anabaptist Women*. Finally, Pamela Klassen addresses silence in terms of women's sexuality and power in "What's Br(e)ad in the Bone: The Bodily Heritage of Mennonite Women," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (April 1994): 229-247.

Women's historians may feel similar pressures.

⁸. United Methodist women conducted a conference in 1980 ("Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the United Methodist Tradition," Cincinnati, Ohio) and produced two volumes of essays, entitled *Women in New Worlds* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981). The first conference on Jewish women's history in America was held in 1993 ("Across Boundaries: A History of Jewish Women in America," College Park, Maryland).

Basic texts on women and religion in American history include Janet Wilson James, ed. *Women in Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978); and Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1995). Another good starting place for those new to the subject is the three volume series by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women and Religion in America: A Documentary History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981-1986).

⁹. Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Fall 1975): 5-14; reprinted in Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York, 1979), 145-159.

¹⁰. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green, eds., *Notable American Women, The Modern Period: A Biographical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹¹. Linda Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart, *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, 4th Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

¹². Mary Lou Cummings, *Full Circle*.

¹³. Ruth Unrau, *Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1986).

¹⁴. Unrau, *Encircled*, 187.

¹⁵. Unrau, *Encircled*, 225.

¹⁶. Mary Swartley and Rhoda Keener, eds., *She Has Done A Good Thing: Mennonite Women Leaders Tell Their Stories* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999): 242.

¹⁷. Louise Stoltzfus, *Quiet Shouts: Stories of Lancaster Mennonite Women Leaders* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).

¹⁸. Other books of this genre include Katie Funk Wiebe, *Women Among the Brethren: Stories of Fifteen Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Women* (Hillsboro: KS: The Board of Christian Literature of The General Conference Of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1979); and Dorothy Yoder Nyce, *Which Way Women?* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section, 1980).

¹⁹. Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness, 1683-1983* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983).

²⁰. Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Fifteen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom From the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950); Lois Barrett, "Women in the Anabaptist Movement" in *Women in the Bible and Early Anabaptism*, Herta Funk, ed. (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1975), p. 33; Keith Sprunger, "God's Powerful Army of the Weak: Anabaptist Women of the Radical Reformation," *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History* Richard L. Greaves, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 45-74; Jennifer Hiett Umble, "Spiritual Companions: Women as Wives in the *Martyrs Mirror*," *Mennonite Life*, (September, 1990): 32-35.

²¹. James C. Juhnke, "The Role of Women in the Mennonite Transition from Traditionalism to Denominationalism," *Mennonite Life*, (September 1986): 17-20.

²². An image used by Gordon, "U.S. Women's History."

²³ Perhaps the missionary experiences of Mennonite women, in which many were granted more autonomy and power in the mission field than they were in the home communities, would be emphasized in a more inclusive MEA. The 1960s and 1970s in which women started to attend Mennonite seminary and obtain decision-making positions in the church might also be viewed as a critical period in Mennonite women's history. More work at the congregational level needs to be done in order to sustain or disprove these theses.

²⁴ Sharon Klingensmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church, 1900-1930," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (July 1980): 163-207.

²⁵ Klingensmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church," 167.

²⁶ Klingensmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church," 190.

²⁷ Klingensmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church," 170.

²⁸ An earlier attempt to document the MWMS is found in Melvin Gingerich, "The Mennonite Woman's Missionary Society," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 37 (April 1963): 113-125, 37 (July 1963): 214-233.

²⁹ Several articles begin this process. See Hope Nisly, "A Mennonite Woman in 'Thanksgiving Town': Edith Swartzendruber Nisly's Work Experience 1935-1941," *Labor's Heritage* 3 (January 1991): 24-33, 48-53; and Priscilla Stuckey-Kauffman, "A Woman's Ministry: Clara Brubaker Shank, 1869-1958," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (July 1986): 404-428.

³⁰ Steven D. Reschly & Katherine Jellison, "Production Patterns, Consumption Strategies, and Gender Relations in Amish and Non-Amish Farm Households in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, 1935-1936," *Agricultural History*, 67 (Spring 1993): 134-162.

³¹ Kimberly D. Schmidt, "Transforming Tradition: The Effects of Religion and Economics on Women's Work in Two Mennonite Communities, 1930-1990," (Ph.D. dissertation, Binghamton University, 1995).

