

Reframing Historical Scholarship Through Gender: An Analytical Approach to Gendered Representation and Historiographical Change

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Abstract: Historical scholarship is not a neutral record of past events but a process through which social experiences are selected, classified, interpreted, and represented. Gender provides a particularly significant analytical category for examining how historical narratives have privileged certain forms of social experience while marginalizing others. This research-and-review article examines the possibilities of reframing historiographical interpretations through a gender-sensitive analytical approach, using the historical development of Toronto's suburbs, property relations, housing, immigration, social reform, and urban transformation as its principal field of analysis. The study employs a qualitative historiographical methodology based exclusively on the supplied historical and urban studies literature. The analytical framework connects four dimensions—spatial organization, property and housing, social regulation, and historical representation—to investigate how apparently gender-neutral historical processes can produce differentiated experiences. The literature demonstrates that suburban development was shaped by class, immigration, property ownership, institutional regulation, and cultural expectations, while the gendered implications of these processes require more explicit historiographical attention. Harris's analysis of working-class immigrant suburbs particularly demonstrates how residential environments can be interpreted as products of intersecting social and economic forces rather than merely physical expansion (Harris, 1991). The findings suggest that gender-sensitive historiography can broaden conventional urban history by recovering overlooked experiences, interrogating assumptions of neutrality, and connecting domestic, spatial, economic, and institutional histories. The article concludes that gender should operate not simply as an additional subject of historical inquiry but as an interpretive framework capable of reshaping the questions, categories, and causal relationships through which historical change is understood.

Keywords: Gender Historiography, Gendered Representation, Urban History, Suburbanization, Historical Methodology, Housing History, Social History, Toronto, Spatial Analysis.

1. Introduction:

Historical scholarship is fundamentally concerned with reconstructing and interpreting change over time. Yet the process of historical reconstruction is influenced by the categories through which historians understand social life. Conventional urban and social histories have frequently emphasized institutions, property, economic development, municipal expansion, architecture, infrastructure, and political

administration. Such approaches provide valuable explanations of urban transformation, but they may also obscure the differentiated experiences of people who occupied, managed, contested, or were excluded from these spaces. Gender-sensitive historiography challenges this limitation by asking how historical processes were experienced differently according to socially constructed gender roles and how those roles themselves were shaped by economic, spatial, and

institutional structures.

The history of Toronto's suburban development offers a particularly productive context for such an inquiry. The supplied literature documents transformations in property ownership, housing tenure, immigrant settlement, suburban landscapes, housing reform, and the expansion of metropolitan space. Goheen's examination of Victorian Toronto establishes the significance of spatial growth and patterns of urban development, while Dendy's historical account emphasizes the transformation of Toronto's built environment (Goheen, 1973; Dendy, 1978). Harris similarly demonstrates that suburbanization cannot be reduced to physical expansion because working-class and immigrant settlement was connected to broader social and economic processes (Harris, 1991). A gender-oriented reading can extend this scholarship by examining how these transformations affected domestic responsibilities, household authority, access to property, community participation, and socially prescribed roles.

The central problem addressed in this article is therefore not the absence of historical evidence concerning urban transformation, but the interpretive consequences of treating major historical processes as gender-neutral. A city can expand geographically while simultaneously reorganizing relations within households and communities. Housing can function as an economic asset while also constituting a site of domestic labor, social reproduction, privacy, respectability, and gendered authority. Likewise, suburbanization can represent upward mobility for some groups while producing exclusion or intensified regulation for others.

The objective of this study is to develop an analytical approach for reframing historical scholarship through gender. Rather than treating gender as an isolated category, the study positions it alongside class, immigration, property, housing, and spatial organization. Its scope is deliberately limited to the supplied references, particularly literature concerning Toronto and Canadian suburban development. The significance of the study lies in demonstrating how existing historical materials can generate new interpretations when examined through a gender-sensitive historiographical framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The supplied literature presents a multidimensional account of Toronto's urban and suburban transformation. Goheen's study of Victorian Toronto provides a foundational understanding of the relationship between urban growth, spatial patterns, and processes of metropolitan development (Goheen, 1973). Dendy's *Lost Toronto* further demonstrates the importance of interpreting urban history through changes in the built environment and the historical transformation of urban spaces (Dendy, 1978). These works establish the spatial and chronological foundations necessary for understanding suburbanization, but their primary analytical categories are not explicitly organized around gender.

