Gender is a concept with potential to bring about far-reaching change in how we interpret the past. It is very encouraging that the Society for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Ireland should have devoted a conference to gender issues. In this foreword to a selection of the papers presented at that conference, I would like to consider briefly three aspects of the use of gender analysis in history. The first is how the concept of ‘gender’ developed as a category of historical analysis. The second concerns its relevance to men as well as women, and to the concept of ‘separate spheres’. The third relates to the use of the words ‘gender’ and ‘patriarchy’.

The work of historians of the new wave of women’s history, which began some decades ago, has progressed through a number of stages. The initial stage, a step bigger than perhaps we recognise, was to see and to say that women are invisible in the conventional history books. I, for one, can remember studying and later teaching history for years, uneasily aware that there was something wrong about the absence of women but unsure what to do about it. It was only when feminists began openly to challenge the invisibility of women, and to follow this by turning to the historical sources to find out for themselves what women had done, that many of us began to act on that uneasiness.

Gerda Lerner has given now well-known names to the early stages in the recovery of women’s past: ‘compensatory’ history, which looks for the ‘great’ individual women who have ‘achieved’ in the way men who are deemed ‘great’ have achieved; and ‘contribution’ history, which researches the part played by women in the political, intellectual and social life of their societies, and their status within these.¹ As Lerner points out, both compensatory and contribution history give us significant information about women in the past, and undermine the view that history has been shaped solely by males. However, both still tend to deal with the areas of human activity defined as the important ones by conventional history, written as if men were the only active agents of change in human societies.

The next stage has been to try to research the past from the perspective of how women themselves experienced it, distinguishing women’s actual experience from establishment prescriptions of what they should have experienced. There have always been plenty of these prescriptions, and the historian needs to be wary of accepting them as evidence of what women actually did. Another source to be handled with caution is male assessments of female contributions to men’s (sic) work.

Once women's experience moved centre stage and information began to accumulate, new vistas emerged and with them new interpretations. The concept of gender grew from the convergence of two apparently contradictory findings. On the one hand was the enormous variation in the historical experience of women, who have comprised half or more of the population of every race, colour and nationality. There was no simple, universal women's experience or women's history. On the other hand there was a linking thread running through all of the stories. In the history of society after society, to be born a female or a male had different political, social and economic consequences for an individual's life. The life and opportunities of the daughter of an aristocratic family in the middle ages, and those of a woman living in the slums of late nineteenth-century Dublin, were light years apart in many ways, but each woman's life and her set of opportunities were influenced by her sex and, as a consequence, were different to those of her father, brother or husband. Across time and place, an individual's sex invariably carried political, social and economic consequences that could not be explained by a simple biological determinism. Such consequences varied from place to place and changed over time, they were the subject of debate and struggle, but they were a factor in individuals' lives as real as their class, race, colour, creed, or education. They shared a common characteristic in seeking to direct power and control of resources to males, curtail female autonomy and define women's role in society in terms of relationship and service to men.

The word 'gender' was brought into use to name the social roles created and prescribed for women and men. Another way of putting it is that gender analysis emerged from the growing understanding of the complex role of sex in history. Sexuality and sexual practices are obviously an important part of the history of the relationships between men and women. They are not, however, the sum total of that history nor are they themselves immutable and unchanging over time and place, fixed for all eternity by some 'biological' programming. Neither are the social relationships which societies create for men and women, and which they enforce in various ways at different times, through combinations of laws, regulations, customs, education and exhortation.

Gender then concerns social relationships between women and men, and also between different groups of men and different groups of women. As a category of historical analysis it interacts with other analyses such as class, colour, religion, ethnicity, age and nationality. The convergence of all of these locates an individual or group in its historical context. Feminist historians thus argue that conventional history, written for the most part without reference to gender, overlooks one central aspect of human experience, and is correspondingly diminished and incomplete.