³² Unpublished papers on women and work from the Quiet in the Land conference include Phyllis Brien Hammerstrom, "Keepers of the Home: Contemporary Baptist Women and Work Outside the Home"; Marilyn Lehman, "Separate But Equal: Women's Place in Amish Society"; Tracey A. Werner & Ronald J. Wilson, "Identity, Role Models, and Non-Traditional Careers for Mennonite Women of Anabaptist Tradition"; Steven D. Reschly, "They Don't Believe in Recreation": Household Budgets and the Consumption of Gender in Depression-Era Lancaster County"; and Anne Taylor Stotzfus, "From Farm Wife to Entrepreneur: New Trends in Lancaster County Amish Women's Work."

³³ The *Journal of Mennonite Studies* focused its 1989, volume 6, issue to the topic of women's domestic service and church formation. See Frieda Esau Klippenstein, "Doing What We Could: Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s," 145-166; and Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite Girls' Home of Winnipeg: A Home Away from Home," 100-115. Also, in David A. Haury, *A People of the City: A History of the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, 1932-82* (Wichita, Kansas: Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, 1982), 2, two former "working girls" describe how young Mennonite women worked as domestic servants and formed the nucleus of the church. Haury found that many of the early members of the church were working girls from nearby Mennonite farming areas.

³⁴ Marlene Epp, "Mennonite Women Pioneering in Paraguay," *Anabaptist Women* (forthcoming); and *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (University of Toronto Press, 2000).

³⁵ Although no monographs or books have been written on the topic, analysis of women's dress has received more attention than perhaps any other area in Mennonite and Amish women's studies. An early scholarly publication to address the women's dress issue was Donald B. Kraybill, "Mennonite Women's Veiling: The Rise and Fall of a Sacred Symbol," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61 (July 1987): 298-320. More generally on the subject of clothing in Anabaptist groups, see Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonite Attire Through Four Centuries* (Breinigsville, PA: Pennsylvania German Society, 1970; Publications of the Pennsylvania German Society, Volume 4).

³⁶ Epp argues that women, more than men, were required by their churches to adhere to restrictive dress. See "Carrying the Banner of Nonconformity: Ontario Mennonite Women and the Dress Question," *Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (Fall 1990): 237-57; and "The Double Standard of Nonconformity: An Historical Perspective," *Women's Concerns Report* 17 (March-April, 1993): 7-9. The *Women's Concerns Report* is obtainable through the Committee on Women's Concerns, Mennonite Central Committee, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

³⁷ See Schmidt, "Schism: Women's Work and Dress Collided in an Amish Mennonite Church," *Anabaptist Women* (forthcoming).

³⁸ Beth Graybill, "Gendered Interpretations: Toward a Feminist Reading of Mennonite Tradition," an unpublished paper presented at "Reweaving Women's Colors: Scholarship, Curriculum and Our Lives," National Women's Studies Association Conference, June 17, 1993. Graybill applies feminist theory and ethnographic techniques to the study of conservative Mennonite women in "Women and Their Bishops in the Founding of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72 (April 1988): 251-273; and "'To Remind Us of Who We Are': An Ethnographic Exploration of Women's Dress and Gender Roles in a Conservative Mennonite Community" (MA Thesis, The University of Maryland at College Park, 1995).

³⁹ See Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *American Historical Review* 5 (Dec. 1986): 1054-55. For discussions of gender as a culturally-bound construction, see M.Z. Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (1980): 389-417 and Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, "Introduction: Accounting for Sexual Meanings" in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, Ortner and Whitehead, eds. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁴⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris, "Reflections on a Field," in Susan Ware, ed., *New Viewpoints in Women's History: Working Papers from the Schlesinger Library 50th Anniversary Conference, March 4-5, 1994* (Cambridge, MA: Radcliffe College, [1994]), p. 20.

⁴¹ Royden K. Loewen, "Household, Coffee Klatsch and Office: The Evolving Worlds of Mennonite Women in Meade, Kansas, 1945-1975," *Anabaptist Women* (forthcoming).

⁴² Beth Graybill, "The Multiple Meanings of Women's Dress in a Conservative Mennonite Community"; and Margaret Reynolds, "Breadmaking: Women and Ritual Among Order River Brethren," in *Anabaptist Women* (forthcoming).

