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Investigating the Daily Lives of Female Academics After World War II: Research Challenges*

STRESZCZENIE

Badanie życia codziennego akademiczek po II wojnie światowej: wyzwania badawcze

Badanie związku między życiem codziennym a karierą zawodową akademiczek po II wojnie światowej stanowi istotne wyzwanie badawcze. Ze względu na złożoność tego zagadnienia konieczne jest zdefiniowanie trzech kluczowych pojęć: „akademiczka”, „życie codzienne” oraz „kariera”, które stanowią podstawę dalszej analizy teoretycznej i metodologicznej. Celem artykułu jest zatem zaproponowanie definicji tych terminów, z uwzględnieniem ich płynność i niejednoznaczności w dyskursie historycznym. Zdefiniowanie tych podstawowych pojęć i ustanowienie ich ram teoretycznych stanowi punkt wyjścia do dalszych badań empirycznych oraz umożliwia sformułowanie odpowiedzi na pytania dotyczące relacji między życiem codziennym a karierą zawodową kobiet w środowisku akademickim.

Słowa kluczowe: metodologia historii, teoria historii, historia życia codziennego, historia uniwersytetu, historia kobiet, historia Poznania

* The article was created as a result of research project Preludium Bis 3 no. 2021/43/O/HS3/01412 financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.



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Funding Information: Yes. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical Considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. **Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** not used

ABSTRACT

Research into the correlation between everyday life and the academic careers of women scholars after World War II poses a significant scholarly challenge. Given the complexity of this issue, it is essential to define three core concepts: 'female academics', 'everyday life', and 'career' – which form the foundation for further theoretical and methodological analysis. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to propose definitions of these terms, taking into account their fluidity and ambiguity within historical discourse. Defining these key concepts and establishing their theoretical frameworks serves as a starting point for further empirical research and enables the formulation of answers to questions concerning the relationship between everyday life and the professional careers of women in academia – answers that will be reflected in the doctoral dissertation.

Keywords: methodology of history, theory of history, history of everyday life, history of the university, women's history, history of Poznań

Investigating the daily lives of female academics during the first two decades following the end of the Second World War presents a complex research challenge. Therefore, due to its complexity, it was necessary from the outset to develop a conceptual framework that would enable a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Here, I devote space to defining three key concepts: *female academics*, *daily life*, and *career*. Developing suitable theoretical approaches made it possible to structure the direction of further analysis and to clarify the methodological stance of the study. A clear definition of the three core concepts, along with the construction of an appropriate conceptual framework, was essential for conducting a valid analysis. It should be noted that these terms are highly fluid and encompass a wide range of meanings, which makes them difficult to define unambiguously. The historical literature on the period under consideration lacks detailed studies dedicated to women's academic careers, which further justifies the necessity of clarifying these foundational terms. Clearly defining these concepts will enable a proper analysis of the source material and allow for addressing the core research questions in my future dissertation.

A fundamental question regarding the concept of *female academic* is: Who belongs to this group and who does not? What are the criteria that define membership or exclusion? With regard to the concept of daily life, I chose to draw upon both German and Polish research traditions in this field, using them as sources

of knowledge and inspiration. Building on these foundations, I then formulated an operational definition tailored to the needs of my study.

Regarding the concept of *career*, my principal questions are: How can it be understood in an academic environment? What factors may shape its course? These considerations have formed part of my research. My chronological framework encompasses the two decades following World War II, a period marked by significant socio-cultural, political, and economic transformations in Poland¹. Substantial changes also occurred within Poznań's academic environment – at the University of Poznań and the institutions that emerged from it in the 1950s². Examining this period requires an approach that considers both the enduring aspects of academic thought and practice as well as the departures from previous ways of structuring the world.

Female Academics

The first category I attempt to define is *female academic*. In seeking an answer to the question of who these women were, I initially assumed that 'female academic' referred to an employee holding an academic position, such as research assistant, junior assistant, assistant, senior assistant, adjunct, associate professor, or titular professor. Initially, I wondered whether the term 'female academic' could also apply to women working at the university in roles such as university library staff, which were categorized as 'academic staff'. However, after reviewing university documentation of the scope of their work and personnel files, I determined that they typically did not conduct scientific research but worked as junior

¹ M. Mazurek, *Spoleczeństwo kolejki. O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945–1989*, Warszawa 2010; PRL. *Trwanie i zmiana*, eds D. Stola, M. Zaremba, Warszawa 2003; *Spoleczeństwo PRL. Kultura, pamięć*, eds D. Skotarczak, I. Skórzyńska, S. Jankowiak, Poznań 2015; M. Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm: nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*, Warszawa 2001.

