





YEARBOOK OF WOMEN'S HISTORY /  
JAARBOEK VOOR VROUWENGESCHIEDENIS 37

# Gender and Archiving: Past, Present, Future



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# Editorial

## *Gender and Archiving: Past, Present, Future*

The idea for the 37<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Yearbook of Women's History* was born after the international conference on archiving in the twenty-first century organized by Atria in December 2015, marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the IAV Collection. Two researchers at Atria, director Renée Römkens and manager of collections Antia Wiersma, served as guest editors of this volume. They built on the conference papers, and added additional contributions from an array of regional and institutional backgrounds. Additionally, this volume is the result of a longstanding collaboration between the *Yearbook of Women's History* and Atria, *Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History*. As such, this Yearbook is a joint effort of two institutions that share their aims, their target groups and their background. As editors of the Yearbook we are happy that this collaboration has now materialized in a tangible product.

Archives are fascinating places. Through their collections they enable us simultaneously to peek into the past and envision the future. Since the 1930s, women's archives and libraries have actively contributed to the empowerment of women worldwide; their achievements cannot be underestimated. Atria is a case in point: since its foundation in 1935, Atria – then the 'International Archive for the Women's Movement' – has played a pivotal role in collecting and disseminating material on women and gender. The editorial board of the Yearbook deems it important to highlight Atria's work – although this Yearbook also exceeds the achievements of Atria. By presenting articles on archival theory and history alternated with shorter pieces on present-day archival practices, this Yearbook focuses on the role and influence that archives can have in empowering women and disseminating knowledge. We hope that the hybrid nature of this volume, which can also be seen as a metaphor for the archives it describes, contributes to this.

Atria is a fine example of the rise of archival institutions in the first decades of the twentieth century and the changes such institutions have gone through over the years. For feminist archives, both the constant need to be alert to one's own specific biases and the constant need to keep implementing new techniques bring about certain challenges. The articles in this volume discuss several of those challenges from different viewpoints.

We would like to use the occasion of the publication of the 37<sup>th</sup> Yearbook to emphasize our longstanding ambition to push each new edition of the Yearbook into theoretically more sophisticated and stimulating directions. To be able to do this we

are in need of a few extra hands and minds. We would therefore like to make an appeal to enthusiastic young academics to join our editorial team and help us to achieve that goal.

Again, we would especially like to thank Saskia Bultman for her invaluable English editing.

*Eveline Buchheim, Saskia Bultman, Marjan Groot, Evelien Walhout, Ingrid de Zwarte*

# The Archival Turn

## ARCHIVING AS A TOOL FOR EMPOWERMENT

RENÉE RÖMKENS & ANTIA WIERSMA

The act of creating in general and of writing in particular is a powerful and empowering act.<sup>1</sup> To leave a mark on history has been the goal of many who held positions of power or aspired to hold these positions. The act of storing or archiving can be considered as one of the most powerful acts, because it shows how ‘governments and states wish to safeguard relevant documents and cement one interpretation of history into place.’<sup>2</sup> This statement also holds true for individuals because these acts determine the way historical actors are remembered over time. Over the last centuries women have used both processes of creating and archiving to enhance their identity and leave their mark in an otherwise male dominated world. The historical experiences of underrepresented and under-documented groups, such as women, but also religious and ethnic minorities, and LGBT individuals, were until recently often overlooked in mainstream history, even though these groups kept records, created archives and made a lasting mark on history through writing and creating. Over the last century, with the rise, mounting influence and consequently the mainstreaming of women’s history and gender studies, many of these historical gaps were filled, stereotypes were countered and gender as a social and cultural construct has been studied and debated. Pioneers such as Gerda Lerner (1920-2013) served as trailblazers and many (mostly women) historians followed suit in the United States and beyond. Women’s archives and libraries turned out to be valuable sources for sharing and producing feminist knowledge, provide safe spaces for thinking and activism, and document the history of feminism. Thanks to the broadening perspective of scholars and their interaction with archives and libraries the realization that marginalized groups in society also tended to be underrepresented in special

archives grew within archival and library institutions. This *Yearbook of Women's History* focuses on the past, present and future of women's archives and libraries as a powerful authorizing act to enable scholarship, feminist activism and cultural production.<sup>3</sup>

