# The Future of Women's and Gender Research:

## Digital Lives in the Swedish Archives

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ABSTRACT

The future of historical women's and gender research is uncertain for two reasons. First, the digitization of society affects how women and gender are represented online. Questions about what can and should constitute "an archive" need answering, particularly for women's and gender activism, which is no longer tied to formal associations and often spans the physical/digital divide. This raises new ethical and legal issues related to GDPR and the private ownership of communication platforms where activist work occurs. Second, what counts as "women's and gender historical material" is unstable. Current research emphasizes intersectionality and multiculturalism, often critiquing the whiteness and middle-class normativity of earlier feminist scholarship. At the same time, activists disagree on the meaning and application of these concepts, creating tensions within feminism that do not always align with scholarship focused on narrower research questions. This exploratory article examines archival acquisition policies in Swedish cultural heritage institutions from a feminist "information activism" perspective, drawing on community archive research to assess whether Swedish institutions are preparing to collect future women's and gender archival materials and what kinds of women's and gender histories these materials will make available to future researchers.

KEY WORDS

ARCHIVES, WOMEN'S AND GENDER RESEARCH, FEMINISM, ACQUISITIONS, DIGITISATION

## INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to escape discussions of just how digital our lives are – and whether we can separate the digital from the physical in any meaningful way. Current debates range from screen time for children, to the politics and privacy aspects of birth control and pregnancy apps, to the issues with working from home. Many of these debates raise the gendered aspects of digitization. Social media in particular has changed the way social movements on the left and right operate and mobilize while also facilitating the exploitation and monetization of ideological rhetoric (Proffitt, Hamid & McDowell, 2014). Sitting under these conversations is a question about the way in which technology elides distinctions between the public and the private, a key area of analysis for feminists from the 1960s forwards. And some researchers and artists have raised questions about what is not there or is rendered inaccessible – a set of questions concretized by the Trump Administration's erasing of references to minorities and women across the vast array of federal government websites (Mina, 2019). Digital information is voluminous, deeply fragile, and political in its nature.

If our lives now extend into and are influenced by what happens online, what is the future of women's and gender archives? Archivists have long warned about a black hole of historical material from the advent of the Internet to the construction of AI. While the metaphor of archiving has proliferated in pace with the explosion of information at our fingertips, what should and can be collected, organized, described, archived, and made available for future generations remains fuzzy. International legal frameworks like General Data Protection Rights (GDPR) conflict with open access requirements. The fact that multinational corporations own much online content also creates logistical and legal problems for archival institutions. As multiple scholars interested in minority community-building note, digital channels are a double-edged sword, providing connection across space and time while also featuring increased potential for harassment, a threat that makes protection of personal information all the more important (see, for a series of examples on Black and queer data, Keilty, ed., 2023; for a feminist perspective, see D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

Acquisitions policies and texts are a reflection of, as well as a tool for, how cultural heritage institutions understand the importance of outward-facing donations as well as their place in a broader world of archives (Boczar, 2025). This article borrows a feminist "information activism" perspective from sociologist Caitlin McKinney (2020); McKinney argues that "information activism describes a range of materials and processes constituting the collective, often unspectacular labor that sustains social justice movements" (p. 2). While McKinney focuses on information organization and description for access, analysis in this text extends this definition to archival acquisitions, which establish the basis for what can be described and made available to the public and activists. Feminist information activism in the context of archives requires the inclusion of acquisitions, which set the boundaries for and define the centre of what counts as archivable (and thus history). As a result, the article focuses on the extent to which Swedish acquisitions policies and approaches at cultural heritage institutions are forward-looking, outward-looking, and prepared to work for more democratic collection processes that prioritize materials by and about women as well as sex and gender issues, thus enabling future research in these areas.

Work on Swedish archives is very limited; the country has no established journal for academic research on archives. As a result, some initial fact-gathering research questions are necessary:

1. Do the acquisitions policies or texts provided by Swedish cultural heritage institutions deal with born digital materials and/or representation of women and gender?

2. How are born digital materials and/or issues of democratic representation dealt with?

The answers to these questions – placed in the results

section – will then lay the groundwork for an analysis of to what extent the Swedish cultural heritage sector is prepared for an inclusive archival future. The larger research question here is:

3. What would a feminist information activist approach to born digital archival acquisitions look like in the context of the Swedish archival system?

This analysis will then be followed by the proposal of some practical approaches to securing the future of women's and gender historical research in Sweden.