Harris's scholarship significantly broadens this perspective. His study of a working-class immigrant suburb in Toronto demonstrates that suburban development involved the interaction of class, immigration, housing, employment, and spatial organization (Harris, 1991). This is important for gender historiography because the category of "working-class immigrant" is not socially homogeneous. Household members could experience the same residential environment differently according to their roles within the family and community. Consequently, the suburban neighborhood can be examined not only as a geographical unit but also as a social environment in which gendered relationships were reproduced and negotiated.

Harris's later works extend the historical interpretation of suburbanization. *Unplanned Suburbs* frames Toronto's suburban development as a process involving institutional and spatial consequences rather than simply planned metropolitan expansion, while *Creeping Conformity* interprets suburbanization in relation to broader processes of social and cultural change (Harris, 1996; Harris, 2004). These perspectives are particularly relevant to gender because conformity is never merely spatial. Expectations concerning family life, household organization, respectability, property ownership, and appropriate social behavior can become embedded in residential structures.

McCann's discussion of the Canadian suburban landscape similarly emphasizes the cultural and spatial dimensions of suburban development (McCann, 1999).

The concept of the “suburban landscape” allows historians to move beyond a purely economic interpretation and examine how space acquires social meaning. A gender-sensitive approach can therefore investigate whether suburban landscapes reflected particular assumptions about household organization and social roles.

Choko and Harris’s comparative study of housing tenure in Montreal and Toronto is important because it situates property within local cultural systems rather than treating housing as a purely economic phenomenon (Choko Marc, and Richard Harris, 1990). This perspective creates an analytical opening for gender research because property relations can structure authority, security, dependency, and household status. Dennis’s study of Jewish landlords in early twentieth-century Toronto likewise demonstrates the importance of examining property relations within particular social groups (Dennis, 1997). Such scholarship suggests that ownership and tenancy were embedded within wider social relations.

Purdy’s analysis of housing reform thought introduces another crucial dimension: the relationship between housing, social order, moral purity, and reform ideology (Purdy, 2006). This literature demonstrates that housing was not simply a matter of physical shelter. It became an object of social regulation and moral judgment. From a gender perspective, such regulation is significant because moral standards surrounding households and domestic environments could influence expectations concerning family behavior, respectability, and social responsibility.

The newspapers included in the supplied references provide additional evidence of contemporary public discourse. Articles concerning Parkdale, suburban corporations, civic celebrations, and transportation reveal how suburban communities were represented publicly (“Parkdale’s Civic Holiday: How Monday Was Celebrated in the Floral Suburb,” 1879; “Suburban Corporations,” 1878; “Against Parkdale Annexation,” 1888; “There Is No Benefit to Earlscourt,” 1911). These materials demonstrate that historical representation was produced not only by later historians but also through contemporary media. Their inclusion allows historiography to be examined as a layered process in which historical actors, journalists, institutions, and later scholars participate in constructing

representations of urban life.

Whitzman’s study of Parkdale is especially relevant because it explicitly examines transformation within a particular Toronto neighborhood over an extended period (Whitzman, 2009). This neighborhood-level perspective can reveal changes that may disappear within city-wide narratives. Solomon’s history of Toronto’s sprawl further emphasizes the long-term development of metropolitan space (Solomon, 2007).

