

[Conference Report: Was it a man's world? Intersections of gender and global history. August 25-27, 2022. Convenors: Christof Dejung \(Bern\) and Angelika Epple \(Bielefeld\)](#)

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Conference Report

Was it a man's world? Intersections of gender and global history.

Conference in Muntelier, Switzerland, August 25-27, 2022, Convenors: Christof Dejung (Bern); Angelika Epple (Bielefeld)

"It's a man's, man's world," sang James Brown in 1966. And yet, already the second line of the song, "man made the cars to take us over the road", contains only half of the historical truth. If Bertha Benz hadn't driven her husband's invention the twelve hours from Mannheim to Pforzheim on her own in 1888—patching cracked ignitions with hatpins and garters, inventing the brake disc en-passant—what would the global industrial revolution of the 19th century have ultimately looked like? Or, in other words: Was it really a man's world?

This very question formed the focus of the conference "Was it a man's world? Intersections of gender and global history," which took place between the 25th and the 27th of August 2022, at the Hotel Bad Murtensee, in Muntelier, Switzerland. Organised jointly by the Faculty of History, Philosophy and Theology of Bielefeld University and the Institute of History of the University of Bern, the event was financially supported by the Max and Elsa Beer-Brawand Fund of the University of Bern. As the convenors CHRISTOF DEJUNG (Bern) and ANGELIKA EPPLE (Bielefeld) pointed out in their introduction, the conference aimed at contesting the structural silencing of female actors and the neglect of other, non-binary aspects of gender within global history, in order to "establish a portrait of the 19th century that

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integrates gender as a valuable category". Such an approach is particularly urgent, because the category of gender does not yet form part of the analytical framework of global history even though it intersects significantly with other much-researched categories, like race, class, and religion. While there is already a considerable number of books in colonial history and in area studies that take gender seriously as a category of historical analysis (for example the works of Catherine Hall, Ann Laura Stoler or Lora Wildenthal, to name only a few),¹ the situation is quite different in the case of global history. Leading global historians such as Christopher Bayly, Jürgen Osterhammel, Akira Iriye, or Dipesh Chakrabarty have described the history of the interconnectedness of the world without paying much attention to gender as a meaningful element within this process. Until now, the organisers noted, most of global history writing has been either masculine or gender-blind. In the global-historical story-collection of steamships, railways, and global markets, it's big men who drive the world; women do not show up, neither as historical actors nor as historians. Queer and transgender voices are also significantly underrepresented in global history writing. What does this lack of representation mean for global history as a distinct field of research? And whose voices are currently silenced in it? Dejung and Epple encouraged the conference participants to approach the global from the conceptual vantage point of gender, and vice versa. This relational thinking, the convenors suggested, could help to develop a complementary understanding of both categories, and, above all, to pave the ground for a new way of writing global history.

The first panel of the conference explored the historical relationship between global migration and gender order. As the first speaker (ELISA CAMISCIOLI, Binghamton) noted, research so far has paid relatively little attention both to gender as a determining factor in migration dynamics and to the numerical significance of female migrants. Camiscioli's own contribution focused on how the emigration of European (especially French) women to the Americas in the 19th century was structured by gender-bias. In her paper, she argued that "human trafficking" functions historically as a normative term rather than as an analytical category. In particular, she demonstrated how the "trafficking"-discourse, organised around categories such as "vulnerable female migrants" and "willing prostitutes", not only influenced the development of migration control regimes in the US and in Cuba in the 19th century, but even today contributes to the effacement of agency and of voluntary forms of movement by female sex workers. In their contribution, JOHANNA TÖNSING (Paderborn) and MUSTAFA AKSAKAL (Bielefeld) addressed the perspectives and motivations of migrants exhibited in human zoos, which have so far been silenced by "big-men"-history. By narrowing their focus to the life of Abraham Ulrikab—an Inuk

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who was exhibited together with his family in several European cities during the late 19th century—Tönsing and Aksakal explored the scope for action available to subaltern migrants. Employing a micro-historical approach that drew upon Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space, the contributors provided an alternative account of the history of human zoos in which not only the colonial gaze, but also specific individual decisions become perceptible, and gender dynamics can be scrutinised. The contribution pointed to future possibilities of looking more closely at gender-specific power constellations and female scopes of action in colonial contexts.

