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**EXISTENCE OF COLLECTIVE WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE
VIEWED IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORIOGRAPHY
REFERRING TO WOMEN IN EARLY MODERN WESTERN
AND EASTERN EUROPE**

Abstract: In the light of opposing views on the existence of collective women’s experience and rising support for the idea of the category of “woman” as one that changes over time, it becomes interesting to consider the methodology which assumes the existence of a collective women’s experience. Keeping in mind ideas propounded by theorists to determine the meaning of social category of “woman”, the paper explores women’s experiences in terms of three selected components: economic involvement, religion rights, and women’s power and gender. Thus it is concluded that 1. women from spatial area under research had different experiences in domains of their economic inclusion and regarding their opportunities to hold political power and influential position within the family. 2. However, there are indisputable features that common to women in the mentioned geographical and time frame. 3. The third conclusion stems from the to mentioned: that the theories assuming existence of women’s collective experience are partially valid and need to be applied with care due to the two above mentioned conclusions.

Keywords: women’s history, category of gender, Early Modern period, Europe, methodology, collective women’s experience.

The issue of women’s collective experience has been central to the writing and discussion of women’s history in the last thirty years. Expanding on previous research, some historians began to examine gender itself, inquiring about the meaning of being a woman or a man within a certain social order at a certain time. The methodology applied in this research was borrowed from other social sciences; indeed feminist methodology was also utilized, even though there was no constant feminist methodology.

There are controversies about the existence of collective women’s experience among historians researching gender history. Some of them, notably Judith M. Bennett and Laura Lee Downs, suggest that all women, as a group, share a common identity and live its

experience.¹ Such perspective can trace its origin to (radical) feminist and Marxist theories of the 1960s, focusing on the phenomenon of patriarchy to determine the meaning of being a woman, as a member of a subordinated group, and to derive women's collective experience of eternal subordination whether it is based on sexuality or production. On the other hand, an increasing number of scholars led by Joan W. Scott argue that meanings of "woman" and "man" are different in diverse cultures and historical periods, pointing out at 'instability and malleability of the categories "women" and "men".² In the light of such opposing views and rising support for the idea of the category of "woman" as one that changes over time, it becomes interesting to assess the validity of methodology which assumes the existence of a collective women's experience. Given that none of theoreticians offers a concrete definition about the features that women's experience incorporates, constructing it rather as a fluid and varying concept, for the purpose of the essay, the author will identify it as a changeable category, depending on historical and cultural variables. It is a formation of several components, which depend on, among other things, historical circumstances, and out of which, three will be taken for the purpose of analysis: economic involvement, religious rights that are linked to the female sex and women's power in political and household sphere. Thus, the essay is divided in three areas of exploration, which coincide with domains that are used by historians to investigate women's experiences, as well as with definitions propounded by theorists to determine the meaning of social category of "woman": economic involvement, religion rights, and women's power and gender.

This analysis will be conducted with reference to the historiography of women in early Modern Western and Eastern Europe. Europe with its numerous countries, cultures, religious beliefs, and changes in society in this period provides sufficiently a diverse base for testing the authority of the mentioned methodology. Time frame used for the analysis covers the sixteenth, the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, while for the purpose of a more accurate comparison examples from countries covering geographical areas known as the Western, Eastern and South Eastern Europe are utilized. More precisely the places employed are states of the Holy Roman Empire, Poland, Russia and parts of the Balkan Peninsula under the Ottoman Empire.

For this study, books covering the general situation of early modern women were consulted, as well as works on the position of women in specific countries and time periods. The analysis will be conducted with reference to historiography on women's history that has been researched and written by the authors, who do not essentially look at the issue of women's history from feministic and gender perspective. Most of the books concerning these topics discuss the situations in societies of Western Europe, mainly England, France and Germany, and to a less extent Italy and the Netherlands. Merry Wiesner's book is a rare one which gives the analysis of women's position not only in Western, but also in Central and Eastern Europe. Another work covering Central and Eastern Europe that was used is Maria Bogucka's "Women in Early Modern Polish Society, against the European background". Works on women in South-East Europe, which was in the early modern period

¹ Downs 1993: 416.