When you look up the word 'archive' in a dictionary<sup>4</sup> you will find it is both a noun (a place to hold historical records and documents or a collection of documents and papers from an organization or a family/person) as well as a verb (the act of preserving and storing materials). In the traditional view, an archive houses the records of lawmakers and those who hold positions of power. For a long time, the act of archiving was perceived as a neutral and objective act. In their 2008 article on the archival policy and practice of the IAW (International Archive for the Women's Movement), Annette Mevis and Francisca de Haan used the term 'positivist perspective on history' for this, now dated, notion in which archival materials are seen as providing an uncontested foundation for 'the truth about history'. They argue that this idea 'seriously underestimates the complex nature of not only writing history, but also of collecting and preserving'.<sup>5</sup> In this traditional view, long since criticized, the archivist supposedly describes the material without judgement, classifies it according to standards and does not or as little as possible intervene in the materials. But, of course, archivists, as well as librarians, are not immune to bias: they are only human. Structural biases skew the archival records as well as library collections.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, each choice to include or exclude material reflects wider social and historical power dynamics. The traditional view on archives and libraries also did not take into account the fact individuals or organizations actively created their archival legacy, most often with the purpose of documenting their lives and steering future appreciation or recollection. They (or their relatives) made decisions about their papers and other materials with respect to what to keep or what to discard as, for instance, the example of well-known Dutch first wave feminist Aletta Jacobs (1854-1929) shows. After writing her autobiography, she appears to have destroyed the letters she received from her husband, Carel Victor Gerritsen, who died in 1905.<sup>7</sup> Besides this, the traditional view did not take into account the fact that archival institutions have to follow rules and regulations with respect to their policies on collecting, whether it is state laws which dictate what to preserve or policies drawn up by the institutions themselves, or merely the simple fact the archive or library was created for a special purpose such as collecting women's sources or LGBT materials. This is even further complicated by the fact that archivists tend to document what they know by whom they know, and that archival collections often reflect the interests and identities of their curators.<sup>8</sup> This is aptly illustrated by De Haan and Mevis in their aforementioned article. They cite Dutch state archivist Robert Fruin who, in 1917, said about the archive of a Dutch school that trained women in cooking skills: 'Neither society, nor science, nor the arts would lose anything if this archive were not to be preserved but were to be lost.'<sup>9</sup> In 2013, Kären Mason and Tanya Zanish-Belcher stressed that archivists must be conscious of and open about their biases, carefully evaluating the decisions they make about collection development.<sup>10</sup>

Even if the traditional view on archives as objective and neutral institutions does not hold up anymore – and has, in fact, been widely criticized – archives are still



FIG. 1 Tour through Atria's library and archive during the International conference on archiving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Collection IAV in December 2015 (Photograph by Marieke Lucas).

systems of power in themselves, and an established archive can be seen as a powerful authorizing act. As Michel Foucault puts it in his seminal publication *The Archeology of Knowledge*, archives are: '[t]he institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation.'<sup>11</sup> This was already understood 35 years earlier by three Dutch women. In December 1935, they founded the IAV, which is one of the oldest collections of women's documents worldwide. The three founders, Willemijn Posthumus-van der Goot (the first Dutch woman to earn a doctorate degree in Economics, focusing on women's labour participation), Rosa Manus (suffragist from the early days on, international networker *pur sang* and peace activist) and Johanna Naber (self-trained historian specialized in women's issues, active from the end of the nineteenth century) had a clear mission when launching the IAV: to document the history of women's movements, conduct scientific research and set up a specialized academic library.<sup>12</sup> Rosa Manus wrote in a letter to Jane Addams on 29 July 1930: 'The International Archive for the Women's Movement is fulfilling a unique task not only in at last providing the possibility of the historiography of the past, and the consolidation of what is being archived at present, but also in creating a sound basis for the important development of women's work in the future in order to ensure a constructive and harmonious growth in human relationships.'<sup>13</sup> Their mission was intended as a powerful critical intervention in the context of prevailing traditions in which the work of women's organizations and women's voices were often silenced or marginalized. In their eyes the absence

