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Women's (in)visibility

In the Carl Sahlin Archive

ANNA FOKA

Carl Sahlin (1861–1943) was a Swedish businessman, a distinguished industry historian and a metallurgist. His historical collection contains about 1,800 archive capsules of mining history up to the 1930s. This chapter focuses on Sahlin's archive from the perspective of women's presence. The purpose is to unpack and reveal the complexities when digitally organizing and rendering a physical archival collection. Our project team took several concrete steps in the process. First, the Sahlin archive was examined from the perspective of gender studies, identifying the stark need for women's visibility in historical archives. Sahlin's archive was then assessed, particularly with a focus on its fluid character – a mix of pictures, magazines, books, photographs, maps, handwritten and printed text – and compared to gender-critical digitisation initiatives such as the University of Gothenburg's women's journals' collections and the Gender and Works database in Uppsala. The latter are leading examples of critically selective digitisation in a Swedish context and have succeeded in making women's history archives visible. This chapter concludes by offering some recommendations on how to rethink collections with digital technology to include social categories that correspond to research questions in the 21st century.

Research on women in the past has often argued that women have mainly been presented as subordinate and inferior in archives.¹ The pre-modern period in Europe has often been mischaracterised by a lack of source material regarding women's experiences and lives. This has been attributed to the fact that the institutions that produced and stored

Traditional gender roles – displayed in a Klafreström advertisement for ironing devices from *Järnhandlaren. Organ för Sveriges Järnhandlareförening* – excerpt in Sahlin's archive from the 1930s. Carl Sahlin's bergshistoriska samling / Tekniska museet (CS-F1-340-1).

documents were exclusively male-dominated. Historians, whether medieval or early modern, are hence bound to work with male-mediated archives. While there are historical documents written by women (of higher social status), they only offer a partial picture of women's experiences.² Such limitations in fact determine what we know about women in pre- and early modern Europe. Research has, for example, shown that marital status exerted a strong influence on women's sustenance activities, creating a clear distinction between unmarried and married women.³ However, the archival norm is that women's roles have been 'hidden'. Household and unpaid work was simply concealed or ignored by (male) officials, studying these was considered obscure.⁴

Today, archival material is increasingly examined from different perspectives in order to reveal more about women in historical records. Digitisation, digital rendering and organisation of historical data have also added an additional layer of inquiry by challenging the boundaries of well-established historical knowledge. Digitisation initiatives within historical disciplines often use digital tools to taxonomise and to reveal concepts of critical cultural heritage.⁵ Museums, archives, libraries and universities are accordingly striving for digital research infrastructures in order to make data readable, openly accessible and to inspire new research.⁶ Cataloguing, taxonomising, and identifying historical data with digital means usually opens up questions in relation to social categories – not least in terms of gender.⁷ This chapter aims to contribute to the topic by showing how digitisation is a process that begins with a critical organisation of historical data and evolves through both research questions and technical solutions.⁸ In doing so, digitisation *per se* becomes a knowledge producing mechanism.

Carl Sahlin's personal archive at Tekniska museet will serve as my case study. Sahlin's historical collection contains everything that captured his attention in relation to the mining industry from early medieval times to the 1930s. The archive counts a total of almost one thousand and eight hundred capsules filled with press clippings, financial documents, correspondence, travel books, contracts, articles, maps, literature, stamp books and interviews. All with neat notes by Carl Sahlin himself, there is even a piece of radioactive wool cloth, which is more closely mentioned in Finn Arne Jørgensen's chapter. The ultimate implementation of the archival material load was to be selectively rendered

in a digital format (a model) with (preferably) an open and available online presence. The digital rendering of Sahlin's archive was also thought through the lens of gender. Digitisation then emerged as a process of both humanistic and digital nature capturing, taxonomizing and storing in a digital form data about women in Sahlin's archive. The conclusion of my chapter hence highlights the importance of an infrastructure that is open, searchable and interoperable with other platforms, intended for citizens and scholars alike.