² Scott 1999: 10.

under Ottoman occupation, are practically none-existent, apart from a recent publication “Women in the Ottoman Balkans: gender, culture and history”. Joan Kelly’s essay “Did women have Renaissance?” was consulted for evidences of women’s experience in Renaissance Italy.

1. Economic involvement

Europe in the early modern period has been perceived as undergoing incredible economic change, due to the spread of commercial capitalism, the beginning of industrial production, and the creation of a world market system.

According to Joan Kelly, it is necessary to understand that the respective roles of women and men changed with the changes in mode of production during the early modern period.³ Furthermore, she views those changes as collective, to a large extent belonging to the gender group: “Regardless of class and regardless of ownership, women have generally functioned as the property of men...”⁴ She uses the separation of public and private spheres, connected with industrialization, production and ownership, in order to explain the declining position of women in early modern period. However, it should be examined whether women in early modern Europe collectively experienced this decline, in this case in the area of their economic involvement.

Diane Willen challenges Kelly’s supposition about public-private dichotomy and subsequently its nature of women’s experience, stating that local authorities and poor working women worked together in early modern England. Poor women provided the state with public services such as fostering orphans and working as nurses in poor hospitals.⁵

Evaluation of women’s economic role during the early modern period shows unfavourable changes: women were gradually banished from craft guilds, continued to be paid half of what men were paid regardless of their work, and although women were present in the town markets, they were seldom capable of accumulating high income. Women’s economic exploits were progressively controlled during this period by male heads of the households who they were legally dependent on.⁶ In Protestant Augsburg economic prospects of women were constrained within subordinated position, given that they were not able to become masters in their own rights; even a widow, who inherited her husband’s guild rights was subjected to control in running the business.⁷

In agriculture of Württemberg, the situation was a bit different, since gender differences were not as strongly pronounced as in industry. The status of a woman in a household had smaller influence on the type of work they did; both daughters and female servants engaged in work that was not necessarily domestic.⁸

Women’s participation in trade was also constrained by their limited access to funds, since the capital women invested was their inheritance or dowries, and in many parts of

³ Kelly 1984: 1.

⁴ *Ibid.* 13.

⁵ Willen 1988: 559.

⁶ Wiesner 2000: 134.

⁷ Roper 1989: 48-49.

⁸ Ogilvie 2003: 118-119.

Europe there were increasing restrictions on women's ability to invest that capital in any way that might threaten their children's inheritance. They were also limited in their access to land. In Muscovy, the state supported legislation in 1627 which prohibited childless widows from inheriting family lands and limited daughters' access to land.⁹ Women had the most independent control over their movable property and could manage its disposal through wills, marriage contracts arranged for their children or grants made while living to the church or other individuals.¹⁰ Although women in Protestant Augsburg had rights in property, the property transaction, which took place in connection to marriage, were carried out between men; woman had control only of morning gift.¹¹

As it is shown women in Western Europe had similar experiences regarding their economic involvement, and their participation in the public sphere. Their right to do certain jobs, the amount of money they earned, and freedom to make choices in production and consumption were restricted by guilds and local community.¹²

While Western Europe experienced economic and social development, regions of Eastern Europe, such as Poland or the Balkans, either trailed behind the progress or their attempt to catch up with the rest of Europe was prevented by the economic and social practices of the Ottoman rule. Ironically, it was this backwardness that that provided women with wider opportunities for economic activity.¹³

The empowerment of Balkan women during the early period of Ottoman rule in Europe was not limited to the private sphere. Women found important venues for self-affirmation through public institutions.

Contrary to general belief about the backward position of women in the period, Kerima Filan analysed women's situation in the Balkans and the possibilities for their economic action. Her study was focused mainly on the Muslim women in Bosnia and noblewomen. According to her findings Ottoman women could legally own property and freely dispose of it. Similar to women in the rest of Europe, they could not individually contribute to politics or religion, but they exercised considerable influence on the society by designing their properties as pious endowments (so called *vakufs*)-schools, hospitals, dervish lodges, houses of worship etc. This implies that women in Bosnia in the 16th and 17th century owned property and disposed of it independently. In order to establish a charity it was necessary for them to go to court, which they were able to do freely.¹⁴ At first they mostly founded their projects with varied amounts of cash, which points to the fact that both wealthy and relatively modest women founded pious estates. These women acted independently of their husbands when making the decision to found *vakufs*. Women took care of the management of their own *vakufs* as administrators or supervisors, as well as of their fathers' endowments by the appointment of the benefactor.¹⁵

Similarly to women in Eastern Europe, women in Western Europe made donations for

⁹ Wiesner 2000: 131.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 132.