of the women's perspective in mainstream academia needed correction. They solved this by founding a specialized institution not only as a repository of documents but also to provide a more inclusive account of history and to produce knowledge about the position of women in society in their times, but with an eye to the future. In doing so they were what Tanya Zanish-Belcher and Anke Voss called 'countering the establishment argument that not enough sources were available.'<sup>14</sup> Half a century later, this argument was still used by many mainstream historians, and prompted the rise of many women's archives, libraries and documentation centres in many locations all over the world during the 1980s and 1990s. Kate Eichhorn echoes this idea when she describes the second wave feminist movement:

For a generation or two born during and following the rise of the second wave feminist movement, inaugurating private and semi-public collections as archives and donating them to established public and university archives and special collections is central how to they legitimize their voice in the public sphere.<sup>15</sup>

So even though the traditional view on archives and the act of archiving no longer prevails, archives as institutions serve important other functions besides being repositories of (historical) documents and papers, and the same can be said about libraries. Mason and Zanish-Belcher draw the same conclusion when they state that: 'Women's archives have a greater meaning than the collections they house. Their very existence confers weight on the value of women's history, increases the demand for sources and offers the important opportunity to promote and enhance the study of women's history.'<sup>16</sup> Dagmar Wernitznig gives another reason why women's archives hold a greater meaning than simply storing information. As she puts it, '[t]he mentality of considering one's work and life important enough to be preserved for succeeding generations also exemplified a certain degree of liberation. Women's files refused to be banished to the domestic sphere anymore.'<sup>17</sup>

The traditional concept of an archive as a storehouse of knowledge or a repository of historical documents also suggests some form of completeness. In other words, everything that needs to be known or should be known can be found in archives and libraries, according to this view. However, as Sue Breakell argues:

in reality [...] the archive by its very nature is characterised by gaps. Some of these are random – the result of spilt cups of tea, or the need for a scrap of paper for a shopping list. Any archive is a product of the social processes and systems of its time, and reflects the positions and exclusions of different groups or individuals within those systems.<sup>18</sup>

Besides this important factor of randomness, the influence of institutional policies of collecting is evident. It is fair to say that the origins of the oldest women's libraries and archives in the world, which were founded in the Western world in the 1930s, among

them the IAV in Amsterdam, trace back to white middle-class feminists. As Wernitznig has indicated, most interwar archival projects maintained this blind spot.<sup>19</sup> Only roughly fifty years ago did the question of how to ‘collect the memories of migrant women and other marginalized groups that have not always left behind minutes or other paper documents of their meetings’<sup>20</sup> start to be addressed. Additionally, the question ‘what is a woman?’ arose, since the meanings of womanhood and gender change over time and between cultures, classes and religions.

In 2008, Breakell concluded: ‘There is no one fixed meaning of any archival document: we may know the action that created the trace, but its present and future meanings can never be fixed.’<sup>21</sup> Niamh Moore, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley and Maria Tamboukou echoed this when they wrote in 2017: ‘[a] widely held but misconceived assumption is that the documents that archives hold are always from and about the past.’<sup>22</sup> According to Breakell, libraries and archives are host to documents of the past in order to interpret the present.<sup>23</sup> This is reiterated by Moore et al. when they claim that many archives are organized around contemporary concerns and interests, while the contents of these archives are always understood within the present moment.<sup>24</sup> As a result, archival material is subject to multiple readings, and the lines between archiving as retrieving and storing material and researching as analysing the content of the material are blurred.<sup>25</sup> In this view, the librarian and the archivist play an important role as creators of collections as well as situated mediators of the gathered information.