² Uniwersytet Poznański (1919–2019). *Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego w latach 1950–2019*, eds T. Jurek, M. Łuczak, I. Wyszkowska, Poznań 2019; *Uniwersytet Poznański (1919–2019). Dzieje Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego w latach 1945–2019*, eds S. Jankowiak, T. Schramm, Poznań 2019; *Uniwersytet Poznański (1919–2019). Uniwersytet Medyczny im. Karola Marcinkowskiego w Poznaniu w latach 1950–2019: historia i luminary nauki*, ed. M. Musielak, Poznań 2019; *Uniwersytet Poznański (1919–2019). Uniwersytet Przyrodniczy w Poznaniu: historia i luminary nauki*, ed. M. Kozłowska, Poznań 2019.

librarian, librarian, academic-technical staff, or department head. They were thus part of the academic community broadly understood, but for the purposes of my research, I did not classify them as academics.

The next step was to determine how many female academics actually worked at the University of Poznań and the institutions that emerged from it. Useful in this regard were the university personnel records from 1945 to 1962. However, for the academic years 1946/1947, 1948/1949, 1957/1958, and 1962–1965³, these records seem to have not been published, making it impossible to determine the number of women employed during these missing years. Based on the available records, I was able to identify 644 female academics. It is important to note that the documents only include women employed at the University of Poznań. Identifying female academics from other Poznań institutions of higher education emerging due to transformations in the 1950s posed a challenge. Not all universities-maintained personnel records in the same manner as did the University of Poznań (later named Adam Mickiewicz University in 1955)⁴. The only institution that published university chronicles during my period of interest was the Poznań University of Physical Education, which provided some relevant names. The Poznań University of Life Sciences did not keep personnel records or chronicles listing active female academics from these years. Despite this lack of documentation, I was able to find relevant information in catalogs compiled by university archivists. The Poznań University of Medical Sciences was the only institution from which I could not obtain information on female academics who started working after 1950, as no lists or registries could be found. However, this gap does not significantly impact my study, as I have assembled a sufficiently large representative group from the accessible sources.

³ Staff rosters are stored at the University Library of Adam Mickiewicz University and made available in the Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa in the collection: “Uniwersytet Poznański: składy”, Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa (accessed 26 May 2025).

⁴ To maintain consistency and clarity throughout the narrative, universities will be referred to by their current official names, irrespective of any historical name changes.

Among the female academics I identified, four generational groups can be distinguished⁵. I believe this classification can be usefully applied to female academics across various disciplines. The four generational groups are⁶:

1. Women born in the 19th or early 20th century who obtained their doctoral degrees in the first three decades of the 20th century.
2. Women born just before or during World War I who earned their doctorates in the 1940s or 1950s.
3. Women born in the early 1920s and 1930s who obtained their doctoral degrees in the 1950s and 1960s.
4. Women born just before World War II who defended their doctorates in the 1960s and 1970s.

Within these four generations, significant social diversity is evident, with representatives from landowning, intelligentsia, peasant, and working-class backgrounds. Such a factor is noteworthy, as it influenced both daily life and career trajectories. To further delineate the concept of female academic, I also examined factors such as geographical origin, prior professional experience, family situation (marital status, children, parents, siblings), and political involvement (membership in political organizations, especially parties). Some of these aspects may serve as an initial general characterization of a group. This concerns the origin (social and geographical), early career, and age (generational affiliation) at which a woman became active during the period after the end of World War II. Other considerations, such as family situation and political engagement, are dynamic elements that might have changed over time.

The chosen elements serve as boundary markers to help characterize the *female academics* in my study. They also constitute a part of the theoretical framework that helped to organize the source material.

⁵ J. Kolbuszewska, *Kobiety w drodze na naukowy Olimp... Akademicki awans polskich historyczek (od schyłku XIX po rok 1989)*, Łódź 2020.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 304–305.