Women's Archives in Sweden

How does one determine the presence of women within an archive? Is conceptual and thematic digitisation, isolating and digitising every archival item related to one theme – women for example – a good scholarly practise? Feminist research in the cultural heritage sector has contributed in inspiring ways by showing how women are portrayed in both pictures and texts within archival environments. Since the 1980s studies within feminist museology have brought forward the complexity of issues that arise with the portrayal of cultural notions of gender in museum discourse. Overall, studies show how archival objects and museum processes produce depictions of women in exhibitions, and often emphasize the influence of social processes over curatorial work. In short, gendered power relations become invisible when males are constantly favored as the central figure in stories told through exhibitions as well as archival practices. The Sahlin archive, a collection composed and donated by one of the most important men of the Swedish industry, is no exception and thus created a similar challenge within our research project.

Contemporary information and library science usually stipulates that archives can suggest an ever increasing mountain of data that is 1) to be sorted out later at a great expense and effort, or is 2) hyperorganised collection of ephemera placed into regulated storage for the purpose of supplying historians of the future with abundant and trustworthy primary source material.⁹ While activism has brought together a number of individuals building contemporary women's internet archives and historical collections online – state funded institutions (such as Tekniska museet) operate in different ways. However, given the challenge of unearthing women in an archive organized and assembled by a man

(Carl Sahlin), our research project decided to examine other initiatives and projects on gendered archiving.

The current state of affairs is that there are initiatives for databases and repositories with an all female agenda. The most eloquent example is the Women's History databases hosted by Harvard University. It contains a number of databases that relate to American women's history and culinary history, most notably The American Consumer database, Everyday Life and Women in America, 1800–1920, Gerritsen Collection – Women's History Online, 1543–1945, Women and Social Movements in the United States: 1600–2000, and Women working 1800–1930. In Sweden, the most notable platforms for women's history are the Women's Journals database and the Database Gender and Works that are hosted by the University of Gothenburg and Uppsala University respectively.

The purpose of the Gender and Works research project conducted at Uppsala University is to investigate work performed by men and women in the past.¹⁰ During the first phase of the project researchers studied how women and men sustained and provided for themselves in Sweden from 1550 to 1800. The second phase narrowed down the research and digital implementation scope by focusing on shifts in gender work between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The overall aim was to locate the actual division of labor identifying who worked and in what context, and what the division of labor meant for society in general. The Gender and Work database (GAW) contains primary source materials and archives (on jobs and occupations). When one looks at the webpage of the database, a number of options appear. Free text search means that users can search words without specifying the fields in which the words are searched. Advanced search means that the users themselves determine which search criteria to use or group. In short, the Gender and Work database – a repository that contains primarily handwritten administrative documents in Swedish – is an ambitious research project that, over the years, has organically narrowed down its scholarly scope to focus on a specific historical context.

KvinnSam – the National Library for Gender Research (hosted by the University of Gothenburg), started in 1958. It has since acted as a stepping stone for various gender projects: “activities consist of monitoring and listing literature on gender issues, collecting, arranging and listing women's archival material and providing reference services”.

KvinnSam has produced several research databases. The largest database is KvinnSam, which contains about 150,000 references that are based on University Library literature. In Gena, another repository, Swedish dissertations with gender perspective are listed. The research database Greda has a list of gender scholars. Archives, letters and scanned photos are searchable in the Alvin database that is hosted by Uppsala University. Parts of the archive material have been digitised and made available in female-historical portals with different themes. Older women's journals have also been scanned in full text. In addition, KvinnSam is home to *Digitid*, a digitised collection of women magazines.¹¹

Both the Gender and Works database and KvinnSam are examples of theme-specific collections which succeed in enabling researchers to look through thematic collections that are gender specific. Interfaces are easy to use for researchers, but do not provide a scheme for interoperability, nor are they connected with larger platform initiatives, as for example *Europeana*. Still, they are useful points of reference because they open up historical materials thematically, and the archival collections are also thought through alongside research, being initiated and hosted by universities. Most importantly, however, both databases take gender as a principle for organizing and thinking around archival material; the GAW repository contains primarily handwritten documents and KvinnSam typewritten text and historical press – yet independent of content, archival categorization is perceived through the lens of gender.

