

# TERMS FOR WOMEN IN 1600-1800

By AnnaSara Hammar

Down the ages, women as a group have had less power than the group comprising men. They have also been less significant in history than men. They have produced fewer important inventions, been on fewer daring voyages of discovery, built fewer houses and written fewer books. You know that. But who's actually taught you that? And why have you learnt it?

That's a question that can be answered in a thousand ways. One answer is that you learned it because it is true. At most times and in most places, women have been excluded from the opportunities that have existed for men. Another answer is that you learned it because women were not considered important when people wrote down history and have therefore been excluded.

What would you say if you found out that women have had much more power, produced many more inventions, written more books, built more houses, gone on more voyages of discovery and taken part in more wars than you were ever taught? If someone said that women were actually there when it happened, but that they had been taken out of the accounts. Would you be surprised? Angry? Happy? Or would you think that maybe it wasn't that important?

In this exhibition, we believe that it is important. We are usually taught that modern society has been shaped by the past. It would be more accurate to say that modern society is shaped by what we believe that past was like. By what we call historiography.

## **Better and better?**

We learn from our school history books that the world is constantly developing. From the very first people in prehistoric times to the modern people of the present, it's been a long, dramatic journey. It has often been the role of history to pick out the highlights during the journey, those moments when people's conditions changed in a particularly distinctive way. Western historiography, for example, nearly always starts with Ancient Greece and Rome, as this was the first time that large, advanced, national states existed in the region we now refer to as Europe.

When the textbooks describe antiquity, they usually take a great leap across those awkward centuries following the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD) and only pick up again about six hundred years later in the middle of the vague, peculiar period of time known as "The Middle Ages". That period was long referred to as "the dark ages", before historians in the 20th century realised that it was actually quiet bright, at least before the ravages of the Black Death at the end of the 14th century. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans explored the globe, fought one another in religious wars and discovered that the earth revolves around the sun rather than the other way round. This older period is usually described as an unsettled, violent and fairly arcane place. People were superstitious, they burned witches on bonfires and feared God. Society was unequal and unfair, as people believed that God wanted it to be so.

During the period usually referred to grandly as the "Age of Enlightenment", a conceptual movement emerged that became the starting point of the world we recognise today. Lots of old thoughts were thrown overboard: superstition had to make room for rational, scientific thought. Old hierarchies were questioned and the concepts of the equal value of all people and equality were born. Since then, the world has become better and better, and we people have become increasingly tolerant and reasonable, apart from a couple of slip-ups in the form of the two world wars. This account is not untrue. But it is a simplification.

Firstly, it only deals with one small part of the world, Western Europe. And secondly it only deals with a small proportion of the people in the world, namely white, Christian, fairly wealthy men. All it takes is to look at this history from a woman's perspective to turn the entire story on its head. But let's start at the very beginning. What is history exactly?

### Who writes history?

Historiography is unfair. Most people who lived will not be included. Most of the things people have done, thought, felt and believed will be forgotten. The history books only contain a very small part of everything that makes up our past.

So, who decides what is to be included? Is it the historians? Politicians? Winners? Authors?

Maybe we all decide, at least a little bit. Together we create a perception of what is worth recounting of the past and what is not. Our perception of what is important in history in turn creates our perception of what is important to preserve for posterity. The fact that women appear so rarely in the history books is therefore not only because they were never present when things happened, but because their presence was for long periods not perceived as being important.

From antiquity to the present day, women have been expunged from important events. Even when their presence is mentioned, they are rarely named. When women themselves wrote on occasions, their texts were rarely saved. It is therefore also difficult for posterity to know anything about them, which means that they are often excluded, which means in turn that they are perceived as being even less important.

Another factor that also plays a role is what we consider important to remember. When history was still a subject that was studied by princes in order to become better warlords and monarchs, the most important elements were individual battles, famous rulers and political power games. Whatever women were doing at that time and place did not belong there. You only have to look at the shelves for history books in a bookshop to realise that this view remains. But are individual wars or individual political agreements really as important for us today? And if so, why do we think that?