¹¹ Roper 1989: 148.

¹² Ogilvie 2003: 352.

¹³ Bogucka 2004: 31.

¹⁴ Filan 2007: 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 119.

religious purposes. Such actions testify to their ability to possess and dispose of capital. However, in Western Europe, women could not manage their money once it passed into the possession of religious institution. Furthermore, according to Merry Wiesner women's superfluous giving for religious reasons led to the creation of laws that restricted their testamentary freedom.¹⁶ Thus the Strasbourg city council limited amount of money a woman could donate to a convent or deed to a convent when she entered it, claiming that an excessive donation would unfairly disinherit her relatives and decrease the city tax base. Despite the protests, especially from preachers, the city council aggravated the situation by declaring that all widows and unmarried women should be assigned guardians for their financial affairs, a move that occurred in many other European cities later in the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁷ It can be seen that while women in Western Europe experienced tightening of their freedom concerning religious donations, women of the South-East retained their independence in the matter.

It can be noted that women's experience in Poland differed depending on their class. However, no matter whether they were peasants, townswomen or noblewomen, they all had larger and wider options in economic activity than women of their same class in Western Europe. Maria Bogucka researched their position against the European background. In terms of Polish women's experience being different from men's, their economic activities were carried out with their husbands' permission. Instead of being condemned by society, as was often the case in Western Europe, Polish noblewomen had great influence in setting family matters and could become the head of their household.¹⁸ Likewise, peasant women experienced bigger range to economize, especially, since the cash for the household was provided by women's activity in a nearby town's market.¹⁹ Moreover they could lease fields, meadows and lakes, along with borrowing and lending money or keeping mills and inns.²⁰

Women's experience in terms of their economic involvement differed depending on the community they came from as well as their social status. Regions of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, where proto-industrialisation did not reach, showed more tolerance to active women's participation in the economy. Belonging to certain classes also made a difference, since lower-class women had to participate in earning. Women in the Western European countries were facing steady implementation of ban on as many features of their economic actions as possible. While it is evident that even where women had significant liberties in terms of earning, owning and managing capital, it was always done with knowledge of male members of their family. In terms of experience of the economic involvement there were differences present, yet male knowledge and permission of such actions made it very similar.

2. Religion and Sexuality

Christian religion was interested in the human body, women's bodies included.

¹⁶ Wiesner 2000: 133.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bogucka 2004: 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 39.

However, depending on which branch of Christianity they belonged to women experienced their bodies differently and therefore found different places in particular beliefs or religious rituals. Under Christian denomination for the purpose of the article, are understood the three main one: Protestantism (which presence as more than significant in the areas of the Holy Roman Empire, as well as in other countries of Western, Central and parts of the Eastern Europe), Catholicism and Orthodoxy (prevalent in Russia and among Balkan nations under the Ottoman rule).

Both Luther and Calvin stressed that the subordination of women to men was a result of God's will, and despite the fact that they were spiritually equal to men and above all equal to men before God, their subordination in other spheres was indisputable. This view was derived from the idea of the first sin. Here again women's bodies, and necessary (male) rule over them, formed the amount and quality of their participation in religion. All liberties of women derive from their bodies and their sexuality, the negative connotation of which is extracted from the original sin. It is depending on the position of the certain denomination on this issue that women were given bigger rights or their liberties constrained.