It is worth considering some of the implications of the absence of gender analysis from history as it has generally been written. It is not just that women have been invisible in the history books. While men have indeed been visible, this has been a partial visibility that has obscured as much as it revealed. We are used to saying that conventional history has been the story of men's activities.
More accurately, it has been the story of the 'public' activities of a few élite males. Historians have analysed and assessed the contribution of 'great' men, political and military leaders, outstanding intellectuals and artists, with no reference to the fact that, for the most part, the freedom they enjoyed to devote themselves to their public work was built on women's domestic work. History has usually been written as if the 'separate' spheres of male and female, the 'public' and the 'private', ran forever on parallel, untouching tracks, and as if only the 'public' had significance in the story of society. Gender analysis shows that, on the contrary, male and female roles have been intermeshed and interdependent. The male role has depended on the female role being defined in terms of relationship and duties to men, and on the centrality of the wife-mother who carries the responsibility for the care of the family home and the daily servicing of the physical and emotional needs of husband and children. Historically, female dissenters have argued for both recognition of and status for 'women's work', and for women's freedom to work in both the public and private spheres.

Conventional history has seldom noted, let alone analysed, the historical evidence of women rejecting and resisting imposed gender roles. For example, the political campaigns of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish women's emancipation movement, which succeeded in removing many of the civil and political disabilities of Irish women, and which was itself part of a highly visible international movement, has remained completely unknown to the general public and to generations of history students. It has only recently come under serious historical scrutiny with the new wave of women's history, and has still to find its way into most histories of Irish society. If conventional history accorded serious attention to feminist political activism, this would inevitably focus attention on the structures of society that gave rise to such activism. This in turn would focus attention on male as well as female gender roles. Women's demands to enter the public sphere, however, have always carried the threat of a fundamental revolution in existing sex roles, male as well as female, and hence in the whole status quo. At the height of the campaign to win the parliamentary vote for women, in the years before the first world war, the response of John Dillon, deputy leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, was both typical and revealing. Women's suffrage, he said, would 'be the ruin of our western civilisation'. Bearing in mind that history is a dialogue between the present and the past, it is perhaps not so surprising that conventional historians have been so slow in giving serious attention to feminist campaigns. This is not to suggest that the omission is necessarily conscious or deliberate, but that it is part of a long-standing conditioned pattern of defending patriarchy by silencing and ignoring feminist challenges.  

The blindness of historians to gender roles and to women's historical experience has deprived both women and men of important elements of their past. Today

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it continues to remove debate about feminism from its historical context, and correspondingly weakens contributions on all sides. Women's history and the concept of gender have both developed from feminism's endeavour to locate itself in its historical context. Yet both feminism and women's history face major problems in trying to articulate perceptions of the world as it has been, as it now is, and as how it might be in the future, while using paradigms and philosophies which reflect the experience of males. Most historians, male and female, feminist and non-feminist alike, have been socialised within these world views and using these systems of thought. For feminists they present an on-going challenge, and for non-feminists they make the challenge difficult even to perceive.

It is important that we try to hold on to the new knowledge and insights that have been gained, and establish them as a foothold from which we can push further. The foothold is precarious and could easily be lost. For example, some historians (and others) object to the word 'patriarchy', because they see it as expressing a view of relationships between men and women as an eternal, unchanging oppression of all women by all men. Such a reductionist view is clearly wrong both historically and today, and it should indeed be challenged. But the word 'patriarchy', used to mean the organisation of a society around sex-role stereotypes which see men as dominant over and more important than women, names a historical reality. Societies have been so organised, and successive generations have been taught and socialised to accept patriarchal thinking and patriarchal structures as a natural and inevitable result of male and female human 'nature'. Whatever word we use, to grasp this historical reality is important for our understanding both of the past and of the world we live in today.

There are problems also with the word 'gender'. Its grammatical derivation means that it can easily be misunderstood as simply a synonym for sex, or, more often, the female sex. In this slippage its meaning as the way in which societies construct and maintain social relationships between the sexes can get lost. This in turn blunts the edge of gender analysis. As with patriarchy, the essential issue is not which word we use to name a phenomenon or idea. The essential issue is that we do use some word and that we do not lose the hardly-won sighting of the phenomenon or the development of the idea.

Women's history and gender analysis have already restored to women today some of their lost history, its activity and diversity, contribution and dissent. They have begun to reveal the role played by relationships between and within the sexes in the history of societies, and have begun to explore how those relationships operated in the lives of women and men. The more we understand how gender, the social construction of sex, operated in the past, the better equipped we are to understand how it operates today. The studies in this book, offering a variety of disciplinary perspectives, are a welcome contribution to furthering this understanding in the context of nineteenth-century Ireland.