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Gender & History ISSN 0953-5233
Anna Greening, 'The Women's Library in Istanbul: The International Context'
Gender & History, Vol. 12 No. 2 July 2000, pp. 467-471.



The Women's Library in Istanbul: The International Context

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This commentary has been written to set Aslı Davaz-Mardin's case history into context, and to explain the background to an international network of women's libraries. As it happens, that library set in train such international organisation as now exists, and this writer has been personally and professionally involved in the process.

In October 1991 a small group of women's library professionals from Europe and the USA gathered in Istanbul for the First International Symposium of Women's Libraries, called there by the Women's Library and Information Center Foundation Istanbul (KEK)¹ to advise and inform them on methodologies and incidentally to set KEK firmly on the world stage. The non-Turkish speakers were: David Doughan, reference librarian of the Fawcett Library, London; Annie Dizier, curator of the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris; Patricia Miller King, director of the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Cambridge MA; Marieke Kramer, co-ordinator at the International Information Centre and Archive for the Women's Movement (IIAV), Amsterdam; and Johanna Kootz of the Center for the Promotion of Women's Studies and Research on Women, Free University of Berlin. Their first impressions must have been very mixed. They were in a fabled city just metres from the waters of the Golden Horn discussing modern feminist library classification systems in a very new library situated in

a purpose-built military grain store, dating from the Byzantine era but now marooned in the middle of a very large traffic island with busy traffic passing close by on both sides between the shore of the Golden Horn and the ancient city walls.

The programme started with speeches by representatives of the Municipality of Greater Istanbul and the Turkish Librarians' Association; other speakers were introduced by representatives of their national governments in Turkey. It was a unique occasion – the first international meeting of women's libraries ever held.² It was a bold initiative for a young library to undertake, and Patricia Miller King was inspired to offer to host a subsequent international meeting of women's libraries at the Schlesinger Library.

Almost three years later, representatives from these libraries took part (with over 240 other delegates) in a world-wide conference of women's libraries and information centres, 'Women, Information and the Future', hosted by the Schlesinger Library. This library, as part of Radcliffe College, was able to draw on the resources of the Harvard campus and, like KEK its predecessor host, depended on the generosity of a number of sponsors and financial backers. Women's documentation centres from fifty-six nations were represented. Over half the delegates came from North America, fifty from Europe, twenty-two from Asia and the Pacific rim, twenty from Mexico, Central and Southern America, and fourteen from Africa. Unofficial regional caucuses were organised, taking place under large shady trees on the Radcliffe campus, giving delegates the opportunity to explore informally their professional concerns in a more relaxed atmosphere outside the very full programme of plenary sessions and seminars – several strands of seminars on various aspects of documentation took place concurrently each day.

The mutually supportive professional and personal relationships struck at these first conferences are still active in initiatives such as the *European Women's Thesaurus*, an IIAV project originating in the Netherlands, discussed in Boston and published and distributed at a third conference in August 1998.³ This third 'Know How' conference was organised by IIAV and took place in Amsterdam. Development of the *European Women's Thesaurus* continues, and the Fawcett Library (soon to become the National Library of Women) is a partner in the venture. Connections made in Boston were strengthened in Amsterdam and new community initiatives emerged such as the e-published follow-up newsletter distributed to conference

participants. E-mail and other electronic media, in 1991 a futuristic dream to all but the richest women's documentation centres, have facilitated communications among women working in feminist and women-centred institutions. All kinds of women's resource centres and organisations are represented in this informal association, from radical through academic to United Nations-sponsored non-governmental organisations and national collections, from small one-woman initiatives to multi-staffed, multi-media collections. Looking at the 250 names on the 1994 conference participants' list, this writer still feels personally connected to thirty delegates nearly seven years on. The international community is still growing: the Fawcett Library was recently visited by two women from University College Cork, Republic of Ireland, who are establishing a feminist archive around women in Irish society, and were keen to consult our archival expertise.