## BACKGROUND ON DIGITISATION, ARCHIVAL PRACTICE, AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION IN THE SWEDISH ARCHIVE

Archival traces of organizational work in Sweden begin to be a bit patchy from the 1960s forwards. The wave of activism that began in the mid-1960s and sought to democratize political life focused on mobilising large swaths of the public around particular ideological and political questions – for example, fascism in Spain and Chile, decolonisation in Africa, the war in Vietnam. This work was supposed to be rapid, outward-facing, and temporary. The issue-based nature of political activism has affected the nature of women's and gender-based political participation in profound ways, de-centring the importance of identity-based organisations and centring networks and the rapid transmission of information. Simultaneously, the basis of most older movement archives – the paper protocol and other physical administrative documentation – is in the process of disappearing (see Pierce 2025).

Digital tools have facilitated this shift, as activists now rely on communication channels such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and other apps. Indeed, much of what might in the future be called women's and gender history now resides in these channels. Both the #metoo movement and the soft girls/trad wife trend are products of digital interconnectivity, and both are important for a future generation of researchers interested in women and gender. Yet collecting this kind of information and data requires a shift in how archival institutions operate. Queer data studies scholars have pointed out the dangers of metadata capture and data security (Conrad, 2023), while scholars of digitisation note the potentially problematic effects of free circulation of digital data and documents (Odumosu, 2020). Historically oppressed groups are more likely to be concerned about privacy and less likely to trust state institutions to hold and make their materials available in a way that fits with their values and concerns about security and privacy (Cowan & Rault, 2018; White, 1987). Meanwhile, there is evidence that the metadata connected to materials online contains significant gender biases, making sweeping collection of digital documents related to women and gender more difficult (Otterbacher et al., 2018).

The Swedish archival system is not built to protect these groups or their materials. The country houses just one institution dedicated to women's and gender archival materials – KvinnSam, the Swedish national library for gender studies at the University of Gothenburg humanities library. It is worth noting that the other two organisations devoted to women's history in Sweden do not have the infrastructure to collect, preserve, and make available historical materials, rendering them almost entirely outward facing.[1] Meanwhile, the inaccessibility of material related to gender non-conforming individuals and groups in the broader landscape of Swedish archives is a problem that has resulted in the establishment of the Queer Movement's Archives and Library (QRAB) and the Swedish Archive for Queer Moving Images (SAQMI). As in many countries, small local community-built archives and museums are voluminous and hard to access or assess, while the majority of visible archives (at universities and for larger regions) are a part of the state.

There is an underlying assumption on the part of archival institutions in Sweden that materials related to and created by women are available, and that the

real problem is finding this material (Melander, 2006; Nordenstam, 2008). Sweden is not unique in this assumption, which threads through much of critical archival studies and related fields – so-called "recovery projects" are currently numerous, especially in the area of queer history (for reflections on recovery projects, see Wallach Scott, 2011). Yet infrastructure for recovery projects is very limited. Archival institutions have not historically received extensive attention or government funding in Sweden (Isacson & Olausson, 2018). Nor is it clear that future archival acquisitions will resemble earlier acquisitions, in terms of their representativeness or the ease of access to information and materials about women or questions of sex and gender.

Sweden has a historically unique category of "private archives," composed of non-state archival materials and thus not subject to the legal requirements for preservation and accessibility from which public archives benefit. What are called "enskilda arkiv" are defined as archives "that have been created in organisations that are not covered by the principles of press freedom and therefore are not subject to public accessibility requirements" (SOU, 2019:58, 153). On the ground, it is unknown how many institutions in Sweden collect, process, and make available personal and organisational archives, nor do we know how many institutions have paid staff, educated archivists on staff, and sufficient infrastructure for keeping archives in line with current best practices (Svenska arkivförbundet, 2024). Within the Nordic countries, Sweden has the weakest legal protection for this kind of archival material (Edquist 2018).

This top-down structure combined with weak protections for non-state archives has shaped what materials are preserved as historically important, as well as how Swedes understand what is archivable. Such framing affects the larger archival world's approach to power imbalances and silences in the archives – here, legal and administrative requirements focus on official minority communities like the Sápmi and Finnish Swedish. The majority of research on women's, gender, and queer archives has focused on physical community-building collections or digital accessibility, and oral history plays a huge role in this literature (Bastian & Flinn, 2020). While some of this "archivism" has been imported to Sweden (Larsson Pousette et al., 2021), even institutions like KvinnSam have not historically seen their role as activist in nature (Losman, 1984). Further, there is very little research on collection policies and practices, digitisation, and the problems of ensuring that historically oppressed groups are broadly represented in the archives of the future.