The principal gap emerging from the literature is therefore analytical rather than evidentiary. The supplied studies provide substantial material concerning urban growth, property, housing, immigration, reform, and suburbanization, but these themes can be reconsidered through a more explicit gendered framework. The present study addresses this gap by treating gender as an interpretive mechanism through which spatial, economic, and social histories can be reassessed.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Historiographical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative historiographical research design. Rather than producing quantitative measurements of gender representation, it examines how historical processes are framed, which analytical categories dominate existing scholarship, and how gender can alter interpretations of those processes. The method is based exclusively on close analytical reading and thematic synthesis of the supplied references.

The methodological premise is that historiography operates through selection and interpretation. A historical account does not merely reproduce events; it organizes them into meaningful relationships. Accordingly, the study evaluates the references according to four interconnected analytical dimensions: spatial organization, property and housing, social regulation, and representation.

3.2 Gender as an Interpretive Framework

The first methodological principle is to treat gender as an analytical category rather than merely a demographic variable. A gender-sensitive approach asks how expectations concerning masculinity, femininity, domestic responsibility, authority, and social respectability influenced historical experiences.

For example, a discussion of housing tenure may initially appear economically oriented. Yet the meaning of ownership can change when the household is analyzed as a gendered institution. Property may provide economic security, confer social status, establish authority, or generate dependency. Choko Marc and Harris's emphasis on the local culture of property supports an interpretation in which housing relations must be situated within broader social structures (Choko Marc, and Richard Harris, 1990).

3.3 Spatial and Suburban Analytical Model

The second dimension concerns space. The study conceptualizes suburban development through the following analytical relationship:

Urban Transformation → Spatial Organization → Housing/Property Relations → Household and Community Practices → Gendered Historical Experience

This model does not claim that space mechanically determines gender relations. Rather, it proposes reciprocal interaction. Urban environments influence social possibilities, while residents simultaneously reproduce or challenge social norms through their use of space.

Harris's analysis of the working-class immigrant suburb is especially important in this model because it demonstrates that residential space was closely connected to class and immigration (Harris, 1991). A gendered extension of this framework asks how those same spatial conditions affected different household members.

3.4 Property, Housing, and Social Power

The third analytical component investigates property and housing as mechanisms of social power. The literature indicates that property ownership and tenancy were central to Toronto's urban transformation. Dennis's study of Jewish landlords, for example, illustrates how property relations were embedded within particular community structures (Dennis, 1997).

The methodology therefore distinguishes between housing as a physical structure and housing as a social institution. This distinction is important because a building can simultaneously function as shelter, investment, workplace, family environment, and

marker of social status. Gender analysis becomes relevant when these functions are distributed unequally among household members.

3.5 Reform, Morality, and Regulation

The fourth component addresses the relationship between housing reform and moral regulation. Purdy's examination of housing reform thought demonstrates that reformers connected physical housing conditions with social order and moral purity (Purdy, 2006). A gendered historiographical reading investigates how ideals of respectable domesticity could become embedded within reform agendas.

The methodological implication is that historians should distinguish between material improvement and normative regulation. A reform initiative may improve housing conditions while simultaneously reinforcing particular expectations about family organization and social behavior. This creates a potential tension between modernization and conformity.

3.6 Historical Representation and Newspaper Evidence

The fifth dimension concerns representation itself. Newspaper materials such as "Against Parkdale Annexation," "Parkdale's Civic Holiday," "Suburban Corporations," and "Tub No Benefit to Earls Court" provide evidence of how suburban communities were represented contemporaneously ("Against Parkdale Annexation," 1888; "Parkdale's Civic Holiday: How Monday Was Celebrated in the Floral Suburb," 1879; "Suburban Corporations," 1878; "Tub No Benefit to Earls Court," 1911).

These materials should not be treated as transparent descriptions of reality. Instead, they can be interpreted as historical representations shaped by editorial priorities and contemporary assumptions. A gender-sensitive historiography therefore asks not only "what happened?" but also "whose experience became visible, whose remained marginal, and what social assumptions structured the representation?"

3.7 Comparative Interpretation

The final methodological procedure is comparative synthesis. Rather than analyzing each source independently, the study compares historical interpretations across scales: city, suburb, neighborhood, household, and property relation. This

enables the identification of relationships between apparently separate processes.

