

## Women in Archives: A Program for Action

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**M**OVING FROM the tightly woven statistics of Mabel Deutrich and from the wealth of information and detailed analysis in the four reports to a broader view of the archival profession, we are able to judge the ways in which the movement for women's rights can aid the profession and the Society of American Archivists. I offer several general assumptions that may serve as foundation to the movement for women's rights in this profession.

First, the movement has a wide base. The public media and traditional authorities have been trying to establish the view that "women's lib"<sup>1</sup> is the outlook of a small percentage of women and that many housewives and supposedly well-adjusted women reject this outlook, preferring instead the traditional "housewife-mother" role in which males protect them and take major responsibility for their welfare. In reality, most women whom I know professionally and socially are finding new identification with the liberated woman. They may not look kindly on public demonstrations, but they now recognize the thousand ways in which, as women, they have been "put down" all their lives and have been, in effect, denied the development of their full potential; the world, in turn, has been denied the fruits of their abilities. Women have come to realize the great achievements of early feminists, particularly in the nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> I trust that readers will recognize that this term is in quotation marks because it is not accepted usage. As activists of the women's liberation movement stress, no one uses the term "black lib"; to do so would be to belittle the efforts towards black liberation; a similar usage reflects a belittling attitude to women and their efforts for equal recognition. [The author prefers that the word *black* be capitalized when it is used in racial references. The practice of this journal in such instances is to capitalize black when it is a noun and not to capitalize the word when it appears as an adjective.—ED.]

and early twentieth centuries when suffragists, abolitionists, opponents of child labor, social welfare advocates, and women educators were often the same persons and at the forefront of the major progressive movements of the day.

A second point is that the women's rights movement is clearly identified with other major drives for people's rights today—for the rights of Blacks and other minorities, for civil rights, and for an advanced socio-economic reform nationally. The contemporary impetus for women's rights came in part from these movements, as women saw that efforts in one area advanced related movements. Their analysis of the role of women led also to an understanding of the structure of society, an understanding that gives them insight into injustice. While there are differences in approach, in emphasis, and even in goals among the various women's rights groups, almost all of them recognize a common direction with the movements for greater civil rights.<sup>2</sup>

A third major premise basic to the effort to expand women's rights is that men are not the enemy—though there are certainly many men who will use every means possible to hold back the movement of women towards equality. The enemy is more accurately identified as a system, white male dominated to be sure, based on economic relationships which promote power for one group within the society at the expense of another. This system perpetuates itself through the increasing fragmentation of society and through the hostilities fostered among the fragments created. The liberation of women from shibboleths about sex differences simultaneously frees men from the illogical patterns they maintain at great cost to themselves and to society. In contrast to one position taken in these papers, I would prefer not to perpetuate the distortions in the traditional sex-role assignments, avoiding references to aggressive violent characteristics as "masculine" and to other, gentler, sympathetic qualities as "feminine."

The sections of the feminist movement most relevant to our needs have specifically extended these assumptions. They recognize that the movement is not primarily the result of moral, philosophic, or deliberate effort, but of changing technological, social, and economic conditions. It is therefore not strange that the effort to obtain equal employment opportunity is the largest common interest of the diverse

<sup>2</sup>I offer as one clear example the National Women's Political Caucus which began with representation from women across the political spectrum but which, in its first national conference in 1971, drew up a platform taking a strong stand for equal rights for black people and other minorities and for redress of economic injustice.

channels of the movement. Women today, middle-aged as well as young, unite in seeing economic equality of women and men as the key to their social and intellectual equality, a further goal which requires separate efforts but will be fully achieved only with economic equality.