There is a long tradition of applying feminist perspectives to issues of automatization, algorithms, and artificial intelligence (e.g., Adam, 1993, 1995). However, such efforts are dispersed across activist and scholarly communities that do not always communicate with one another and have little to do with archival studies and archiving in practice. Data feminism began ostensibly with the Feminist Manifest-NO, a declaration of refusal towards harmful data regimes and commitment to new data futures (Cifor et al., 2019). Absent from this conversation are questions of how to archive gendered realities and feminist activism that manifest in digital spaces.[2] Sweden in particular has failed to grapple with the ways in which digitization changes the very nature of archives and, more specifically, women's and gender archives. This article aims to jumpstart this research.

## ARCHIVAL ACQUISITIONS, BORN DIGITAL ARCHIVES, AND REPRESENTATION

Why focus on acquisitions policies and texts? Acquisitions and policies/strategies for acquisitions are a specific research area within archival science. The area is closely related to appraisal; as one researcher puts it, "the principles of appraisal help us to answer the question, 'Why am I saving this?' – while acquisitions policies force us to answer the equally important question, 'Why am I saving this?'" (Ericson, 1992, p. 68). Appraisal continues to be a more well-researched and theorized area of archival science, but the areas of new social history

and community archives have, through the 2000s, pushed archivists to consider acquisitions more carefully, with an eye towards patterns of and gaps in archival representation of the past (Van Wingen & Bass, 2008). With more knowledge of the lack of representativeness of archival holdings (despite their voluminousness), some archivists pressed for a re-evaluation of "what constitutes documentary evidence," in the words of Linda Henry, former archivist at the National Archives for Black Women's History (1980, p. 60).

The place of women in the history and theory of archival acquisitions has received relatively little attention from archival scientists. A wave of "archival turn" researchers – mostly from anthropology and history –lifted the (in)visibility of women in the archives and encouraged women's historians to question archives as bearers of objective truth. Instead, as historian Arlette Farge notes in her memoir-methods book The Allure of the Archives (2013), women were recorded when they encountered state bureaucracies. This haphazardness is even more confusing when it comes to personal archives, often because one family member has succeeded in making a name for themselves (most often himself). Both appraisal and acquisitions policies and practices have been largely left out of this conversation, though scholars have noted the central role that newer archival institutions run by and for women have had in working against this historical invisibility (Yale, 2015).

Digitization and the need for more active selection and de-selection poses many overlapping questions, again requiring that archival institutions think through collection policies and processes. However, the choice is often framed as one of a black hole versus infinite documentation. The digitisation of society has resulted in, as Bossewith and Sinnreich (2012) note, an "exponential growth in the volume of data produced by individuals and institutions" which "shows no signs of abating" (p. 238). As Amanda Boczar (2025) writes, "Archives without a clear policy or dedicated professionals managing born digital acquisitions may find themselves either refusing collections of significance or taking collections they cannot appropriately manage" (p. 2). As with physical archives, acquisitions policies and practices are shaped by questions of format, and "difficult" formats run the risk of being collected by no one, while other "simpler" formats are broadly collected. As McKinney notes, part of "information activism" is a resistance to the "digital imperative" alongside a sensitivity to the rarity of and need to collect and make available archival materials from historically underrepresented groups (2020, p. 159; 166-167).

Archiving of social media activism makes clear how these technical issues can affect representation in the archives. Ashlyn Velte's (2018) work on the subject notes that there are a few different ways to understand collection, but that social media archiving means that archives, often for the first time, are working with big data. Big data poses a variety of problems for archivists, including legal and ethical problems, which sit alongside questions of file storage and other technical issues. These problems are, without a proper acquisitions policy, likely to consume the time and attention of resource-strapped archival institutions, distracting from other questions involving representation. As Morna Gerard's (2015) analysis of the Georgia LGBTQ Archives Project makes clear, new collecting projects require more active outreach efforts, which in turn require that institutions define what they should collect, why they, in particular, are best positioned to collect such documentation, and in what directions their collections are headed, as well as how they can and will protect the materials of at-risk groups and individuals through access restrictions and the like.