The Protestant Reformation, which was at first seen by traditional historians as a time when women began to experience greater equality, did not change the general situation of women. In the European countries taken by the Reformation gender relations became less equal, with leaders taking into account sexuality, especially women's to sharpen regulations regarding sexual life.²¹ Despite evangelicalism's belief in women's spiritual equality, guild ideal of inferior female prevailed in German Protestant towns such as Augsburg.²² Some would argue that abolishment of celibacy and dissolution of nunneries gave women bigger freedom and alleviated their position in Protestant families, creating the position of Pastor's wife. However, it is arguable to what extent such actions freed women, since they were undertaken by religious leaders, who were all male, and who passed these decisions with an aim to controlling women's sexuality and bodies. It was on the grounds of their mistakes and weakness innate to their sex that nuns had to give up heading of convents in Protestant Germany.²³ Natalie Z. Davis claims that the reformed model of marriage also further subjected women to men. Women's status did not change drastically, and in Catholic France and Protestant German principalities women experienced the same powerlessness as changes in marriage further restricted their freedom, along with the dwindling of female guilds, a decrease in role of women in commerce and farm direction, and rising disparity between women and men's salaries.²⁴

While in Poland, Reformation did not achieve significant results as it was mainly restricted to the nobility, religion gave the chance to Polish women to participate in activities outside their home.²⁵ The Antitrinitarian faction (that stood against belief in the Holy Trinity), which had its share of supporters in Poland, treated domination of any partner in the marriage as a distortion of the marriage. It seems that it left its legacy in otherwise majority Catholic Poland, so that a marriage was considered a 'partners union', unlike

²¹ Bogucka 2003: 63.

²² Roper 1989: 54.

²³ *Ibid.* 216.

²⁴ Zemon-Davis 1987: 94.

²⁵ Bogucka 2004: 74.

Lutheran Germany where an extremely patriarchal family was created.²⁶

Reformation and Contra-Reformation did not influence women's status nor change their religious experience in Eastern Orthodox countries. Nevertheless, during the seventeenth century the Russian Orthodox Church had undergone a series of reforms which had impacts on women's lives. However, it seems that the Orthodox Church changes did not meddle in the questions of faith itself, nor they had anything to do with women's participation in religious activities; the changes were mostly connected to institution of marriage. Church ceremonies became important part of the wedding and confession and penance were required so that prevailing pagan elements would be eliminated from popular piety.²⁷ Further intervention in the Russian church by Peter I in the late seventeenth century, had additional impact on women's lives. The church forbade forced marriages, since Peter I was convinced that such unions produced less offspring. In addition to these, women and men who were capable of having children were forbidden from entering monasteries.²⁸ The experience of women in both Western and Eastern Europe regarding religious regulations concerning marriage were similar.

The sixteenth and seventeenth century in Western Europe witnessed the phenomena of witch-craze, which was by far the most severe in the lands with rising number of Protestants. Some believed that a powerful woman was a dangerous woman, and a witch was an example of a powerful woman. The ambivalence and apprehension in the Protestant image of womanhood was more ominous than the Catholic.²⁹ After all, it was again due to the sexuality prescribed to their gender, and Eve's mistake that women were perceived as easily corrupted by the devil himself. Where the most famous Inquisitions in Italy, Spain and Portugal were lenient when it came to persecution, treating them as superstitious and ignorant peasants, Protestants saw women responsible for their action.

It is striking that the majority of women who fell victims of the witch-craze were of low origin; mostly peasant women, midwives and healers. Witch hunts did not impact noblewomen to the same extent as the lower classes. Moreover, depending on their civil status, women experienced witch hunts differently: most victims were widows or unmarried women, a fact which some historians connect to male desires to take away their control of their economics.³⁰

Whilst women in Western and Eastern Europe did not have qualitatively identical experience regarding their religious activity, there were collective familiarities. Joan W. Scott argues that gender, as social organization of sexual differences, does not reflect fixed and natural physical difference between women and men; rather it is knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily differences. These meanings vary across cultures, social groups, and time, since nothing about the body, including women's reproductive organs, determines unequivocally how social divisions are shaped.³¹ Meaning of bodily differences, as Scott calls gender, might vary, especially across time. However, during this period of

²⁶ *Ibid.* 75.

²⁷ Wiesner 2000: 240.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 241.

²⁹ Bogucka 2004: 64.

³⁰ Wiesner 2000: 269.

³¹ Scott 1999: 5.