### Three important changes

We have based this exhibition on three major historical changes, each of which has contributed to shaping the society we have today: the scientific revolution, the centralisation of the State and the transition to a capitalist, industrial society. These changes were introduced rather slowly in Europe during the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, and took full effect during the 18th and 19th centuries. We use them to explain why we now have certain opinions about what women and men are and what their relationship with one another should be like. But we also use them to question the traditional view of history and to show that history is not one single stream running in one single direction, but rather a fabric or a web with thousands of threads and thousands of possible courses. Let's begin with one of the most prominent phenomena of our age: science.

### The new science

It's been called a revolution: the transition from medieval thinking where trusted sources such as the Bible and the ancient philosophers helped people to understand the world, to an empirical approach in which people themselves had to investigate how the world functioned. Using measuring instruments, magnifying glasses and telescopes, people started to map out their existence and question the Bible and

the philosophers. The world was measured, weighed, shared and sorted. Modern science had arrived. At the same time, a breeding ground emerged for race biology, Nazism and racism. The scientific approach paved the way for attempts to eradicate anything that either did not fit in with the greater scheme of things or was ranked far down. For women, the new science posed a problem. For them, the age of enlightenment largely meant that they lost opportunities that they had previously had. Some of this is because the perception of what gender actually was changed during this period.

### One gender or two?

The notion that there are two genders that can be easily separated from one another is such a self-evident part of modern thinking that it may come as a surprise that in the western world there used to be more ways of viewing gender. There was a single-gender model and a two-gender model. In the single-gender model, man is viewed as the only gender while woman is simply a poorer or incomplete variant. In the two-gender model, the genders are viewed as two fundamentally different opposites.

Both models have existed in parallel throughout history, although from antiquity until the 18th century the debate was dominated by the single-gender model. The differences between the two models are clearest in the fields of biology and science.

The typical single-gender view could be expressed, for example, as it was by the Greek physician Galen (130-200 AD):

*Turn outward the woman's [genitals], turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man's, and you will find the same in both in every respect.*

A woman is thus an outside-in variant of a man. A little weaker and a little poorer than he is. But despite its unfairness, the single-gender model does allow scope for gender to be on a sliding scale rather than two separate compartments. The view of gender as a scale allowed for transformations, i.e. women could under certain circumstances be transformed into men. Exceptions could also be imagined: women who were just as intelligent and skilled as men, or men who were no better than women. Of course, this didn't mean that people were free to change gender in olden times.

The possibility of transformations awakened the deep-rooted fear in older society of anything that was disguised, unreliable and untruthful. It meant that the division between the genders was strictly regulated with different jobs, different clothes, different expectations of behaviour and different legal rights. But there are examples of normal people still be able to display a surprising degree of tolerance towards variants. Certain individuals seem to have been able to dress themselves in both men's and women's clothing, according to views in their own community, and were allowed to take on both men's and women's jobs. Intersex people (although the term used then was "hermaphrodites") were viewed as a kind of intermediate variant, not necessarily as being malformed or abnormal.

Another view of the human body emerged during the 18th century. A new fascination now developed in the biological differences between men and women, and the 19th century was totally dominated by the two-gender model. In virtually all conceivable contexts, biologists, socially engaged authors and doctors described women as being completely different to men, all the way down to the cellular level. This conviction

that there were two genders that could be easily differentiated from one another rendered all other variants impossible. Anyone who crossed borders started to engender discomfort and loathing. The opportunities to be an exception were restricted. After all, a woman was so different from a man by nature that she could never be like him, far less surpass him in his areas.

Views of sexuality also changed. In olden days it was often considered that women had the strongest sexual drive. The notion that women have a considerably lower sexual drive than men, or even no drive at all (while men have a virtually uncontrollable drive), first emerged at the end of the 18th century. This had consequences in many areas, not least in the legal system. In rape cases, the focus shifted from the act of violence to sexual conduct. Towards the end of the 18th century, the law in particular started to take an interest in the behaviour of a woman who had been raped. It became extremely important how a woman appeared in public, where she went, in which company and how she was dressed. If she behaved inappropriately, she was the one who attracted or encouraged the man to rape her, making her guilty that the rape took place.

The public arena thus became a sexualised arena for women. A woman who voluntarily used the public arena was considered to be a woman who was also sexually available: a whore. If a woman wished to remain respectable, she could therefore neither speak in the square, publish books nor display pictures. This is one reason why female authors in the 19th century so often used male pseudonyms.