One of the greatest contributions of the women's rights movement, well illustrated by Elsie Freivogel's paper in this series, has been publicizing the actual and relative positions, economic and professional, of women in the population, and exploding the long-standing myths about their reasons for working and their characteristics as employees, using the most reliable, established sources. Much more needs to be done to continue such publicity. Perhaps the most startling awakening for women of the middle class came in discovering that the proportion of women in the professions has been decreasing. Women, like minorities in other situations, must always offer outstanding qualifications in order to advance. And, adding insult to injury, the advantages of the male over the female, in the gains labeled "success" by society (i.e., salary, rank, and officeholding), increase as their simultaneous educational levels and experience grow. The fact that women are the losers even in those professions traditionally considered their domain is nowhere driven home as effectively as in the shocking pair of figures from the library profession, showing that *although 80 percent of American librarians are women, 90 percent of library administrators are men*. To most women familiar with the archival field, such figures from closely related professions will be adequate proof of the need for improvement of the situation of women archivists. But scholarly and professional organizations do not move without specific, relevant, statistical, or scientific evidence. We therefore must see that evidence beyond the beginning statistics presented here is collected for our profession.

In general, women archivists appear to be in no better position than their sisters elsewhere. No women have ever occupied the top three levels in the National Archives, i.e., the top six positions, over a period of thirty-nine years, the entire history of that institution. Rather than assuming, as we have been for many years, that the National Archives is an impenetrable fortress of male dominance, we might profit by taking a look at the Library of Congress, where a campaign launched last year by black union employees and the young activists in the American Library Association has resulted in much greater attention to a program to recruit, train, and upgrade more Blacks. Within our professional Society, the proportion of women office-holders, program speakers, committee members and chairmen

has *not* increased substantially over the years, though the proportion of women members has increased.<sup>3</sup>

We can aid the progress of women if we recognize in our own attitudes certain self-limiting approaches. In this profession, as in others, there are a few women who believe that no discrimination exists. Some even resent being tagged as women, perhaps because they fear some loss of prestige in any separate treatment that may result. It is certainly true that there are women who appear to have experienced little overt discrimination. Within most groups that have known discrimination, there are those who have advanced to *near* the top (one must emphasize *near* to the top, never to the top). These may be the truly outstanding people. Some have been aided by fortuitous circumstances in the recognition of their abilities. I do not belittle them, nor their place in the profession. Their small number, however, is almost certain evidence of the failure of other qualified persons to gain adequate recognition.

We have been shown that some of our problems may be self-made, though understandably so: we make a poor showing in areas where our abilities alone should make women shine, as in authorship. That two-thirds of women SAA members in 1971 listed no publications of any kind (two-fifths of the men also listed none) suggests a very definite need to improve our own self-image, to strike out and make names for ourselves. Do we have anything to say in print? I know we do, from the articulate voices I hear at conferences and in conversation. We need to decide how we will spend our time. There is some tendency to stay with the detail work, to allow it to occupy us rather than delegating it to assistants who cannot perform the writing and long-range guidance jobs we can accomplish. "Consciousness-raising," to which the younger women turn, can serve a useful purpose in improving that self-image.<sup>4</sup> At the same time,

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, the increase in the proportion of women in membership is not very great. From an original 28 percent of the membership, the number of women had increased by 5 percent in 1956, leveling off somewhat at about 31 percent in 1971. The criticism is more correctly directed at the *continuing* failure to appoint or nominate women in any substantial number to positions within the SAA.

<sup>4</sup> The subtle, long-range effects of the role assigned to women over the centuries is raised in pointed fashion by Gerda Lerner of the history faculty of Sarah Lawrence College: "Women are a group who for a considerable period of history were deprived of equal access to education. While they were not illiterate, their education was limited, usually to below the high school level. This was true of the majority of women until the end of the nineteenth century. It might be very useful to investigate what impact this had on female behavior, and more specifically, women's performance as a group in terms of outstanding achievement. To put it another way, how many generations of women are necessary to produce a significant number of outstanding women academicians? How many generations of college-trained women are necessary before women in sizable numbers make contributions in the sciences?"

we need to recommend the guidelines suggested by Dr. Deutrich, which will more likely assure equal consideration of publications by women, particularly for SAA awards.