Given this situation, it seems clear that archives institutions must take seriously F. Gerald Ham's advice that "conceptualization must precede collection" (1975). According to research on documentation strategy, this conceptualization must span multiple institutions, ensuring that a wide and diverse range of materials is collected and made available to researchers. Acquisitions policies are often the outward-directed face of this kind of strategy, designed

to make it clear to potential donors what is and is not collected. Unfortunately, many archival institutions have, as Linda Henry observes, "defined [collections policies] too broadly . . . [but] collected too narrowly," creating problems with representation that compound when archival institutions do not have the general knowledge necessary to refer donors to other institutions (1980, p. 63). To go back to the questions of "Why am I saving this?" versus "Why am I saving this?" – archival institutions must understand and have a well-articulated definition of their place in the broader system of archives in order to ensure the future of scholarship built on archival research.

## THEORY AND METHOD

This exploratory article will examine the archival acquisition policies and texts of a swath of Swedish cultural heritage institutions in order to assess to what extent to which the future of women's and gender archives is secure. Analysis is couched in a feminist information activism perspective (McKinney, 2020). In McKinney's work, information activism means an understanding of archives – their construction, description, and accessibility – as a process laden with power dynamics. However, her analysis in Information Activism focuses on the organisation, description, and provision of access to archival material, which misses acquisitions, a key part of community/archive-building that defines the outer limits of what counts as a community's history. In this text, acquisitions are seen as part of an archival institution's "information infrastructure" in Susan Leigh Star's (2016) terminology, directly linked to the extent to which archival institutions in Sweden are "doing feminism" or working to enable the future of women's and gender research in the archives. As such, the text develops McKinney's theoretical framework to include the archive's roll in defining and shaping the boundaries of what "historical collections" means.

What acquisitions policy means in practice is a question. Richard Brown (1992) notes that a strand of "archival hermeneutics" defines acquisitions strategy as a kind of macro-appraisal process, one that is fundamentally active in nature. Acquisitions policies in this sense are attempts to "both practically and intellectually […] remove from the hands of record creators and record managers the de facto responsibility for their historical value designation, and place it firmly under the control of archivists" (Brown, 1992, p. 40). Outward-directed acquisition texts and policies are, however, often combined with passive acquisitions practices, leaving the interpretation of these texts in the hands of members of the public. As such, these online texts can potentially function as devices of "information activism" in McKinney's terms, a way of reaching out to and involving the public in the making of archives, a part of the infrastructure connecting social movements with archival institutions.

The study design is formed to capture this aspect of information activism. In this article, acquisitions and appraisal are considered two sides of the same coin of feminist information activism, with acquisitions policies serving as a main gateway for donors, especially given the lack of resources for active acquisitions work at many Swedish cultural heritage institutions. Archivist and researcher Kate Theimer (2015) notes the slippery boundaries between these and other tasks at archives. This makes the acquisitions policy one of many potential tools that interact with other activities related to archiving. As a result, we have collected a swath of formal archival acquisitions policies and less formal acquisitions statements and information from cultural heritage institutions in Sweden, as well as some practices communicated via email when formal policies were not available online, in order to cover non-transparent (and thus non-activist) acquisitions approaches.

The methodological approach is based on a similar exploratory study conducted by Amanda Boczar (2025), which examined "websites and published materials" in order to examine approaches to acquisition of born digital material. Our collection of texts was designed to cover (1) large national institutions, (2) university libraries and archives, (3) subject-specific institutions, and (4) local institutions. These

categories cover the main kinds of Swedish institutions with archival materials. The broader focus on cultural heritage institutions rather than archival institutions is purposeful. Ericson (1992) warns against institutional siloing of materials, skills, and information, noting that "archivists, librarians and records managers, along with record users and record creators (or depositors)" must cooperate "to ensure that important documentation is not lost" (p. 74). Information activism to preserve and make women's and gender history available is necessarily collaborative and collective, rather than a competitive endeavour. Further, the museum sector in Sweden became well-known for establishing a cooperative, national approach to acquisitions via the SAMDOK project (Axelsson 2014).

Based in Boczar's approach, I searched broadly for "förvärvspolicy arkiv" (acquisitions policy archives) and similar formulations, which primarily yielded policies from major university libraries, national bodies such as the Royal Archives and Swedish National Heritage Board, and more regional bodies such as local museums and movement archives. In total, 22 different institutional approaches to acquisitions have been analysed, covering national, local, and subject-specific organisations, and the results are visualized in Appendix 1. As noted, very few of these texts are acquisitions policies, per se; most are online texts about what kinds of materials an organisation accepts and how donations work. As a result, the rest of each website has been scanned for references to women's and gender, as well as born-digital materials. It is worth noting that there is no overview of archival institutions in Sweden, making national analysis difficult and any overarching conclusions about the state of acquisitions in Sweden near impossible (Svenska arkivförbundet, 2024). This study is thus necessarily quite descriptive, a first attempt to analyse acquisitions policies in Sweden.