### **The State and people**

In parallel with the new science, a new kind of government also emerged: the centralised state. If the new science made it difficult for women to use the public arena and have their voices heard there, the centralised state restricted their opportunities to govern and exercise power.

The conviction that women should not be involved in issues such as war and politics was strong as long ago as the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, which was after all pervaded by ideas from antiquity and the Bible. For the Greek philosopher Aristotle, it was self-evident that men should govern women. Women were not independent and should therefore not hold power. Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century theologian and philosopher, was inspired by both Aristotle and the Bible when he wrote:

*Subjection and limitation are a result of sin, for to the woman was it said after sin (Genesis 3:16): "Thou shalt be under the man's power", and Gregory says: Where there is no sin, there is no inequality. But woman is naturally of less strength and dignity than man; for the agent is always more honourable than the patient, as Augustine said.*

Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas expressed commonly held views at a time when women were largely considered to be incomplete men. Women were unable to think reasonably, rationally and logically. Either because they bore the guilt for God driving mankind out of the Garden of Eden or because they have weaker bodies. But despite this massive resistance to female exercising of power, it was possible to find ways around this resistance.

This is because a person's access to power in the older society was not ultimately decided by gender, but by family. Europe was governed by mighty royal families or groups of relations in which ancestry was the most important consideration. Women exerted tremendous influence within these family circles and could – if there was no alternative – also be chosen to represent them. After all, in the

single-gender model it was perfectly possible for a woman to better herself and be just as good as a man. This exception-based approach was used by women to acquire both power and senior positions in society, as evidenced by all of Europe's reigning queens.

From the 16th century onwards, a centralised state apparatus developed around the monarchies in Europe. The State gradually took over duties that had previously rested with the church or the family: alms houses, hospitals and schooling, for example. When the State grew, power in society was transferred away from influential families to government officials. Family circles were replaced by education and exams. Of course, this sounds reasonable enough to us. But this change had major consequences for women. This is because the routes to power that became established instead of relatives and good connections, such as education, were closed to women. They found it increasingly difficult to exercise power and influence. Put simply, it can be said that the modern, centralised state was in the first instance a male state.

### *The state and discipline*

When the state became centralised, the relationship between the state and the individual changed. The new state, with its bureaucracy, resulted in more and more parts of people's everyday lives being disciplined and organised according to the state's needs. In the 16th century the king did not have a presence in everyday life, other than for the small number of people who worked and lived close to the court. By creating increasingly advanced education, military service, laws, rules and regulations, as well as a number of inspection bodies and ultimately a bigger police force, the state could start to regulate the individual citizens in their everyday lives. The state could thus reward behaviour that fell within the framework of what was considered to be legitimate, normal and correct. In the same way, the state could punish behaviour and actions that were not considered legitimate or normal. The state turned to the new science for help in describing what the sound, healthy, desirable citizen should be like and to suggest measures against those who did not comply with what was desired.

Our relationship with the state and authorities is now clear to all. We willingly spend our time filling in forms, waiting for a decision from an authority and making sure we have the right certificate and valid ID documents. The state, for better or worse, shapes both who we are and how we behave.

### **Capitalism and industrialisation**

For a long time, paid work was something quite rare and foreign for most people. At the beginning of the 20th century most of the Swedish population still lived from farming, where home and workplace were one and the same. All people worked in the agricultural society. There were strong opinions about what kind of work was suitable for which people, and life on the farm was strictly divided between the genders. But ideas about the division of work were constantly being challenged by a reality in which men and women by no means kept to their allocated places. Under certain circumstances a woman could take a man's place. In Karlskrona in 1710, the doctor's wife was proposed as town doctor. During the 17th century, women became both county administrators and postmaster general, and in cities women could take over the position of master after their husbands in all craft occupations, even though they were actually excluded from the guilds.

During the 18th century, Europe started a process of industrialisation that completely transformed people's lives. Work moved out of the home and was given a price in monetary terms. At the same time, women were

forbidden from inheriting an occupation from their father or their husband. When work and home were separated during the process of industrialisation, a perception emerged that women should not work in an occupation. This meant that they were also unable to provide for themselves. In older times, the man was responsible for managing the farm as the master of the house. Now this responsibility was changed to him having to provide for his wife.