Whitzman's long-term analysis of Parkdale, Harris's work on suburbanization, and McCann's examination of suburban landscapes can therefore be read together to identify continuities and changes in the organization and representation of suburban life (Whitzman, 2009; Harris, 1996; McCann, 1999).

4. RESULTS

The analysis identifies five major findings concerning the potential for gender-sensitive historiographical reconstruction.

First, the literature indicates that suburbanization should be understood as a social process rather than exclusively as geographical expansion. Toronto's transformation involved changing relationships between urban space, housing, property, immigration, and social organization. Harris's study of the working-class immigrant suburb demonstrates that suburban development reflected complex relationships among residential space, class, and immigrant settlement rather than a simple movement away from the city (Harris, 1991). A gendered approach extends this finding by asking how these transformations reorganized household and community responsibilities.

Second, property emerges as a critical mechanism through which social power can be examined. The literature on housing tenure and Jewish landlords demonstrates that property relations were socially differentiated (Choko Marc, and Richard Harris, 1990; Dennis, 1997). This suggests that historians should avoid interpreting ownership simply as an economic category. Ownership and tenancy could influence security, authority, social standing, and access to resources. Gender analysis can reveal how such benefits and constraints were distributed within households.

Third, the findings demonstrate that suburban landscapes contained cultural meanings. McCann's analysis of Canadian suburban landscapes and Harris's broader studies of suburbanization show that physical environments were connected to cultural patterns (McCann, 1999; Harris, 2004). Consequently, suburbanization can be interpreted as a process through which particular forms of social organization

became spatially normalized. Gender becomes significant because assumptions about family structure and domestic life may be embedded in these spatial arrangements.

Fourth, housing reform represented both material intervention and moral regulation. Purdy's discussion of housing reform thought connects housing with social order and moral purity (Purdy, 2006). This finding demonstrates that historical modernization should not automatically be interpreted as progressive or neutral. Reform could improve living conditions while simultaneously defining acceptable household behavior. Gender-sensitive historiography can therefore identify the normative assumptions that accompanied reform.

Fifth, historical representation itself is uneven. Contemporary newspaper accounts provide evidence of civic events, suburban administration, transportation, and political concerns, but their visibility does not necessarily correspond to the full range of lived experiences. The absence or marginalization of particular experiences should therefore be treated as analytically meaningful. Harris's treatment of immigrant working-class suburban life provides an important methodological precedent because it shifts attention toward populations that can be overlooked by institutional urban histories (Harris, 1991).

Taken together, these findings support a four-level analytical model: **space, property, social regulation, and representation**. Gender operates across all four levels rather than constituting a separate category. This is the principal methodological finding of the study. A gender-sensitive historiography can therefore transform existing urban historical questions without discarding established scholarship.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that gender can substantially reshape the interpretation of urban and suburban history when used as a relational analytical framework. The central implication is that gender should not be added to historical narratives only through the insertion of women as previously omitted subjects. Such an approach would risk leaving the underlying historical structure unchanged. Instead, gender analysis should examine how categories such as

property, household, labor, respectability, migration, and space were themselves historically organized.

The literature concerning Toronto's suburbs provides a strong foundation for this reinterpretation. Harris's study of the working-class immigrant suburb demonstrates that residential space was closely connected to social class and immigrant experience (Harris, 1991). A gender-sensitive extension asks how the same neighborhood functioned differently for people occupying different household and community roles. The significance of this approach is that it moves historiography from a single generalized "resident" toward differentiated historical actors.

The relationship between property and gender presents another important theoretical implication. Choko Marc and Harris demonstrate the importance of local cultures of property, while Dennis examines Jewish landlords and property relations in Toronto (Choko Marc, and Richard Harris, 1990; Dennis, 1997). These studies complicate purely economic interpretations of ownership. From a gender perspective, property can be examined as a site where economic resources and social authority intersect. This does not imply that all households followed identical patterns. Rather, it establishes a research question concerning the relationship between ownership, household decision-making, and social status.