At the beginning of the second panel, "Women, mobility and the global circulation of ideas", FREDERIK SCHULZE (Bielefeld) examined the global impact of female European travellers who visited South America during the early 19th century. Schulze argued that female travel writing on Latin America functioned as a medium that brought European audiences into contact with the emancipatory experiences of Latin American women. Such writing thus helped to globalize imaginaries about gender and ultimately influenced proto-feminist thought within European societies. In addition, its very existence calls into question the prevailing notion of the 19th-century global reading public as a primarily male sphere. In the second part of the panel, AUREA MOTA (Barcelona) and AINAMAR RODAGUT (Barcelona) discussed the role of women as cultural mediators in the 19th and 20th century. By providing five case-studies of Spanish-speaking women, the speakers showed how displacements, cultural entanglements and personal networks created by female intellectuals connected European and American societies in the making of a global modernity.

The first day of the conference culminated with the keynote by LYNN HUNT (Los Angeles) on "Women, tea, and western notions of superiority". In her talk, Hunt argued that European notions of civilization and of cultural superiority took shape in global contexts mediated in crucial ways by women of both European and non-European origin. Analysing the contemporary use of the terms "modern times", "civilization" and "modern nations", Professor Hunt's talk ranged from a discussion of classics like Montesquieu and John Millar to the influence of travel literature (in particular that describing the New World) and ultimately addressed the role of women as a driving force of the European consumer goods market. Drawing on the example of drinking Chinese tea as an occasion for conversation, Hunt demonstrated how female consumption patterns, along with the male gaze directed toward them, played a key role in translating the global into the domestic sphere during the era of the Enlightenment. Consequently, according to Hunt, women made the domestic sphere "an - if not *the* - engine of globalization."

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The second day of the conference began with a panel on fashion and bodily hygiene in a global context. In her presentation on self-care, domestic well-being and bodily hygiene, SANGITA SAHA (Michigan) posed stimulating questions about the articulation of gender in the context of the consumption of beauty products among middle-class women in Bengal. Saha argued that the family constituted a space of consumption in which women could face constraints and pressures to subordinate their own consumption desires to the needs of the family. However, the development of social differences in the 19th-century made it imperative for Bengali middle-class women to reject this subordination in order to express their status and social distinction. KATJA JANA's (Berlin) contribution focused on late 19th-century bourgeois masculinity in the Ottoman Empire and its sartorial codes. According to Jana, modern male dress has often been overlooked due to its alleged uniformity; and yet it is precisely this uniformity that constitutes the significance of male apparel within the evolution of gender-specific norms. Taking the headpiece of the "fez" as her main example, Jana demonstrated how male fashion was crucial to the formation of modern Ottoman masculine identity, oscillating as it did between bourgeois standards and national(ist) claims to authenticity. Focusing on regional case studies, these two contributions opened up new ways of formulating global-historical arguments by comparing regionally specific phenomena with processes in other parts of the world. Jana's references to the work of Robert Ross, for example, helped to situate the Ottoman case in the broader context of the worldwide standardisation of dress codes.²

During the next panel on "Bodily practices and social order", SIMONA LUKMINAITE (University of Hyogo) showed how in 19th-century Japan the martial arts were gradually included in the physical education of girls and women, who thus came to participate in the modernizing project through these bodily practices. This inclusion blurred the lines between the sexes and shifted the character of martial arts from a traditionalist to a modernist, sport-like conception. Subsequently, STEFAN RINKE (Berlin) presented his paper on "Global representations of the 'American Girl' and the transformation of social norms in Chile in the Early Twentieth Century". This talk examined the relationship between transregional connections and gender-norms in the Atlantic triangle, with a special focus on Chile. As Rinke showed, when it came to discussing gender, Chile was by no means isolated, but rather deeply connected to the globalization of mass media, with its shared images and stereotypes. In particular, the image of the "Yankee Girl"—transmitted by what Rinke called the "visual revolution" driven by cinematography, lithography, and photography—stimulated discussions about the role and the rights of women in Chilean society. Both contributions once again pointed to the possibility of embedding

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local analysis in global contexts, specifically through the juxtaposition of two debates regarding female emancipation: To what extent does the national genesis of Japanese martial arts reflect a global momentum, comparable to the triumph of yoga on the Indian sub-continent or to the importance of boxing within the African American struggle for emancipation? How far was the "modern girl"-debate in Chile comparable to similar debates in other parts of the world?

Panel five offered a broad global-historical look at women's "labour of love" in the long 19th century, presented by JANA TSCHURENEV (Göttingen). In particular, Tschurenev's contribution explored changes in the "worlds" of women and children through the lens of female caretaking. As she argued, the ideal of the "respectable domesticity" of the bourgeois family, primarily founded upon the relationship between a married couple and their children, gradually changed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both due to the social and cultural diffusion of European middle-class norms, and to the professionalisation of childcare. Tschurnev showed that this development was not a purely European phenomenon; rather, as a result of colonial entanglements, it also caused repercussions in other regions of the world. For instance, by examining the situation of the family in India, the speaker highlighted the global nature of the differentiation of family structures.

