



International Networks of Women's Activism and Mobility in East Central Europe and South Eastern Europe, 1848–1945

Dóra Fedeles-Czeferner

ELTE Research Centre for the Humanities

fedeles-czeferner.dora@btk.elte.hu

Until the new millennium, historical scholarship focused primarily on women and women's movements within national frameworks. Even in 2017, Francisca de Haan argued that “many feminist historians today continue to work within the national paradigm.”¹ As she observed in 2013, however, historians have started to explore inter/transnational dimensions of the history of feminism and women's movements, due in no small part to the rise of post-colonial and transnational perspectives in historiography since the 1980s and 1990s.² A growing number of scholars agree with her entirely on the necessity of the inter/transnational perspectives, as feminism and women's movements did not operate in isolation within national borders. What is indisputable is that women's history and gender studies have undoubtedly become one of the fastest growing domains of contemporary cultural and social research, especially in Western Europe and in North America.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, more and more transnational links were formed between individual women and different types of women's associations.³ As Francisca de Haan again observes, the inter/transnational dimensions of the women's movements were of key importance since this time. This internationalization can be explained partly with the congresses and other formal and informal meetings of transnational women's associations, such as the International Council of Women (1888–, Washington, D.C.), the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (1904–, Berlin, since 1926 the International Alliance

1 Haan, “Writing Inter/Transnational History.” Rupp, “Constructing Internationalism.”

2 Haan et al, *Women's Activism*, 2. Papers in this volume examine “how women in a variety of contexts and at different levels since the 1890s have challenged oppressive systems and worked for social justice.” They also focus on women in movements and associations.

3 Haan, “Writing Inter/Transnational History.” As de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis and Krassimira Daskalova highlight in the introduction of their edited volume, “‘women’ are not a unitary category, and [...] their national and transnational activism has both challenged and reproduced existing power structures and institutions.” Haan et al, *Women's Activism*, 2.

of Women), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (1915–, The Hague). These meetings provided not only information but also inspiration and support for the national women's associations that took part.⁴

Leila J. Rupp asks the following questions in her 2010 paper, in which she examines the construction of the aforementioned international organizations and seeks the prospects and limits of internationalism: "What drew women together across the borders of nationality? Who fell within the circle of we? What did it mean to profess ties across national, ethnic, and other identities?"⁵ As de Haan notes, membership in this kind of international community gave activists self-assurance in their attempts to face challenges in their own countries, and it also created conditions within which it was possible for them to take their cases to international forums, as is made plainly evidence in the articles in this special issue. This way of thinking is also mirrored in the structure of the international organizations, as each had national organizations with additional local auxiliaries. In this context, de Haan also points out that these "national building blocks [...] may even have strengthened the nationalization of women's movements by encouraging women to form national organizations."⁶

This special issue aims to explore women's activism in East Central Europe (along with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and its successor states) and South Eastern Europe between 1848 and 1990. It investigates the history and (inter)national networks of contacts of these regions' women's associations and studies the activism of their leaders through the second half of the nineteenth century until the end of the 1940s and over the rise and fall of various political regimes. The contributions transgress state borders which historically separated different activists and activisms. They adopt an interdisciplinary approach, examining the relationships among the local, national, and transnational/international dynamics of women's activism.

Many people inaccurately still believe that feminism never existed in East Central Europe or South Eastern Europe. Consequently, a large part of writings on women's movements and feminism focus only on the period after 1989 without examining their roots at the turn of the twentieth century. In a 2008 article, de Haan examined the historical and political factors that might explain why the study of women's history, particularly the history of women's movements, has been underdeveloped in this region of Europe. She also

4 Haan, "Writing Inter/Transnational History."

5 Rupp, "Constructing Internationalism."

6 Haan, "Writing Inter/Transnational History."

elaborated on the negative effects of this lack of attention and proposed ways to remedy the situation. Her central point was that a “lack of knowledge about past women’s movements and feminists cannot inspire and empower contemporary women and men; the complete misconception and caricatures of past and present feminists in the media and in popular discourse cannot be effectively challenged, which in turn means that these caricatures continue to be effective weapons against contemporary feminists.”⁷

To this day, very few sustained efforts have been made to address this lacuna in the secondary literature. The 2006 project at the CEU Gender Studies Department is unique. As a result of this project, a lexicon was published that included biographies of 150 women activists from 22 countries. The articles included sources and bibliographies. At the time of its publication, its editors were motivated by books appearing in the early 2000s the titles of which had promised overviews of the history of European women but which in point of fact passed over the Central and Eastern Europe (almost) entirely.⁸ The next groundbreaking volume was published at the end of 2024. It was edited by Zsófia Lóránd, Adela Hincu, Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc, and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wislicz. This volume contains 100 sources, which are preceded by an introduction and short biographies of the authors of these writings. It also offers a selection of the most representative texts on feminism and women’s rights in East Central Europe during the interwar period and the Cold War era.⁹ Thirdly, *Aspasia*, one of the most significant peer-reviewed journal in this field since 2007, focuses on the women’s and gender history of Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe. Over the course of the roughly two decades that have elapsed since its founding, it has served as a crucial platform for scholars from this region to share their work, offering discussions of diverse topics, historical periods, methodologies, and approaches. These very important initiatives are clearly not enough, however, to compensate for the persistent gaps in the secondary literature on the subject in this region. This special issue makes a significant contribution and helps to fill these gaps.