The article applies McKinney's analytic approach to acquisitions policies and texts with two feminist information activism frames in focus: (1) women's/gender and (2) futurity. These two frames are used to identify and structure the material found in our online searches to identify whether or not a feminist "information activism" approach is visible in Swedish acquisitions. As McKinney writes, "[f]ocusing on decisions, decision-making, and non-decisions or decisions that never get made is one method of attending to the ongoing negotiation of meaning that occurs around technological transitions" (p. 185). The assumption that digitisation is inherently democratising is highly questionable. Given the archival infrastructure of Sweden, a feminist version of archival information activism will be critical if institutions want to ensure that it is possible for future women's and gender history researchers to do work on this early 2000s period of adaptation to new technologies.

## GENDER AND FUTURE THINKING IN SWEDISH ACQUISITIONS POLICIES

Acquisition policies and texts within Sweden are difficult to find, even if this area is broadly defined. This is a particular problem for the future democratisation of acquisitions and any information activism that aims to alter established acquisition approaches and practices – upon what materials and practices do institutions stand? The majority of acquisitions policies are not available online, and many institutions do not have formally established policies, instead entrusting acquisitions to a preexisting and invisible network of contacts that lie outside the organisation itself. Local independent institutions will write guidelines into their associational rules, which are often quite short on description and are not particularly accessible to outsiders (for an example, see the People's Movements Archives in Västerbotten[3]). Most institutions do not have a particular employee who deals with acquisitions, making it difficult to engage in the active networking that ensures sustainable acquisitions. This makes it difficult for the average person to find a route for asking questions, a barrier for all but especially for individuals and organisations with less than full trust in state institutions.

There are few institutions with thought-through,

thorough descriptions of what counts as archival material and instructions for how to organize and eventually donate an archive. University library acquisitions policies tend to focus on printed materials for the library, ignoring archival materials. Instead, broad blanket statements are common and often build on preexisting knowledge that the average person will not possess. A good example is Röhsska Museum's policy, which states that the institution accepts "contemporary expressions and materials within the categories of handwork, fashion, and design."[4] Often the only topical foci mentioned are geographical interests; most of the institutions examined here include a sentence or two on what geographical regions are prioritized. This is true even for KvinnSam, which has a national women's and gender focus.[5] Policies and other descriptive texts also tend to use archival terminology that is somewhat inaccessible to the average donor; the Regional Archives in Västra Götaland have an archival lexicon available on their website, making it clear that archivists are aware of this problem, even if they do not know quite how to solve it.[6] The TAM archive is the most descriptive and accessible here, offering a page on what kinds of documents might be in an archive.[7]

McKinney's definition of information activism focuses on creating a collaborative and non-hierarchical relationship with activist communities. One issue with the majority of archival institutions is their partial reliance on fees for archival processing. While these fees make visible the labor required to process, preserve, and make available archival materials, such requirements place archiving out of reach for individuals and organisations without sufficient economic means. Female-driven, feminist, and LGBTQ+ individuals and organisations are more statistically likely to be financially precarious (Boyles, 2018). Networks – likely the future of many activist initiative – do not have membership fees and therefore lack the resources to deposit materials. Additionally, there is very rarely an employee who is in charge of acquisitions, and in the cases where there is such a position, it is assessment of potential gifts and acquisitions that is emphasized in official documents. This situation makes collaboration quite difficult, impeding the implementation of forward-looking and inclusive appraisal and acquisitions practice regardless of policy.

## WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE FUTURE

Do women and gender appear anywhere in the acquisitions policies and texts of Swedish cultural heritage institutions? The answer is yes, but rarely and often obliquely. Instead, institutions prioritize a broad strokes approach to "democratic" and "inclusive" acquisitions. They very rarely specify what this means in practice. A few examples are worth mentioning. National organisations like the National Archives[8] and Lund University[9] assert – using almost identical phrasing – that they strive for an "inclusive and democratic" approach to acquisitions, mentioning the importance of both a research perspective and attunement to contemporary life. This mention of democratic and inclusive policy is assumedly supposed to cover a variety of historical power imbalances, but the vague phrasing potentially allows for ignoring the vast majority of archival imbalances. Measuring inclusivity and democracy is notoriously difficult, and there are few signs that any kind of thought-through assessment is being done.