New forms of collecting documentation of women’s lives were developed from the 1970s onwards, during the second feminist wave. These included using oral history methods as well as cross-overs with different cultural practices in order to close, for instance, gender and ethnic gaps. Pro-active collecting helps to fill in the gaps in the historical record by encouraging people who have not traditionally been donors of papers to participate in building and using diverse archival collections.<sup>26</sup> However, these new methods also raise new questions. This is illustrated, for example, by Josien Pieterse and Grietje Keller, who aptly called an oral history interview ‘a dance around the camera’.<sup>27</sup> The life experiences of women recorded on camera during oral history interviews are not fixed but should rather be seen as expressions in a specific social and historical context. Pieterse and Keller also refer to Donna Haraway in saying that all knowledge is produced within certain power structures, and that interviewers and researches must take responsibility for the influence they exercise over the knowledge and information they produce.<sup>28</sup> In oral history interviews, the interviewer is as important as the interviewee and their interaction should be documented alongside the interview itself, so that future researchers will know how to ‘read’ the information provided. Mason and Zanish-Belcher argue that women’s archives have a particular stake in developing or refining innovative techniques so that they may rectify the omission of women from the historical records in the past and avoid making the mistake of preserving a historical record that is skewed by the absence of particular groups in the future.<sup>29</sup> However, they also warn us ‘women’s archives today may have a feminist bias and may fail to document groups that do not share these values or who actively oppose these values,

such as right-wing organizations or right-to-life groups.<sup>30</sup> This was something the International Information Centre and Archive for the Women's Movement (IIAV)<sup>31</sup> was well aware of when, in 2008, they interviewed a number of women who were active members of the Dutch National Socialist Party (NSB), and who collaborated with the Nazi's before and during the Second World War, and when they interviewed the daughters of these women, as part of a follow-up project. These oral history projects, which were part of a national project to document as well as to safeguard the heritage of the Second World War, evoked a lot of emotions and heated debate within the institute and beyond. Central to this debate was the question of why the voices of these women should be heard instead of the voices of the heroines of the war or the feminist movement. One of the main reasons for the institute to choose these women as subjects for this project related to the fact that the institute owns the news bulletin of the Dutch National Socialist Women's Organization (NSVO). Another important factor feeding into the debate is the taboo that still exists in Dutch society on membership of the NSB, for men and women alike. Although much research has been done on the membership of men, less is known about female membership. These interviews were intended to give more background on the reasons and motives for women to actively join this party. The third and final motive was more mundane. The old age of the Dutch national-socialist women still alive created a sense of urgency, as this meant that it might not be long before these women passed away and the opportunity to interview them ceased to exist. Passing up this opportunity would mean that their voices would not be heard at all. All in all, from a collecting policy point of view, this project was an unique opportunity to obtain a collection of life stories from an otherwise less documented group of women. These interviews have unique added value. They add a layer to written history because they give first-hand and personal experiences, narrated by the women who were part of the national-socialist movement themselves – even though, due to the existing taboo on the issue, many of these interviews will not be publicly accessible until a number of years after their passing away.<sup>32</sup>

The traditional view of libraries and archives as neutral and objective warehouses of information has also rapidly changed due to the so-called digital turn. This turn challenges traditional views on collecting, poses questions about sustainability and requires new forms of dissemination of information as well as new forms of connecting with users. This development started with the ever growing influence of IT in society in the early 1990s. This also had an effect on libraries and archives. As discussed by Tilly Vriend, these institutions became part of the digital community. Vriend describes the efforts of the IIAV with respect to the digital turn and provides a good example of the way of thinking about digitization and the use of ICT a decade ago.<sup>33</sup>

In the twenty-first century, information has taken on new shapes and forms. Much of formal written communication nowadays takes place digitally, mainly via e-mail. The way we informally interact and communicate, what's more, has changed dramatically under the influence of applications such as Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram. These so-called social media play a huge role in the lives of many as their main form of social interaction and their main source of information. Users no