Another limitation needs to be recognized. The Ph.D. is more decisive in advancement than we have previously acknowledged, reluctant as I am to draw this emphasis. As we raise our sights toward this degree, we must at the same time concentrate on ways of assuring opportunity for women to continue their formal education. Noting the difficulties that women face in taking the time for such education early in their careers, and in gaining admission to doctoral programs, remedial action might be directed to the graduate schools, to part-time employment, to child-care programs, and to more liberal leave policies.<sup>5</sup>

Our first great need, however, is for more detailed, reliable, and analytic statistics to document the need for action of specific kinds. The chief lesson from other professions is the value of having solid data on which to base recommendations. We especially need statistics on the federal archival agencies, comparing men and women employees in different grades over the years; and we must have figures on the state archival agencies, showing in each the numbers of both men and women, again comparing changes in grade levels over the years. In a field where governmental agencies loom so large, we can demand that they set an example.

Learning as much as we can from the gains already made in other professions, we might list the following methods that have been used to advantage by women in other professions. There are now forty national caucuses, committees, and special associations devoted to the status of women in the various professions. The American Sociological Association and the American Historical Association offer us perhaps the best examples of the path followed—a caucus or an ad hoc committee able to provide a hard statistical study, from which it was logical to move to action of the membership authorizing a permanent committee having watchdog and grievance functions and taking a strong stand against discriminatory practices. In the

When do women begin to move from the small-scale, home-centered creative forms, the fiction, poetry, and article-writing, to the larger-scale work within the framework of cultural institutions? Is the proverbial dearth of female philosophers really a result of some innate distinctiveness of female mental function or rather the product of centuries of environmental and institutional deprivation?" From "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," *Journal of Social History*, 3 (Fall 1969): 61.

<sup>5</sup> Parenthetically, it should be noted that, if this profession developed standardized criteria for different levels and types of positions, the Ph.D. might be placed in a more practical perspective, thus altering the present advantage that the male Ph.D. holder exercises. Our present emphasis, nonetheless, should be placed on increasing the number of women with advanced degrees, particularly the doctorate.

sciences, legal steps are being taken to reverse the exclusionary policies of the federal government committees which review research grants and contracts, and another group of scientific women has supplied the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare with the names of candidates for such grant review panels. Job rosters, or rosters of women with special skills in a particular profession, have been effective methods in physics, mathematics, history, sociology, librarianship, and other fields. The method can be used as well for committee assignments and speaker recommendation. Although results in the American Library Association are not as far reaching as may have been implied, the methods offer some guidance for us: ALA activities of the last few years in the direction of greater democracy and support for minorities have aided women's rights, and vice versa. The ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table Task Force on Women's Liberation has provided a place for women to learn and get support from others of like mind and problems, served as an information resource, developed bibliographies, and provided job aid.

Turning our attention to the history of women, we recognize the failure to provide adequate access to documentary resources. There is no comprehensive listing of source materials readily available, and only one of the major depositories has published a catalog. Even the papers presented here have not adequately surveyed the major sources of women's records. Our cooperation in the preparation of special guides to the sources of women's history should be one of our first concerns. It is clear that we need both special repositories of women's records and additional women's records in existing general repositories. We might, in fact, hope that the presence of a women's history archives in a particular area would stimulate other local repositories to collect the papers of women related to the respective subject fields of those repositories.

Both in the collecting and preservation of the original records of women's history and in drawing out the hidden information through inventories, special guides, and union catalogs, we can use our awareness of the issues to increase public knowledge. In every depository in the country, there are important records describing the role of women, most of those records waiting for someone to explore their potential. The Wayne State University Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs devotes its Summer 1972 *Newsletter* to pinpointing those of its collections that illustrate the role of women in the labor movement. The Philadelphia City Archives *News Letter*, October 1972, directs its lead article to particular records in its care that detail women's history. No doubt, these are among many that

will soon appear as guides to alert researchers to the forgotten history that can bring new insight. To illustrate: In preparing this paper, I recalled names I had seen in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. My call to the curator brought forth a full page, listing twenty-five major collections that total about 700 feet, related to women's rights leaders and organizations. There are similar records already collected in many other places. We need to search them out and make the information available. Those who prepare and publish guides to sources of women's history will probably require special funds. Adequate financial support for the preservation and promotion of women's history sources should be one of our central aims.<sup>6</sup>