Prioritising democracy and inclusivity in acquisitions – potentially a support for feminist information activism – can also be at odds with other policy goals that may seem neutral but instead work against historically underrepresented communities including women and LGBTQI+ groups. For example, the Swedish National Heritage Board takes a list of factors into account: (1) relation to cultural heritage, (2) provenance, (3), authenticity, (4) the condition of materials, (5) how much it will cost to process, store, and make available materials, (6) representation, and (7) accessibility. Yet materials from less well-resourced groups tend to be in poorer condition and require more resources for processing and storage, while at-risk groups may want to restrict access to their materials for a period of time. Further, these

kinds of documents rarely open up for discussion of what democracy means in the context of archives, though a common misunderstanding among the public is that one must be famous to be archived (Gerrard, 2015, p. 5-6).

There are a small handful of institutions (five in total) that specifically mention women and gender in their acquisitions policies – these tend to be focused on traditionally female work. Röhsska museum – a design museum in Gothenburg, Sweden – has an acquisitions policy that notes a particular interest in "gender and multicultural questions" where "especial weight should be placed on increasing the visibility of women's role in Swedish and foreign design work, where this role is less well-represented".[10] Finally, KvinnSam states that its major goal is the collection and eventual accessibility of materials important for women's and gender history. The acquisitions text tries to extend the boundaries of this area by noting that the institution is particularly interested in minority groups and norm-critical materials. This broadness is coupled with a note that the institution has a special interest in regional documentation, potentially signalling that the institution would prefer to leave collection of many local women's, feminist, and gender historical materials outside Southwestern Sweden to local institutions.[11]

The organisations that name women and gender tend to exhibit a more active approach to acquisitions. The first example – the Stockholm City Archives – has worked to establish acquisitions approaches and a policy that take historical gender imbalances into account, a project that began in 2018 and has continued through to today, often in cooperation with the organisation Women's History.[12] Here, a policy that specifically notes the need for gender-equal goals in archival acquisitions is complimented with goals for making past gender imbalances in the archives more visible, alongside the creation of new routes into existing archives by and about women and gender.[13] Meanwhile, QRAB and SAQMI define "queer" in a broad and flexible way.[14] SAQMI has particular projects for collecting Sápmi materials and is currently involved with work with Transammans, Sweden's largest trans activist organisation.[15] It is worth noting that these are the two "archivism" institutions surveyed here, and their commitment to communities underserved by the traditional archival institutions in the country, has led to a particular interest in collecting materials from groups historically ignored by traditional cultural heritage institutions.

Acquisitions policies are not wholly reflective of the work done to broaden representation in archival collections at the surveyed institutions; the trend in Sweden is to collect stories and oral histories from local communities, and this method almost always involved collecting women's voices. Museums have regular collection drives, which makes these institutions both more active in shaping their collections and also functions as a way of demystifying what, precisely, qualifies as archivable material. Here, there is a chance to lift women and gender as a particular area in need of attention. Two institutions here – Skåne's archival organisation and Stockholm's city museum – have had projects to collect the voices and materials of women. Skåne has had women's writing workshops to collect women's life stories,[16] while Stockholm has worked with the organisation Women's Historical to crowdsource women's personal archives from the public.[17] KvinnSam has an oral history project on 1968 that highlights female voices.[18] Meanwhile, QRAB has recently restarted its story café, where LGBTQI+ groups can come and share stories which are occasionally recorded for archiving.[19]

Despite these initiatives, a troubling trend is the clear lack of resources for general outreach and active acquisitions work at archival institutions. It should concern researchers that many of the (few) institutions pursuing outward-directed, future-oriented, women-oriented acquisitions work are museums, one of which does not have any collections of its own and zero archivists employed (Women's Historical). Institutions with previous projects focused on collection of women's and gender archives have not followed up on this work. The National Archives had

a drive in the 1970s to perform outreach to 1970s feminist organisations, in the hopes that they would keep, organize, and donate their materials at a later date (Welander, 1982). This worked – archivist Lina Selleby (1998) noted at the end of the 1990s that materials from these groups were now trickling in. The many case studies detailed in Kate Theimer's anthology (2015) lift the importance of this outreach work as a way of ensuring that collections more fully reflect the communities they represent.