Women in Sahlin's Archive

Feminist museology from the late 1980s has offered valuable analyses of the processes of museums in Britain and Sweden, including the underpinning of gender power relations and discourses: “the representationalist depictions of women in exhibitions and their roles in the contextualizations that form museum narratives.”¹² Women in the archive have been tied upon a diversity of different related subjects, considered to be equal in value to each other and to men.¹³ Research however, has illustrated the exclusion of ethnic diversity and social classes in relation to museum collections.¹⁴ This type of scholarly results has influenced museum exhibitions, encouraging narratives around domestic history that contextualizes museum artefacts that specifically illustrate the lives of women with prominent social status.



◀ ▶

In Sahlin's archive – and his documentation of mining history – two images of the Swedish Queen Ulrika Eleonora (1688–1744) are present. The first is a black and white reproduction of a painting by the court painter David von Kraft from 1702. On the second image – also a black and white reproduction of a similar painting of the queen by von Kraft (unknown date) – Sahlin has made the comment: "Queen Ulrika Eleonora visited Stora Kopparberget 7 Aug., 1732". In the margin of the reproduction Sahlin also stated that the painting was sold at an auction at the Stockholm art dealer Bukowski in 1938. Both images can be found in Carl Sahlins bergshistoriska samling / Tekniska museet (CS-F1-340-1_009 & CS-F1-340-1_012).

Then again, the work of women who offered domestic help have been more or less absent in both exhibitions and archival collections, and the Carl Sahlin archive is no exception. There would have been no Swedish industry in the past without women – yet in Sahlin's meticulous categorized archive, they are nonexistent. The archive, which was donated to the museum in the 1930s, has no thematic categories that relate to women at all. Each capsule is neatly organized by Sahlin himself, often including his own notes to accompany every item. He also created his own list of categories for the items. Sahlin's categorization corresponds to an organizational style where women were not separately listed.



Within this list, there is no mention of women at all, other than perhaps ‘Workers and their Families’.

However, while there was no special category listed as ‘women’ – one would perhaps expect that these archive capsules of mining history would not contain any data focusing specifically on women – there was of course a certain amount of archival material related to women. Sahlin’s archive in many ways reflects how he saw his female contemporaries, their activities and lives. During Sahlin’s time, labor was still largely gendered. It followed early modern models of partnership of working-class families based on mining, agriculture and crafts. Sahlin’s year of death in 1943,

however, saw the formal establishment of a sustainable daycare system in Sweden to facilitate work for female professionals. Sahlin's archive was thus established precisely at a time when gender and work were being negotiated, and emancipation gradually became the norm.

Our engagement with the Sahlin archive unearthed a number of interesting data, which primarily were related to women's status. Women with property and queens' visits to the mines, formed the majority of gender related issues within the archive. Status appeared overall to be the most important point of reference, and by looking at the archive one can identify that, for Sahlin especially, queens' visits to mines were of major importance. In Sahlin's own documentation, Swedish Queen Ulrika Eleonora's visit in Falun 1732, for example, comes across as a typical *prosopography* – a term used to identify and relate a group of persons or characters within a particular historical or literary context. Sahlin follows this pattern of prosopography for queens' visits with variations throughout his archive. They reveal the sum of data about individuals in relation to different types of connections between them, and hence how they operated within and upon institutions – social, political, legal, economic, intellectual – of their time. Queen Ulrika Eleonora is, for example, presented in two different types of artistic portraits in Sahlin's archive. General information about her lineage is provided, including comments on her depiction in relation to status and power. In adding a queen's visit to the mining history archive, Sahlin provides detailed documentation about the importance of the individual woman, and also confirms the scholarly assumption about the diplomatic importance of Swedish Queens for the nation's economic history.

While the 'untouchable status' of Swedish Queens is something that is scholarly agreed upon,¹⁵ women of lower status are in Sahlin's archive usually found as oppositional narratives, or never discussed at all. Very often histories of women in Sahlin's archive are revealed because they are minor narratives in a man's story. One example relates to the legendary man "Fet-Mats" (Mats Israelsson), who died in the Falun copper mine in 1677. His body could not be found, and when it was finally discovered in 1719, it had become petrified (literary turned to stone). The body was identified by his former fiancé, Margaret Olsdotter. Fet-Mats was put on display in Falun, yet Margaret Olsdotter – as a female figure of lower status, and a worker in the mining industry – only became visible in the Sahlin archive because of the man she was associated to.