Gains will be made for the total study of history as we uncover the history of women—for example, their association with social movements and their working-class activities—and as we extend our meager knowledge of the history of the family. The search for women's history will give impetus to the “new history” which, to deepen and broaden our knowledge of all human history, digs out the unreported information about the nonhero and the movements of the nameless thousands. Some of the most respected traditional historians were—and are—the worst in their treatment (or neglect) of women. But again I take heart, noting advances made as the result of efforts to remedy the long-standing neglect of black history. The reader may be familiar with Irving Sloan's analysis, *The Negro in Modern American History Textbooks*.<sup>7</sup> The new fourth edition found, for the first time, all the nineteen texts examined acceptable both in scope and in treatment of material covered, the only major criticism being a failure to relate black history to the nation's total

<sup>6</sup> It is worth mentioning that, while the other major women's depositories referred to in this group of papers have been relatively well supported with private and some government funds, the Women's History Library at Berkeley has been in dire financial straits; its continued operation is threatened, since its original founding fund was depleted and requested grant money was not forthcoming. It needs what help can be obtained through both individual personal contributions and assistance in obtaining larger grants. The Women's History Library, created and directed by Laura X, is called an “archive” but is more accurately described by its corporate name, the Women's History Research Center, Inc. It serves as a source of information on bibliographies, periodicals, tapes, films, course outlines, and related materials documenting the contemporary women's liberation movement. The address is 2324 Oak Street, Berkeley, Calif. 94708.

I understand also that the Bancroft Library Regional Oral History Office in Berkeley has been trying for the past ten years to get financial support for a project of interviewing the suffragists still living. One woman is reportedly interviewing on her own time, but funds are needed for completion of that work and for its extension.

<sup>7</sup> Irving Sloan, *The Negro in Modern American History Textbooks*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: The American Federation of Teachers, 1972).

development. Archivists' awareness of and sensitivity to the efforts of the women's rights movement can result in more accurate historical works, particularly as this awareness enables us to be better archivists and curators of women's records.

Are there different questions we must ask of the past, in order to serve women and other neglected groups? Knowledge of such questions could affect our methods of describing manuscripts and archives or our approaches to inventorying and indexing records. To learn the proper questions the historian will ask, we need to develop long-range cross-currents with the women in related professions or those concerned with women's studies. We might thus develop input into the *Newsletter* of the Coordinating Committee of Women in the Historical Profession, contacts with the AAUP Committee W for common purposes, and useful relationships with similar groups. One effort might be a page or section in the *American Archivist*, devoted to women's studies, to bring together information from these different sources, under an editor for this section, who would have dual responsibility for collecting such information, and for forwarding information from the archival profession to interested groups, providing both a clearinghouse for information and cross-fertilization of new ideas on research and related techniques.

This suggests a consideration of other possible action proposals. What recommendations might we make to our own Society of American Archivists? We might first take note of certain SAA characteristics that may affect our choice of methods. With the proportion of women in the SAA approximately one-third, rather than some 80 percent as in ALA, limiting our immediate power, we should recognize the need for informed male support. The hold of tradition on our profession is strong, slowing its ability to move quickly on new issues. Moreover, the issue of women's rights has not been raised previously in the Society, except in the Report of the Committee of the 1970's. However, I believe that our colleagues, steeped in American history, will respond to a call for justice when the issue is correctly raised.

There are a number of possible, long-range methods by which the SAA might help achieve the goals of equal opportunity for women in the profession and in the SAA and of adequate attention to the history of women. I offer the following suggestions:

1. Establish a permanent Society committee on the status of women in the profession to gather statistics on their relative and hopefully improving status, to serve as watchdog on observance of standards, to refer complaints to proper authorities, and to give continuing assistance in other forms that can improve the relative position of women.