The final panel, on the third day of the conference, was dedicated to the relationship between gender and the imperial order. JOHANNA DE GROOT (York) used four case studies to show how men and women constructed their female and male identities based on their positionality in the colonial power structure. She discussed the intersectional aspects of gender orders in the colonial setting, drawing from various examples, including: a black woman's experience in eighteenth century Boston; an elite Indian woman's confrontation with imperial power and male privilege; the imperial masculinities recorded by Rudyard Kipling; and the case of a British planter in Jamaica. Following de Groot's contribution, the participants discussed to what extent similar developments might be registered for other imperial contexts, such as the Dutch or the German ones. A comparative approach might thus reveal the trans-imperial or global dimensions of imperial rule and the specific configurations of gender orders in such contexts. FELIX BRAHM (Bielefeld) closed the last panel by examining the extent to which global trade modified gender relations in precolonial East Africa. His contribution illustrated that commercial globalisation was a process preceding colonisation, and that women participated in it as actors for instance as chiefs, but also in subordinate positions such as unpaid companions in the caravan business or enslaved agricultural and domestic labourers. At the same time, the

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integration of the local into global trade-systems shook the social fabric of precolonial East-African societies and posed an increasing threat to matrilineal social systems. Brahm's contribution illustrated that world trade in the 19th century was neither purely masculine, nor gender-neutral, nor shaped solely by economic inequalities. Rather, its structures were determined in no small part by the complex negotiation of conflicting gender orders.

Concluding Discussion: Gender history and global history have developed relatively unconnected from each other during the last decades. While gender history usually does not pursue global perspectives, global history typically neglects gender-related issues. However, the combination of the two approaches has great potential to enrich the understanding and the writing of history. Chairing the concluding discussion, Dejung summarised how scholars have expounded gender relations for different fields closely related to global history, for instance, in postcolonial studies, imperial history, and consumer history. Despite these advances, and despite the fact that global history has profoundly altered the field of historical research, gender relations are still largely absent from historical work with a global perspective. This gap needs to be bridged in order to pave new ground for the writing of global history. In the final discussion, the participants particularly pointed out the need to embed local case studies more strongly in global contexts. Most papers focused on national, imperial, or local case studies, opening a scope for comparison in the ensuing discussions. A subsequent step, however, might consist of employing comparative approaches and of further exploring the possibility of embedding local analysis within global contexts. How comparable are regional phenomena with processes in other parts of the world? And to what extent do micro-historic case studies reflect moments of global connection or disconnection? The conference showed clearly that this step is both a difficult and worthwhile undertaking.

Bringing the categories of 'gender' and 'the global' together and investigating gender relations thus represents a crucial desideratum in the field of global history writing. This methodological gap was addressed in several case studies included in the different pre-circulated papers presented at Murtensee, and it formed the principal topic of the subsequent debates. During the concluding discussion, the participants addressed numerous subjects related to the methodological approach of global history. One issue concerned the production of globalized gender history and how to integrate more colleagues and further perspectives from the Global South. Global history, despite its efforts, is still often an exclusionary project that only uses the language and the notions of specific geographic regions. Delving more into the

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discussion of historical narratives and philosophical theory may help to explore these tensions and struggles with language. Another topic was the need to transcend inherited categories by questioning default binaries and laying bare racist constructions. While discussions tend to address dichotomies—such as male / female; public / private; global / regional—it is the non-binary and the intersections that provide nuanced perspectives and promise new insight into the historical structures of the 19th century. Participants emphasised two specific steps that might help one to overcome the binary divisions in our thinking: first, by being explicit and reflecting openly upon the hermeneutic problem, thus giving a genealogy to the binary; and second, by discussing globalisations in the plural, considering the voices of men and women and all different sorts of historical agents together in the transformations of the world.

(1) Hall, Catherine: *White, male and middle-class: explorations in feminism and history*, Polity Press, Cambridge; Oxford 1992.

Stoler, Laura Ann: *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things*, Duke University Press, Durham 1995.

Wildenthal, Lora: *German women for empire, 1884-1945*, Duke University Press, Durham 2001.

(2) Ross, Robert: *Clothing, a global history, or, the imperialists's new clothes*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008.

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