

## **Before Feminism. Women and the Political World in England, France and Poland c. 1750-1830**

What can historical documents produced by women and men tell us about women engaged in politics in the age of transition – between the Ancien Régime and the new class society of the late 18th and early 19th centuries? What similarities and differences can one spot while comparing narratives about political involvement of women living in societies shaped by different political systems and cultures? The aim of my project is to answer these questions. The overwhelming majority of primary sources that historians utilise to reconstruct the past was created by and about men. Feminist methodologies took women out of the margins and placed them and their experiences in the spotlight. As a result, we have discovered a great number of papers written by women that allow us to explore the “female” perspective. Indeed, since the 1970s we have gained much understanding of different aspects of women’s lives, including their traditional roles as daughters, sisters, mothers and wives, their everyday occupations, education, social and cultural activities. Although scholars have paid attention to the topic of women transgressing sociocultural boundaries by getting involved in public affairs, they rarely concentrate on both women’s and men’s perspectives. And this is especially true for pre-industrial, feudal societies, before the French revolution and shortly after. My project intends to partially fill in these lacunas by examining women’s presence in the world of politics, their political culture and men’s reactions to women’s activism in the years 1750–1830 in England, France, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (after 1795 the Polish lands).

The source corpus on the basis of which I will conduct my research includes correspondence, travel logs of travellers to aforementioned countries, memories of the nobility, literature, textbooks, state documents such as copies of letters intercepted by intelligence services and diplomatic relations of ambassadors and agents residing primarily in London, Paris and Warsaw. I focus on the second half of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries since the number of records is much higher for this period than for the first half of the 18th century. The year 1789 symbolically marked a new era in European history, however, it does not close the chronological frames of my investigation since I would like to show changes and continuities in thinking about women’s and men’s roles in the long term, taking into account several generations. The comparison of female and male narratives concerning Polish women with those regarding French and English ones will allow me to address the influence of Enlightenment and romantic thoughts on gender roles and relations in different geographical contexts, as well as elaborate on commonalities and differences between Western and Central/Eastern Europe in the revolutionary era. I focus on elites as the accounts reflect primarily on aristocrats and nobility – the groups traditionally involved in politics and holding public offices.

The planned research will permit to identify and describe a group of women who were considered as politically active, characterise female agency and define its importance in the public sphere. As I will delve into narratives concerning this atypical behaviour, the project will reveal which women were perceived as “dangerous” and/or “useful,” in what contexts their activity was well seen or even expected, and in what situations they encountered criticism. My aim is also to reflect on how men’s perspective differed from female perception on their roles and social status. By adopting comparative and transnational perspectives, the conclusions will broaden existing scholarship on women’s presence in European politics. The latter will be presented through the prism of similarities and specificities of the chosen regions, as well as transfers of ideas and practices between them.

My project responds to current demands. The planned monograph will constitute a valuable point of reference for other researchers working on women’s history, relations between men and women in the past, as well as for those interested in social history of the “long” 18th and 19th centuries. The articles in English that I intend to publish in open access in leading scientific journals will allow non-Polish speaking researchers to get acquainted with the project’s results. The project is also addressed to the broader public. It will certainly appear interesting to people from outside academia, as it elucidates such important questions for today as women’s and men’s roles in society. I will show social expectations and stereotypes functioning in the past, as well as possibilities and limitations resulting from one’s sex and reactions to “atypical”, uncommon behaviour by women. The project concentrates on the minor proportion of women and thereby allows us to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms related to the transgression of traditional boundaries and norms by marginalised groups.