

## Why Integrate Women into Holocaust Studies?

The focus of the NJCH seminar on *Women and the Holocaust* is timely because feminist theories and methodologies are now being applied to women's experiences in catastrophe and used to understand the place of women in discourses of nation and citizenship. Among the issues that can now be addressed with more depth and clarity than ever before because of the sophistication of feminist theories are questions having to do with differences in the way women and men responded to their circumstances during the Holocaust: Does the way women and men learned their gender roles affect how they dealt with the situations they found themselves in during the Holocaust?

According to some psychologists, in acquiring their gender roles, women, generally, are given a wider range of acceptable female behaviors than are men. In comparison, men's acquisition of gender roles often results in a more rigid understanding of appropriate behavior. In reading memoirs and other life writing, the seminar group speculated on the affect of such differences in the texts under consideration. As Jewish men were prohibited from following their professions and occupations, women often were flexible enough to retool themselves in order to provide for the family.

Other questions that suggested themselves as we looked at women's texts included the relationship between history and memory. Is there a gender component to this relationship? Although the seminar participants understood that the answers to such questions do not follow a strict gender divide, we were able to map some differences. The historian Cynthia Paces made the radical claim during her lecture that "women are the Holocaust," and helped us to see how women's oppression helps in the understanding of the Holocaust. Women, in fact, were at the center of almost every Nazi decision during the Holocaust years – particularly in their roles as procreators. Women were either pressured to or prevented from procreating by virtue of who they were or whom they married.

Perhaps the most important lesson derived from the seminar was that integrating women's experiences and expressions into Holocaust studies not only enlarges understanding, but changes it. Women's oral histories and memoirs close the gaps in historical records. Bonnie Gurewitsch, archivist at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, discussed how women had more responsibility for the emotional support of the family and bore the brunt of holding families together. As the men were arrested, imprisoned, or in denial, women often remained behind to deal with children and elderly parents. They also led the efforts for education in the ghettos. Women were more mobile because they were thought of by the Nazis as less dangerous than Jewish men; they had no physical distinction, such as circumcision, to identify them as Jews. These are a few of the ideas that were examined during the seminar and convinced us that this topic is just beginning to be mined.

The curricula developed as a result of the workshop give a sense of the variety of themes and approaches suggested by integrating women into Holocaust studies. I encourage viewers of this site to explore them and also the [syllabus](#) that the workshop followed.

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