In sum, there is little evidence of feminist information activism to ensure the acquisition of archival materials related to women and gender in Sweden from institutions that are not already focused on women, gender, and LGBTQI+ issues. It is more likely that an institution devoted to a specific group or area will lead projects that include the capture of women's histories. Some form of active acquisitions can also contribute to at least short-term attention to female representation in the archives; here, museums and community archives lead the way. However, most cultural heritage institutions – and all institutions at the national level and within the university system (state archives, in other words) – neither prioritize acquisitions nor the representation of women and gender in their collections. This sector represents the bulk of collections as well as the place where a majority of researchers go to find historical texts.

## THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

And what of future activism? Given the built-in inequalities of digital realms long documented by researchers (Carter et al., 2013), designing acquisitions policies that do more than passively pledge "inclusivity and democracy" is necessary. If the policies surveyed are largely uninterested in the subject matter of acquisitions beyond a broad strokes interest in democracy and a somewhat more often geographical focus, text about digitization, hybrid archives, and the future of acquisitions is near absent from these sites. Seemingly as a byproduct of the passive acquisitions approach taken by most institutions, there is little acknowledgement of digital files or social media accounts. Those institutions that address e-archiving tend to be devoted primarily to organisational archives (ARAB is the exception here), and very closely tied to labor and business history. In contrast to instructions for paper archives, there are no clear guidelines for what file formats and types of documentation are accepted by institutions in Sweden. Here, developing a feminist information activism approach may be critical if the Swedish memory sector wants to preserve today's grassroots women's and gender activism for tomorrow's researchers.

One troubling trend is the lack of preparedness on the part of state institutions (as noted earlier, representing the overwhelming majority of archival records in Sweden, see Edqvist, 2021). University libraries lack infrastructures and processes for born digital materials, while the National Library and the National Archives have information largely related to digitized materials, rather than born digital documentation. National institutions that collect state administrative records must and do collect digital files. However, there is little indication that they are willing to accept digital documentation from individuals and organisations that are central to tomorrow's women's and gender history. It is entirely possible that these rules are under development. The Regional Archives in Västra Götaland note that potential donors of organisational papers can contact the archives if they have a larger number of digital files to donate but otherwise prefer if these files are printed on archival paper.[20] However, any developments here are largely invisible to individuals and organisations that are not in direct contact with memory institutions.

Regional and non-state actors, while more likely to collect women's voices, have fewer resources and are thus often less ready to take the digital leap. The Stockholm City Archives provides, as noted earlier, advice about a more active approach to acquisitions alongside advice about awareness of gender imbalances in the archives. This advice is, however, offset by their acquisitions policy, which specifically notes that the institution does not normally accept digital files from individual or organisational archives creators.[21]

Coupled with the silence on digital files and active acquisitions from other institutions, this divide indicates that there may be a systemic problem with preparedness for archiving digital materials created by women's or female-coded individuals and organisations. Even museums, traditionally at the forefront of digital archiving (see, for example, Martinez et al., 2002), are largely silent on the question of digital files. Textiles and design are, for example, still considered both female-coded and embodied physically, based on the acquisitions information available on Röhsska's website.

Silence online does not mean that nothing is happening. Sweden has, in fact, produced over 100 preliminary studies of digitally born archival material (Johansson, 2023). Many of the institutions whose acquisitions policies are silent on digital and hybrid archives have worked on exploratory studies of digital archives, in preparation for accepting such materials, or have started to acquire born digital documentation. These institutions are aware of the need for consequent approaches to documentation, file formatting, metadata, and other issues particular to digital archives. The gendered aspects of metadata and documentation are, however, absent from these studies. For many if not all institutions, the goal seems to be the construction of a system that works, rather than a system that is sensitive to historical and contemporary inequalities. This focus on solving technical problems may then lead to a focus on "easy" archives, which may in turn reinscribe older inequitable acquisitions practices (Shusko, 2024).

Relatedly, it is not clear from the texts analysed here that any institution is thinking deeply and critically about what it means to collect digital information and data that may be highly sensitive. Most people do not understand what they have saved on digital devices. Those who do understand may be more interested in retaining community control over archival materials. Research has made clear that women and minority groups are among the most vulnerable to automated and data-fuelled systems (Noble, 2018; Eubanks, 2019). No organization mentions collecting social media accounts, despite the central nature of social media for communication and activism today. There are reasons to be wary given the complications and vagaries of digital rights and issues of digital information and data ownership, and the gendered power imbalances in online environments require that institutions think hard about how to collect social media accounts (Lehtiniemi and Ruckenstein, 2019; Kazansky and Milan, 2021; Sörum and Fuentes, 2022).