The first contribution, “Women’s History in Greece through *The Ladies’ Journal* of Kallirhoe Siganoú-Parren: Class, National Identity, and Reformist Activism in the Formation of Women’s Associations (1887–1917)” by Marina Bantiou, analyzes how a Greek journal cultivated a gendered historical

7 Haan, “On retrieving.”

8 Haan et al, *A Biographical Dictionary*.

9 Lóránd et al, *Texts and Contexts*.

consciousness. By giving attention and discursive space to historical female figures, the journal sought to legitimize women's public roles within the framework of patriotic maternalism. This clearly demonstrates how activism can be rooted in nationalist ideology while also reflecting transnational influences. The second article, "Austro-Hungarian Women's Activism from the Southern 'Periphery' Across Ethnic Lines" by Agatha Schwartz, examines the complex local, regional, and trans-regional aspects of women's organizing in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Through the lives of four activists from different ethnic groups, it demonstrates how women's public work contributed to the improvement of their status, even when they were not directly involved in the struggle for political rights.

In the third article, "Phantom Borders and Nostalgia: German Women's Associations in the Second Polish Republic after 1918," Paula Lange explores German women's associations in the Second Polish Republic. Lange reveals how these groups, which had become part of a national minority, adapted to new political realities, showing how women's activities occurred in ever-changing social and imagined spaces. The contribution by Zsuzsa Bokor, titled "Adrift on the Periphery: The Alternative Development of Hungarian Women's Organizations in Interwar Transylvania," examines Hungarian women's organizations in interwar Transylvania, revealing how these organizations developed hybrid models of emancipation. Her discussion highlights the complex interplay of gender, ethnicity, and politics in the post-Treaty of Trianon context.

In her paper "'Terror against Women': The Struggle of 'Red' Women at the Beginning of the Nazi Era: Between Invisibility and Solidarity," Anna Veronica Pobbe focuses on the resistance efforts of "red" women at the beginning of the Nazi era. She sheds light on the often invisible solidarity among and bravery of communist women who were seen as a threat to the state. Her discussion highlights a form of activism that was not about organized political rights but about a more fundamental struggle for existence and community protection. In the last contribution, titled "The Journalistic Activity of Rosika Schwimmer from the 1890s until Her Death in a Transnational Perspective," Dóra Fedeles-Czeferner offers an examination from a transnational perspective of the career of a prominent Hungarian feminist activist and pacifist. She examines the ways in which Schwimmer used journalism as a tool for activism and self-promotion, despite the challenges and political isolation she faced. This article highlights the importance of the press as a platform for women's voices and the personal costs of such public work.

The six texts are interconnected in their shared focus on how women's activism was shaped by and responded to the tumultuous political and social landscapes of East Central Europe and Southern Eastern Europe. They all move beyond a narrow (national/political) focus on suffrage to reveal a broader spectrum of women's engagement, from journalism and social welfare to ethnic self-defense and anti-fascist resistance. Furthermore, several of the articles, particularly those by Bokor, Lange, and Schwartz, explore the critical impact of "phantom borders" and shifting national identities on women's organizing, showing how ethnicity and nationalism were not just backdrops but integral components of the struggles for recognition and agency.

The discussions in this special issue further a more nuanced understanding of women's activism in East Central Europe and Southern Eastern Europe. They also shed light on the ties between women's movements and nation building projects in the often multiethnic settings of the region. This issue further suggests, as de Haan has done with her research, the importance of "decentralizing" the scholarship on the history of women's movements and women's activism.¹⁰ It thus seeks to encourage the more vigorous and intensive inclusion of East Central European and South Eastern European regions in this scholarship as an essential complement to the continued focus on the countries of the West. It thereby echoes the urgings made almost two decades ago by Deborah Simonton, who explained that, although post-colonial and transnational approaches took root in the 1990s, experts on the subject of women's activism continue to wrestle with fact that the European/global perspective does not mean simply the study of shifts and events in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. In 2006, Simonton warned that more intense inclusion of research on Northern Europe and Central Eastern Europe should be delayed no further.¹¹ As I have noted in this introduction, progress has unquestionably been made in this area over the course of the past two decades, but historians still have a lot of work to do to make women's history of this region internationally visible. This special issue is an important contribution to this effort. We are aware, however, that further contributions require not only sedulous research and a strong knowledge of several languages, but also the support of foreign publishers and a significant amount of funding.

10 Haan, "On retrieving," 65–78.

11 Simonton, *The Routledge History*, 1–14.

Bibliography

- A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminism: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*, edited by Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Alla Loutfi. CEU Press, Budapest, 2006.
- Haan, Francisca de. "On retrieving Women's Cultural Heritage: Especially the History of Women's Movements in Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe." In *Travelling Heritages: New Perspectives on Collecting, Preserving and Sharing Women's History*, edited by Saskia Wieringa, 65–78. Amsterdam: Askant, 2008.
- Haan, Franciska de. "Writing Inter-/Transnational History: The Case of Women's Movements and Feminisms." In *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis/International History in Theory and Practice*, edited by Barbara Haider-Wilson, William D. Godsey, and Wolfgang Mueller, 501–36. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. 2017.
- Haan, Francisca de, Margaret Allen, June Purvis, and Krassimira Daskalova, eds. *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Rupp, Leila J. "Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945." In *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945*, edited by Karen Offen, 139–52. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Simonton, Deborah. *The Routledge History of Women in Europe*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Zsófia Lóránd, Adele Híncu, Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc, and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz. Budapest: CEU Press, 2024.