You might speculate about what would have happened if women had had access from the very outset to the new labour market, to education and influence. It is possible that there would never have been a feminist revolution during the 19th century. But now women from the wealthier middle class were forced to see how their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons benefited from the freedom of this new age, while they themselves were more restricted and had less freedom than before. At the same time there was a growing group of working women whose existence was very far removed from the middle class ideal of the man as the breadwinner and the woman as a kind of "angel of the home". There was also a growing group of unmarried women who started to demand the right to provide for themselves on their own, without the help of a man. All of this combined to produce an explosive public debate that lasted throughout the entire 19th century and well into the 20th century, focusing on three issues: the right to self-determination, the right to education and the right to be able to provide for oneself.

#### *The right to self-determination*

To be a full member of society means to decide for oneself, to speak for oneself, to control one's own money, choice of partner and accommodation. This right has been taken for granted by most men throughout history. But not by most women. A woman has nearly always had a man to decide over her, either a father, a husband or another male relative. As recently as in 1815, the Supreme Court in Sweden rejected a proposal that women should automatically reach the age of majority at 30, with the explanation that women "lack the knowledge of the world that is required for decisions of such importance that they determine her welfare throughout her lifetime". But the debate did not go away, and in 1865 it was agreed that unmarried women would reach the age of majority at 25. But if they married, they became a minor once more. It was not until 1884 that men and women reached the age of majority at the same age (21), and it was 1921 when married women also achieved majority.

#### *The right to an education*

Education has been used as an argument against the subordination of women throughout the whole of history. In the 16th century, the poet Lucrezia Marinella wrote this in Venice:

*I wish that those (who suppress women) would be bold enough to conduct an experiment and to give a girl and a boy, of equal age and both with good intelligence and physique, the same education in both humanist subjects and in the use of weapons. After only a short time, they would notice that the girl has applied herself better to her education than the boy and that she would soon surpass him.*

Lucrezia Marinella challenged set opinions about women being subordinated to men. Give boys and girls the same education and the girls would be better! During the 18th century, more and more people made similar demands that

women should be able to study. At the same time, the arguments against education for women became tougher. Ideas circulated that a woman's uterus would dry up if she wasted her energy on studies or that studies would make her a worse wife and mother. Despite this, university education became available to women in the 19th century. In 1873, all courses except Law and Theology were open to women in Sweden. But education was no guarantee of a job. Many occupations were closed to women, even after the courses had been opened up. It was also only a small group of wealthy women who could go to university, as this required studies in a private school for girls with fees.

#### *The right to provide for oneself*

There were two problems facing women who wanted to provide for themselves. The first one was that many occupations were closed to women, the second that women were paid much less. The most common argument for men earning more than women was that a man was assumed to be responsible for providing for a family, while a woman was assumed to be on her own. Interwoven with this argument was an attitude that work carried a different value, depending on whether it had been carried out by a man or a woman. Old notions of a woman as a replacement for a man or as a "half man" governed when wages were set for work by men or women. The more women who lived outside marriage, the more tangible these injustices became. Equal pay for equal work has been one of the major demands of the women's movement since the 19th century.

#### **The 1950s – the final attempt to keep women in the home?**

At the end of the Second World War, most women in the western world had won the right to vote, access to education and to the public arena, been elected to parliament and entered the labour market. During the war, women had proven that they were just as capable as men of holding more or less any position.

The feminist battle should have been over. Instead, the 19th century's middle class dreams of the woman as the "angel of the home" reappeared. Women who had worked during the war years, obtained an education and lived relatively independent lives were now expected to settle for a life as a housewife in a nuclear family, with the doors closed on the world. The interesting aspect is that the gender division of the 1950s occurred after a couple of turbulent decades that had essentially been the opposite of the 1950s, with women loudly demanding a presence in politics, at the workplace and in the public arena.

This shows that there are always a lot of conflicting processes that are under way at the same time, and that it is not always evident what the impact of such processes will be. History is not a straight line. The justice won yesterday can, in the worst case, be lost tomorrow.

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