Daily Life

My second key concept is *daily life*. My starting point was the definition proposed by Alf Lüdtke, who argued that *Alltagsgeschichte* aims to connect people's everyday experiences with broader socio-political changes⁷. However, he also emphasized significant differences in research traditions across countries⁸. Can the German tradition of the study of *daily life* serve as a useful reference for Polish research? I believe it can be a valuable inspiration, though, as Lüdtke suggests, the concept must be adapted to specific historical, spatial, and contextual circumstances. In the context of Polish research on *daily life*, Maria Bogucka's 1966 article, in which she attempts to define the concept 'daily life', has been particularly helpful⁹. Like German scholars, Bogucka highlights the vast scope of the concept, which encompasses material culture, family life, work and leisure, and collective and individual attitudes¹⁰. She emphasizes that the defining feature of *daily life* is *repetition* shaping human existence: "Repetition is the most crucial criterion that allows us to define the character and essence of 'everydayness' and to delineate its boundaries, which simultaneously determine the scope of research. In this sense, 'everydayness' includes not only weekdays but also holidays, as they, too, repeat, shaping the framework of human existence – both for the 'small' person from the lower classes and the 'great' ruler, magnate, or member of privileged elites. The weekday interwoven with periodically recurring holidays forms the direct ground of human existence, from which individual and group activity arises through work and leisure, engaging in various relationships and dependencies, creating their own worldview and norms regulating behavior. This is the very essence of daily life"¹¹.

Following the perspective proposed by scholars of daily life, I aim to highlight the elements that reflect both the basic needs and the

⁷ A. Lüdtke, *Alltagsgeschichte: zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, Frankfurt (Main) 1989.

⁸ T. Lindenberger, A. Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn, Życie codzienne, podmiotowość i sprawowanie władzy w XX wieku*, transl. A. Górný, K. Kończal, M. Zieliński, Poznań 2018, pp. 623–645.

⁹ M. Bogucka, *Życie codzienne – spory wokół profilu badań i definicji*, "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materiałnej" 1996, vol. XLIV, no. 3, pp. 247–253. My translation.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 252–253.

individual circumstances of each female academic. In examining their daily lives, I identify four categories of conditions.

The first group concerns housing conditions or places of long-term residence:

- a) availability of housing (within university, municipal, or private situations; regulations regarding access and methods of obtaining housing),
- b) living space,
- c) furnishings (sanitary facilities, furniture, household appliances),
- d) location (town, city district, distance from work),
- e) creative work centers as places where work time and personal time overlap,
- f) recreational centers as spaces where private and professional (public) spheres intersect.

The second group includes other elements of infrastructure (national, municipal, and university-level):

- a) mobility, transportation,
- b) childcare facilities (kindergartens, schools, after-school programs).

The third group concerns food-related issues:

- a) access to food in stores,
- b) access to food through individual activity (including family connections),
- c) collective dining.

The fourth group involves health-related matters:

- a) access to medical care,
- b) leave (health, vacation, caregiving).

The above elements, grouped as listed, aim to provide a picture of the daily lives of female academics during the study period. I do not exclude the necessity of expanding or limiting certain aspects as the research progresses and as sources become available¹².

¹² The search for definitional frameworks of the key concepts relevant to my study has led to the emergence of additional research questions. One of these concerns the perceived relationship between daily life and work: to what extent is work a component of daily life, and to what extent might it be understood as

Academic Career

My investigation into women's academic careers after World War II focuses primarily on the following questions: How do I define the concept of *career*? What elements constitute it? What factors can be considered as influencing career advancement? In my research, I pay particular attention to the fact that the post-war period was a time of rebuilding cities and society as a whole. It was a unique period due to the political system, but also because of the destruction caused by the war. The urban space of Poznań was devastated in the final phase of the war, during the Battle of Poznań in January 1945. Academics, both male and female, had to rebuild the university from what remained, while also coming to terms with the specific political situation. They had to find their place in the new, post-war reality, at the same time as they were shaping their professional path.

I define 'career' as the trajectory of female academics' professional development, which I reconstruct using elements such as obtained degrees, positions held within the university structure, functions performed within the university, roles played within organized academic structures, membership in university organizations, and affiliations with scientific or research-related organizations (including editorial boards of journals). The term 'career' is closely linked to the previously discussed concept 'female academic', which refers to women who held academic positions as described above. Similarly, in the case of career – specifically an academic career – these scientific ranks are an integral part.

Just as important as defining what a career is in the context of the academic environment is identifying the factors that influenced the professional development of women. My primary inspiration in this regard comes from Renata Siemieńska's reflections in her work: *Academic Careers of Women and Men: Different or Similar?*¹³. The research conducted for her book focused on later

a break from it? Is it justifiable to draw a clear boundary between professional and non-professional activities? Given that daily life is a fluid concept – shaped by historical, spatial, and contextual factors – how should its relationship to work be understood? I aim to address these questions in the course of my research, and at this stage, formulating them is essential for defining the focus of my future analysis.