From the early modern period and onwards, the social position of women was usually related to their status and financial position. Later, during the 19th century women started to become skill-trained professionals,¹⁶ but they are more or less absent in Sahlin's archive. Representations of (more modern) women do, however, appear in his archive – sometimes within advertisement materials related to traditional (household) female roles. An advertisement for Klafreström, an ironing device, in Sahlin's archive for example, displays traditional gender roles, notably women's work in the household. Women appear at first instance ironing a tablecloth which they use later, (in the second caption) for a social gathering with men.

Digitising Sahlin – Some Final Recommendations

The Klafreström advertisement indicates that, when digging deeper in the material, women actually appear in several media forms and formats: land contracts, press clippings, pictures, drawings and photographs, and within women's magazines as *Idun* or *Tidskrift för Hemmet*. The variety of different media, however, made it difficult to implement a coherent digitisation strategy in relation to gender within the Sahlin archive. The archive was simply too vast and composed by different media materials.

It was hence decided to start digitisation activities following certain geographies (areas with factories and mines), printed and type-written texts (magazines and contracts) and different forms of pictures (photographs, maps and paintings). In addition, it was decided to carefully choose the best method to digitise some materials individually, depending on the type of document. For instance, the old hand painted maps from Gammelbo could not be sent away from the museum because of their delicate quality. Initially, fifteen archive capsules with stamped books from the Sahlin archive were picked by the team of scholars and archivists. These archives were at the outset digitised by different companies. As our project proclaimed the importance of several modes or models of digitisation, the same principle was applied to Sahlin. One reason for using different companies was also to compare quality and price before making a final decision. Devo digitised two capsules from the Sahlin archive and later Mediakonverteringscentrum (MKC in Fränsta) scanned the major part of it. Digitised documents were then inserted into the

museum database Primus. It was also decided to create a link to DigitaltMuseum to enable visitors to directly access digitised materials.

During 2018 a total of almost 46,000 items from the Sahlin archive became accessible on DigitaltMuseum. The digitisation of a large part of Carl Sahlin's archive hence testifies to the richness of the collection. However, as stated, it was hard to make gender a structuring principle of our work. In general, gender was not as present in the archive. Hence, archival ideas from the Gender and Works database and KvinnSam became strenuous to implement. Naturally, Sahlin did not envision his archive in gendered terms, and consequently it became difficult to imagine a novel, gender conscious, version of his archive.

Then again, if one would have made the Sahlin archive (the database) searchable by keyword, the best approach to unearth gender in the archive would probably be to crowdsource a simple model of semantic tagging of selected digitised capsules – based on aforementioned categories such as status, age and social role. An envisioned ontology for tagging should then be applied, in a specific order: 'People' (Name, Gender, Age, Citizen/Non-citizen, Social status, Social role, Other); 'Events' (Type, Industrial, Household, Migration, Unidentified); Subject; Time (historical date). Such an ontology would target a number of categories and make gender an essential classification marker.

To conclude, while there are initiatives of collecting and taxonomizing women's historical materials, digitising Carl Sahlin's archive has been an interesting exercise. The variety of media determined both careful digitisation and the usage of accessible, open and interoperable platforms. Emphasis was placed on high quality digital photographs and manuscripts, as well as on accessibility. In short, our digitisation process succeeded in making the Sahlin archive open and available, and thus able to inspire further research in the field. Nevertheless, the process of thinking about and implementing ontologies, taxonomies and categories in gendered terms was indeed complicated. In Sahlin's archive women did obviously exist, but gender was not explicitly mentioned, let alone served as classification structure. This is not to say that Sahlin in compiling his archive was unaware of women's rights and the emancipation of women during the first decades of the 20th century. Sahlin did have an awareness of social issues, in relation to both gender and status, yet the ultimate question is what to make of Carl Sahlin's understanding of society while searching his archive.

Noter

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