⁴³ Richard Wright, "A Comparative Analysis of Economic Roles Within the Family: Amish and Contemporary American Women," *International Journal of Sociology and the Family* 7 (January, 1977): 55-60; Royden K. Loewen, "'The Children, the Cows, My Dear Man, and my Sister': The Transplanted Lives of Mennonite Farm Women, 1874-1900," *Canadian Historical Review* 73 (September 1992): 344-73; and *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Julia Ericksen and Gary Klein, "Women's Roles and Family Production among the Old Order Amish," *Rural Sociology* 46 (Summer 1981): 282-296.

⁴⁴ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 151.

⁴⁵ C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941-1947* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴⁷ The concept of reciprocal influence between developed and underdeveloped frameworks of women's history can be found in, for example, Claire C. Robertson, "Never Underestimate the Power of Women: The Transforming Vision of African Women's History," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 11 (1988): 439-453; and Hiroko Tomida, "The Evolution of Japanese Women's Historiography," *Japan Forum*, 8 (1996): 189-203.

⁴⁸. The "Ordnung" is the local church district's unwritten rules and prescriptions for patterns of behavior to which Amish persons adhere under the risk of censure and community expulsion. Since the Ordnung is decided locally it varies from one church district to the next.

⁴⁹. Eva Harshbarger, "The Status of Mennonite Women in Kansas in their Church and Home Relationships" (Kansas State College, MA thesis, 1945), 59-60. For a recent discussion of Amish women and beauty, see Sue Bender, *Plain and Simple: A Woman's Journey to the Amish* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 37, 105.

⁵⁰. *Topeka Commonwealth*, 1874, cited in David C. Wedel, *The Story of Alexanderwohl* (Goessel, KS: Goessel Centennial Committee, 1974), 33.

⁵¹. Bender, 105.

⁵². See Schmidt, 288.

⁵³. Di Brandt, "Shades of Sin," *Questions I Asked My Mother* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Turnstone Press, 1987), 8-11; Julia Kasdorf, "St. Francis Preaches to the Birds," *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), 8.

⁵⁴. See Note 38.

⁵⁵. For an explanation of how plain and assimilated Anabaptist groups identify themselves in relation to the broader Mennonite church, see Leo Driedger, "The Anabaptist Identification Ladder: Plain-Urban Continuity in Diversity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51 (October 1977): 278-291.

⁵⁶. A suggestion made by Reschly and Jellison, "Production Patterns."

⁵⁷. For example, a casual observer can see that among transitional groups such as Conservative Mennonites or Beachy Amish in the Midwest, women are required to wear plain dress and head coverings, whereas men dress much like other non-Mennonites in their local communities. For a scholarly treatment of the topic, see Epp, "Carrying the Banner of Nonconformity," and Schmidt, chaps. 5-8.

⁵⁸. One recent work that begins to explore the ambivalence of aggression among Mennonite men is Janet Mancini Billson, "God, Man, and the Godly Woman: Mennonite Women of Elmira and St. Jacobs, Ontario," chapter 6 of Billson, *Keepers of the Culture: The Power of Tradition in Women's Lives* (New York: Lexington Books, 1995), 195-245.

⁵⁹. Canadian researcher Issac Block found that Mennonite women are not protected from domestic violence. Acts of domestic violence among Mennonite families occur at the same rate as for Canadians as a whole. See "Domestic Abuse Among Mennonites in Winnipeg (unpublished manuscript, Mennonite Central Committee, 1991); see also Mary Anne Hildebrand, "Domestic Violence: A Challenge to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 10 (Winter 1992): 73-80.

⁶⁰. Marlene Epp, "Heroes or Yellow-bellies? Masculinity and the Conscientious Objector," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999): 107-117.

⁶¹. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992); Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

⁶². Marc A. Olshan, "Conclusion: What Good Are the Amish?" in Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan, eds., *War Against Progress: The Amish Struggle with Modernity* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 231-242.

⁶³. Gertrude Enders Huntington, "Dove at the Window: A Study of an Old Order Amish Community in Ohio" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1956), 902. Within chapter 9, "Ceremonial Integration of the Community," the sections on baptism and marriage are especially helpful.

⁶⁴. Gerda Lerner, "'Many Shinings of Truth' in a Time of Transition," in Susan Ware, ed., *New Viewpoints in Women's History: Working Papers from the Schlesinger Library 50th Anniversary Conference, March 4-5, 1994* (Cambridge, MA: Radcliffe College, [1994]), 250, 255.