¹³ *Kariery akademickie kobiet i mężczyzn. Różne czy podobne?*, ed. R. Siemieńska, Warszawa 2019.

years rather than those of my primary interest. However, as with the concept of daily life, I consider these reflections useful, though requiring modification to account for differing historical realities. The fundamental elements of social background and family environment include marital status, number of children (or lack thereof), and number of dependents. Another important element from the sphere of daily life that may have influenced women's academic careers is the fact that men and women were subject to different obligations at different stages of life¹⁴. Therefore, in my research, I aim to extract information showing what additional responsibilities women had – or did not have – and whether these influenced their careers. These include details about positions held within the university structure, roles performed within the institution, participation in organized scientific structures, and membership in university or other academic organizations.

These features outline the direction of my research. Based on my review of source materials – particularly personnel files – I believe that the necessary information is available and can be accessed. An essential aspect will also be the consideration of power relations; specifically, how political authority shaped the possibilities for advancement within higher education and the career trajectories of female academics. Equally important, in my view, is the issue of gender order. Karin Hausen juxtaposes stereotypical characteristics attributed to women and men in a table¹⁵. It shows that women's activities were traditionally expected to take place in the context of home and family. However, the first four generations of female academics in this study actively broke the stereotype of a woman's role, one which framed her as passive, devoted to loved ones, and emotional – sentimental, sensitive, and affectionate – while also embodying virtues such as modesty, politeness, and tactfulness. The image of female academics, by contrast, is characterized by traits traditionally attributed to men: they were energetic, decisive, and independent. They were expected to act with reason, intellect, and knowledge and to be open to various social roles. Only in the second half of the 20th century, with the emergence of the fourth generation of female academics, did

¹⁴ R. Siemieńska, *Kariery akademickie w Polsce w XIX i XX wieku: czy pleć je różniowała?*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 66.

¹⁵ K. Hausen, *Porządek płci. Studia historyczne*, transl. J. Górný, Warszawa 2010, pp. 54–55.

the significance of these traits and their association with a particular gender begin somewhat to diminish¹⁶. It is worth considering whether the fourth generation of female academics indeed had greater freedom according to what constituted stereotypically male or female gender roles¹⁷. In the post-war period, transformations occurred that forced a reassessment of the existing gender order, both in society at large and in its local manifestation – the academic sphere. During my examination of the concept of *career*, additional questions arose: Is there a default model of an academic career? Is the prevailing idea of an academic career constructed according to male standards? If it is justified to assume that an academic career model is ‘tailored for men’, it is worth considering the consequences of applying this model to women’s career paths. To what extent is such an approach valid? What insights does it provide, and what does it overlook?

Summary

The situation of women in post-war academia was dependent on social and political circumstances, as well as the life experiences of each female academic. Therefore, conducting research on the daily lives of women in the academic sphere after World War II presents a scholarly challenge that requires precise definitions of key concepts such as *female academic*, *daily life*, and *career*. Initially, I assumed that defining these terms would be difficult due to their fluidity in historical discourse. Thus, from the early stages of designing my research, it was essential to conceptualize these terms, an effort facilitated by formulating key research questions: Who were the *female academics*? How should *daily life* be understood? How can the concept of a *career* be interpreted? By seeking answers in existing literature, I was able to approach an approximate meaning for these three terms.

In this study, I define female academics as women employed in academic positions within university structures. Within this group, I distinguish four generations of female academics, differing not only in age but also in social background, something which could influence the trajectory of their scientific career. The concept of daily life includes key aspects of their functioning, such as

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

housing conditions, access to infrastructure, food, healthcare, as well as elements of their personal lives. Meanwhile, *academic career* refers to the entire professional path of post-war female researchers. This term encompasses elements such as academic positions held and involvement in university life. The academic careers of women were shaped within the historical and political context of post-war Poland. This period saw intense social transformations, including the redefinition of gender roles, which significantly affected women's presence in academia. Female academics gradually dismantled stereotypical gender divisions, raising some questions about career models: Does the concept of an academic career reflect the reality of women's experiences, or is it constructed solely based on a male model? What consequences might have resulted from adapting to such a model?

The conclusions drawn here serve as reference points for further research. By defining these three key concepts, I establish a theoretical framework that enables me to extract data from source materials. Additionally, as research progresses, these definitions may be further specified, expanded, or refined. Conceptualizing the terms from the outset has certainly helped to clarify the research subject and define the direction for further exploration. Ultimately, I hope to determine the correlations between female academics' engagement in daily life and their professional careers, as well as the significance of these relationships.

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Research interest: the history of social constructs – with particular focus on gender – as well as the methodology of history and the history of historiography.



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