2. Create a job roster and a related roster of women in the profession seeking employment.

3. Develop controls on use of the *SAA Newsletter* to restrict its use from employers who show sex preference in hiring or against whom complaints are registered. I would go beyond the mere exclusion of sex from the ads listed, an advance that was achieved after the *Newsletter* was begun.

4. Investigate specific agencies when complaints are received against them and use sanctions against those which refuse to develop needed improvements.

5. Assist archivists in using government equal employment facilities.

6. Develop a standard or guidelines to equal employment opportunity for the profession and distribute such a document to all known institutions in the country with archives and manuscript collections; use sanctions against any institutions which openly refuse to follow such standards or where blatant absence of such standards has been shown.

7. Cooperate with the National Archives and Records Service, various archival institutes, and library schools, to have a larger number of women included on the Regional Archives Advisory Councils and on the faculties of the institutes and library-school archives courses, supplying names of candidates when necessary.

8. Cooperate with institutes and library schools to develop courses on the role of women in archival institutions and libraries and women in historical and documentary resources.

9. Provide child-care services at annual conferences, continuing beyond what may presently be the fad stage. (The lack of use of such service provided at the 1972 meeting requires that the membership be queried on its future use and on supplementary measures that may be needed.)

10. Prepare one or more publications on the contributions made by women archivists and on the role of women archivists.

These are some possible long-term devices, not all of which will necessarily meet with an easy approval in the Society and most of which will need considerable preliminary work before they can be accomplished.

More immediate steps should be possible now, leading to some of the above goals in the near future. These might include:

1. Organize a women's caucus to do certain purposeful, self-serving jobs that a committee could not do, e.g., stimulate the writing of articles for publication or for the Gondos Award ("commission" them in a sense).

2. Include at the next annual meeting a workshop on affirmative action proposals that can assure equality of employment opportunity for women, demonstrating there how to write proposals, how to investigate, and how to file charges of discrimination—the practical aspects of making equal opportunity work. Such workshops might also be planned on a regional basis, either with the regional archival organizations or as a

type of symposium like those sponsored by the Society and the National Archives and Records Service.

3. The current employment crisis, appearing particularly in the library and historical fields and reflected in archives, calls for some immediate attention and requires that we stress the need for urgency in our proposals for action. We must guarantee that women not suffer the classic fate of "least favored, first fired." It may be that approval of tenured part-time employment, with all benefits prorated, should be given special attention as a partial, immediate remedy. That four universities of stature (Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, and Wesleyan) have made adjustments of this sort lends weight to such a proposal.<sup>8</sup>

4. Originally included here was a proposal for the Society immediately to set up a committee, the majority of whom would be women, to collect comparative information on the career patterns, salaries, responsibilities, and working conditions of men and women in the profession. As a result of a discussion at the 1972 meeting, Wilfred Smith, the new Society president, in one of his first acts of office, appointed such a committee. It is obvious that the report of this committee should lead to some of the permanent proposals suggested above.

A few summary words of caution are useful to remember as we look toward a program of action. Any separate approach we use for women at this time should be viewed as temporary—a means to achieve equality in a situation that makes it otherwise unattainable, an approach that can be dropped once such equality is assured. Our enemy is not the male but the system which perpetuates the inequality; he too is a victim. We should not be drawn into divisive approaches of Black vs. Woman, for our stake is the same as that of the black man and woman and not in opposition to their needs; we are allies in the movement toward a society that guarantees equal opportunity. Each person's own continuing knowledge and activity in the movement for women's rights is the best guarantee of bringing change, better than any particular kind of machinery we set up, though we need the best machinery to make the knowledge and activity effective.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Cook, professor of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, points out that the kind of part-time employment now generally available to women not only reduces the return accruing to them (through low salaries and lack of fringe benefits) but also places them in an academic track from which they will find it difficult to be considered for possible future full-time positions; see her "Sex Discrimination at Universities: An Ombudsman's View," *AAUP Bulletin*, 58 (Autumn 1972): 280-81.