European history, both in the West and East there were no significant differences in women's experience regarding their participation in religion, regardless of Christian denomination. Women's experience in religion depended on the way men regulated it. As historiographic examples show, regardless of their class or religious belief it was their bodies and their sexuality that prohibited them from certain functions, and which governed their lives. Therefore, patriarchy in its various forms did influence women's experience through oppression in this aspect of their lives. However, it cannot be said either that all of them experienced religion or their own sexuality in the same way; there is a certain individual part of their experience, which is impossible for historians to retrieve. It should be looked at early modern women's experience with an approach that recognizes the collective elements of culture without trivializing individual subjectivity.³²

3. Political power, household and gender

The early modern period seems to Merry Wiesner to be a time of reinforcement of gender hierarchies and patriarchal structure.³³ For acquiring the right picture, the ways in which masculinity and femininity were linked with broadly defined political power in the state and household should be taken into account.³⁴ With the works debating the nature of women in Western Europe, it seems that the position of women, even the ruling ones started deteriorating slowly, as being a female was a condition that could not be overcome. Being a woman was connected to being of female sex, which seen as biological disadvantage. Even women of the highest social standing such as ruling queens were perceived as a combination of male and female, creating the idea of 'androgyny'.

Since households and families were viewed as the smallest political units, power of husbands over their wives and children strengthened, especially in Protestant lands where fathers were given larger religious and supervisory role than under Catholicism. The controlling role of husbands was strengthened in France as well, through a series of laws which increased the control of both husbands and the state over marriage. Despite increased control and the fact that they had no political rights, ordinary women would still try to confront the patriarchal authority of their husbands by bringing individual cases to courts.

Similarly, Joan Kelly writes about the Renaissance and its negative influence on women's power and authority in the political sphere, as in the private sphere.³⁵ Her assumptions refer to all (Western European) women, meaning that they collectively experienced various practices, which led to their collective subordination in the form of patriarchy. "Women as a group, especially among the classes that dominated Italian urban life, experienced a contraction of social and personal options that men of their classes either did not, as was the case of bourgeoisie, or didn't experience as markedly as was the case with nobility".³⁶ The power of women in the Augsburg household was restrained to the

³² Roper 1989: 158.

³³ Wiesner 2000: 311.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 290.

³⁵ Kelly 1984: 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 20.

point that their central duty was wifely subordination to their husband.³⁷ A husband was allowed to discipline his wife as he saw fit for her disobedience, yet her plea seldom found sympathetic ear in the reformed Augsburg Council. Natural and Godly law deprived them of any role not limited to the household³⁸, yet men did not recognize this unpaid labour.

Furthermore, not only ordinary women experienced restrictions on their power, but those secluded in convents were also affected by it. In the Holy Roman Empire, swept by Protestant teaching, female heads of women's nunneries were appointed guardians, as it was seen inappropriate that women exercise any kind of authority.³⁹ It seems in countries of Western Europe- France, Italy and Germany – women's experiences regarding holding any kind of power was similar.

Looking at Eastern Europe of the time, due to a lack in historiography concerning women of the period, it is difficult to say if women there experienced similar changes in their status.

Taking the case of Poland, Maria Bogucka is of opinion that from the mid-seventeenth century growing public activity could be noted among women of Polish aristocracy, which achieved considerable proportions in the eighteenth century, with women's political activity reaching international dimensions.⁴⁰

Regarding Southeast Europe, particularly the Balkans, which was at the time part of the Ottoman Empire, it is obvious that a change in women's lives occurred; however it is difficult to measure its extent and volume. The lives of Christian women would be the first to be altered. However, owing to the absence of historiography on women of the Balkans in early modern Europe, only glimpses can be seen. Areas of life like marriage, divorce and inheritance (in which women's activities were noticed in the medieval Balkans) were officially administrated by the Christian communities in which women resided, which was managed not only by the written laws but more frequently by local customs that had almost equal importance. In the time frame under consideration, ruralisation of the Balkans was occurring and subsequently led to frequent use of customary norms comparing to medieval legal canons. Given the facts, it is not surprising that rarefaction of available data was occurring, subsequently making it more difficult for the activity (and consequently experience) of Christian women in the Balkan hinterland to be mapped so that their experience is comprehended. Interestingly, the textbook on Serbian legal history, following the concept of Serbian state, breaks its text with the fall of the medieval Serbian state in the fifteenth century and resumes it with narrative on creation of the modern Serbian state in the nineteenth century, thus leaving out, among other legal issues, position of women in all domains related to their experience in the early modern period. That the position of women in all domains in the period under research had occurred can be seen primarily through comparison their possibilities in the medieval Serbian legislation with the one stated in the Serbian Civil Code from the nineteenth century.⁴¹

The status of Christian women in regard to their power to defile the rules of authority

³⁷ Roper 1989: 169.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 222.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 216.