The literature on housing reform introduces a further contradiction. Reform discourse could seek healthier, more efficient, and socially stable housing while simultaneously imposing normative standards. Purdy's analysis of housing reform thought demonstrates the connection between housing, social order, and moral purity (Purdy, 2006). Thus, the language of improvement may contain assumptions about what constituted a proper household or respectable community. Gender historiography is particularly valuable here because normative expectations are often expressed through assumptions concerning domestic responsibility and family behavior.

The findings also complicate interpretations of suburban conformity. Harris's account of suburbanization as a broader social and cultural process suggests that the expansion of suburban environments involved more than infrastructure and residential construction (Harris, 2004). The idea of

conformity can therefore be interpreted as a process through which particular forms of family life, consumption, respectability, and community organization became culturally dominant. Yet the historical record should also be examined for resistance, adaptation, and alternative practices.

The neighborhood scale is equally important. Whitzman's study of Parkdale demonstrates the value of tracing transformation within a specific locality over an extended period (Whitzman, 2009). Neighborhood history can expose changes that disappear in generalized accounts of metropolitan development. It also provides a methodological opportunity to connect public and private spheres: streets, institutions, housing, property, and household life can be interpreted as interconnected historical environments.

Nevertheless, the approach has limitations. The supplied references do not constitute a comprehensive gender history of Toronto. Consequently, some interpretations remain analytical extensions rather than direct conclusions explicitly demonstrated by the sources. The absence of detailed gender-disaggregated evidence means that the study should be understood as a historiographical framework rather than a definitive reconstruction of gender relations. Future research would benefit from additional primary sources capable of identifying individual experiences and household practices.

Despite this limitation, the approach contributes to historical scholarship by demonstrating that gender can function as a mechanism for reconsidering established causal relationships. Urban expansion, housing reform, property ownership, immigration, and suburban conformity become analytically richer when their gendered dimensions are investigated. The principal contribution is therefore methodological: rather than replacing existing urban historiography, gender-sensitive analysis can reveal additional relationships within it.

6. CONCLUSION

This research-and-review study has examined how historical scholarship concerning Toronto's urban and suburban transformation can be reframed through gender. Drawing exclusively on the supplied references, the analysis demonstrates that spatial development, property relations, housing,

immigration, reform, and historical representation provide interconnected fields through which gendered experiences can be investigated.

The study identifies space, property, social regulation, and representation as four central analytical dimensions. These dimensions demonstrate why gender should not be treated simply as an additional descriptive category. Gender can influence how social roles are organized, how domestic and public spaces are understood, how property generates authority or dependency, and how historical experiences become visible within scholarly and contemporary representations.

The literature demonstrates that Toronto's suburban history was shaped by complex relationships involving working-class settlement, immigration, property, housing, reform, and cultural change. Harris's study of immigrant working-class suburbanization is particularly significant because it establishes the importance of connecting residential space with wider social processes (Harris, 1991). Reinterpreting such scholarship through gender can reveal dimensions of historical experience that remain less visible within conventional accounts.

The study's contribution is consequently methodological and historiographical. It proposes that gender-sensitive scholarship should interrogate not only who appears in historical narratives but also how historical categories themselves are constructed. Property, suburb, household, reform, and community should be examined as socially organized concepts rather than neutral descriptions.

Future research can develop this framework through systematic examination of archival records, household documents, newspapers, municipal records, property records, and neighborhood-level evidence. Such research could establish more precise relationships between gender, class, ethnicity, property ownership, domestic labor, and suburban space. A broader comparative analysis of Toronto with other Canadian cities could also determine whether the patterns identified here were locally specific or part of wider transformations in Canadian urban history.

Ultimately, reframing historical scholarship through gender does not require abandoning established urban historiography. Instead, it provides a critical analytical

approach through which existing histories can be questioned, expanded, and interpreted from additional perspectives. Gender thus becomes not merely a subject within historiography but a methodological instrument for understanding how historical change itself has been represented.

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