KEK had acted as a catalyst on the world stage. It was founded by a group of eminent and well-placed women within Istanbul academic life in a secular yet Muslim cultural tradition where a separate women's library appeared acceptable to all shades of political opinion, often for quite different reasons (another common trait shared with long-established women's libraries such as the Fawcett Library, trusted by radical and establishment women alike. The Fawcett Library was founded in 1926, partly to support women emerging into professional life, and partly in response to the needs of the documents of the successful woman's suffrage campaign). In contrast to some women's libraries, which started as information centres for activist groups, one of KEK's central initiatives was from the outset to place women into the cultural mainstream of Turkey. Concentrated effort has focused – among other areas – on the Women Artists' and Women Writers' collections, for example. Women artists regularly exhibit at the library, usually donating a work to the library collections, and there is an ongoing programme of regular seminars on a wide range of woman-centred cultural topics. The broad trust placed by their stake-holders in KEK and other women's libraries rests on (and requires) a basis of adequate financial support, recognition by outside political agencies, society's interest in women in general, and sound professional practices within the institution.

Whether founded by local or central government, activists or philanthropists, women's documentation centres appear to start by concentrating on contemporary material. Sooner or later (usually sooner) the women working there begin to wonder what to do with

the old stuff – that is to say yesterday's out-of-date information. They question what has happened to woman-focused material from earlier times and a reappraisal of the past brings in documents from older and other sources. KEK is very typical in this respect in its response to uncovering Ottoman feminist initiatives across the cultural chasm caused by Turkey's adoption of Western-based script in the mid 1920s, then a conscious national decision to break with the past.

Aslı Davaz-Mardin's close analysis of four individual documents demands one small postscript (from the possible myriads) about international relationships, women activists, dusty documents and their feminist interpretation: the Edmée de Choch album of autographs of representatives at the International Women's Congress in 1935 described in her article contains the signatures of four English women. They are M[argery] I. Corbett Ashby, Marjorie Nunburnholme, Edith Picton-Turbervill (with the subscription 'Member of Parliament 1929–31') and Alison Nielans. The Fawcett Library holds the personal archive of Dame Margery, President of the International Alliance of Women as well as the archives of the IAW.⁴ Her personal papers include her file of the 1935 conference.⁵ Lady Nunburnholme was prominent in the societies for the suppression of traffic in persons, whose archives are also held at the Fawcett Library.⁶ Alison Nielans was the Secretary General of the Association for Social and Moral Hygiene (later the Josephine Butler Society) whose library and archives are held here. Edith Picton-Turbervill was described in the francophone *Journal d'Orient* of 24 April 1935.⁷

On la dit prêtresse de je ne sais quelle secte protestante, elle a l'air terrible mais on la sait bonne. Il est vrai qu'elle fait un peu peur. 'Là où on attaquera la femme, dit-elle, nous devons faire front commun.'⁸

She is represented in the Library by her published autobiography, *Life is Good*, as well as elsewhere in the printed collections.

Thus the documentalists of the present shadow the activists of the past – and the present becomes the past all too soon.

Notes

1. Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı İstanbul (known to the people who work there as KEK).
2. Şirin Tekeli (ed.), *Kadınların Belleği: Uluslararası Kadın Kütüphaneleri Sempozyum Tutanakları*, 8–10 Ekim 1991 (Women's Memory: Proceedings of the International Symposium of Women's Libraries, 8–10 October 1991) (Metis Yayınları, İstanbul, 1992).

3. Marianne Boere (ed.), *European Women's Thesaurus: a structured list of descriptors for indexing and retrieving information in the field of the position of women and women's studies* (International Information Centre and Archive for the Women's Movement (IIAV), Amsterdam, 1998).
4. Archival references GB106/7/MCA and GB106/2/LAW.
5. Archival reference GB106/7/MCA/C/18.
6. Archival reference GB106/4.
7. In GB106/7/MCA/C/18.
8. One would say she was a priestess from some protestant sect or other; she has a terrifying mien but is obviously good. It is true that she inspires a little fear. 'We must make a common front wherever women are attacked', she says.