⁴⁰ Bogucka 2004: 174.

⁴¹ Jeftić, Popović 2003: 53-57.

of the heads of their families could be seen in matrimonial cases that women chose to take to Ottoman courts, rather than deal with them in their communities. According to historiography, the expansion of institutionalized marriage and divorce, made possible and easier under Ottoman courts than local Orthodox religious rules, were of great importance for women. While women in the Ottoman Empire were extremely dependent on men, their legal position was paradoxically secure by inheritance rights that were effectively enforced and utilization of opportunities for obtaining divorce. Svetlana Ivanova sees this as a contradiction to established ideas of unchallenged domination of patriarchal practices in matrimony.⁴²

Women of the West and East of Europe had different experiences during the discussed period. Whereas the beginning of the modern period brought limitation to power both in possible ruling sphere of aristocratic women and the private sexual sphere to the women of the West, it seems from meagre sources that women in Eastern Europe experienced loosening of the patriarchal yoke. However, such conclusions should be taken with care. Concluding from the historiography the assumption that women collectively experienced patriarchy and its oppression is true, but its extension and aspects made the experience different.

* * *

Looking at historiographic accounts of women's experience in Western and Eastern Europe, methodology that assumes existence of collective experience should be approached with care. However, stating that there is no collective experiences of a certain group, in this instance of that of women, means taking the discourse too far. Through all given examples, it is hard not to notice certain collective features of women's experience across early modern Europe regardless of their national or religious conformity, or regional residence. The most prominent feature of being a woman was subordination in various extents to the male rule in all aspects of their lives. "Only those who share group identity and have lived its experience, whether seen as biologically given or socially constructed, can know what it means to be...a woman."⁴³ It is through these lived experiences that women across European boundaries could identify and recognize each other as belonging to the "women" group.

While women experienced different practices in various aspects of their lives, these experiences did not make them believe that they belonged to the category of men, they still perceived themselves as women; it did not alter their gender identity across Europe, and neither men nor themselves saw them as belonging to the 'other' gender. During this period of European history, across its west and east regions, there were collective elements of culture that led women to undergo similar experiences. Therefore, methodology which assumes existence of the collective experience, for this period and region, is still valid, but it should be always investigated more carefully when it comes to specific practices.

⁴² Ivanova 2007: 181.

⁴³ Downs 1993: 416.

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МЕЛИНА РОКАИ

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ПОСТОЈАЊЕ КОЛЕКТИВНОГ ЖЕНСКОГ ИСКУСТВА ВИЂЕНОГ У СВЕТЛУ ИСТОРИОГРАФИЈЕ КОЈА СЕ ОДНОСИ НА ЖЕНЕ У РАНОЈ МОДЕРНОЈ ЗАПАДНОЈ И ИСТОЧНОЈ ЕВРОПИ

Резиме

У светлу опречних мишљења о постојању колективног женског искуства, као и расуђе подршке идеји категорије „жена“ као једне која се мења током времена, постаје интересантно да се преиспита методологија која претпоставља постојање колективног женског искуства.

Имајући у виду идеје које су предлагали теоретичари у циљу одређивања значења друштвене категорије „жена“, овде се разматра искуство у оквиру три компоненте: економског ангажовања, верских права и моћи жене у сфери политике и породице као најмање политичке јединице. Стога се да закључити следеће. Прво, жене из географских области под

истраживањем су имале различита искуства у доменима економске инклузије, као и могућности да имају политичку моћ и утицајну позицију у оквиру породице. Друго, да ипак постоје опште карактеристике, које су заједничке за искуство жена у поменутом временском и геграфском оквиру. Треће, да теорије које представљају јединство женског искуства су делимично валидне и да стога треба да се примењују с резервом имајући у виду претходне закључке.

Кључне речи: Историја жена, категорија рода, рана модерна историја, Европа, методологија, колективно женско искуство.

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