Finally, an enormous blind spot created by the structure of Swedish archives is the assumption that organizational archives are the most important bearers of democratic collective action – this is an area where a more feminist information activist approach to acquisitions is possibly the most necessary. Many of the local archival institutions examined here only collect organizational and not personal or project archives. These institutions may be faced with declining donations in a few decades, given broad cuts in funding and digitization of local and national collective action. Thematic collections – Facebook pages from activist groups working around the climate crisis or in anti-rape work, for example – might be the future of archives dedicated to the history of collective action. In order to do this kind of collection, institutions will need to have acquisitions policies that map out what themes their institutions cover. Vague formulations around "democracy" and locality will not suffice here.

## INFORMATION ACTIVISM IN THE SWEDISH ARCHIVES

Gender and sex-based activism is extremely important for civil society and contemporary politics, and much of this activism is happening online. All of it involves the use of digital tools like email, social media, text messaging, and the like. Arguing that this material is not of historical value is self-evidently false, and yet it is unclear what institutions will be able and willing to collect and make available materials from – to name just a few examples – the peace movement, the movement for an end to violence

against women, and anti-harassment campaigns, as well as rightist movements to roll back LBGTQ rights, remove drag queens from libraries, and promote "traditional" gender roles. Some information about these movements will certainly be archived. The question is whether we have returned to a period where the archives will house materials that are primarily from the perspective of news outlets, politicians, and the state, rather than the grassroots. Without feminist information activism, the return to a world of archives that unthinkingly lean towards a gendered and classed group of the powerful is a distinct possibility.

Acquisitions policies can do some things and not others, but they are undoubtedly a piece of the puzzle. They are brief statements of intent, rather than detailed descriptions of practice. However, these documents are a starting point for thinking about priorities, as well as being doors into archival donations for a public often ill-informed about what is and is not an archive. The materials that make it through to archival institutions are extremely important to future generations of researchers, many of whom are only now beginning to understand and think critically about the limits of and silences within the archives despite "the archival turn" (see, for example, Callahan, 2024). Further, archivism has long been a critical strand within feminism (Eichhorn, 2013; McKinney, 2020), and feminist activists have engaged in a critical use of digital tools inside and outside the archives (Withers, 2015). But has this thinking reached Swedish archival institutions at all?

What the analysis here indicates is that Swedish institutions are not thinking about shaping their acquisitions beyond saying yes or no to donations proffered, a passive approach that collectively reinforces rather than working against societal norms that still define the historically important as public, male, white, and well-educated. None of the materials surveyed here indicate that institutions are thinking about policies and practices to ensure the development of representative born-digital archival collections nationally. The macro-appraisal approach described by Brown (1991) is invisible here, as is Boczar's (2025) recommendation that policy shape acquisitions. Feminist information activism requires acquisitions statements that attempt to make visible societal power imbalances and explain how an institution or group of institutions is working to make historical materials by and about historically underrepresented groups more visible and accessible. This activism is hard to find in Sweden.

Feminist information activism for archives requires looking forwards and working proactively to encourage archival thinking where it might not already exist. Instead, what is in place is an essentially reactive, individualized approach that leaves memory institutions and the broader archival landscape largely unprepared for the representational, legal, and ethical issues encapsulated in born digital materials like email, app communications, social media, and similar documentation. This approach also places the majority of the focus on technological capabilities and infrastructure, rather than on designing infrastructure to ensure a balance of openness and data protection, as well as a more representative set of archives that reflects today's society rather than powerful actors. QRAB and SAQMI are the only institutions that actively ensure that control and expansion of their archives remain in the hands of activists. These are also the most underfunded archival institutions represented here. QRAB is staffed part-time by one volunteer, while SAQMI lives on very uneven grant monies.

Just as with physical archives, these imbalances can be identified and negotiated by reaching out to and developing a more interactive relationship with organisations and individuals who are active online. This is Linda Henry's (1980) advice for increasing the democratic representativeness of archives, repurposed for our digital world. A feminist information activism approach in this context might take as a starting point Stockholm's city archives' advice about crafting an acquisitions policy that thinks about women and gender as one of several strands of work. Advice from the institution included a five-point

strategy: (1) make visible gender imbalances by producing statistics on representation in existing archival collections; (2) use the archives to make everyone's history visible; (3) create a publication plan that includes statistics on gender representation; (4) add information on sex and gender to archival databases and finding aids; and (5) develop an acquisitions policy that builds in sex equality principles and allows for active collection of archival materials.[22]

What is missing from this vision, and what is needed for feminist information activism in this arena is teamwork around the future of women's and gender archives to ensure safe and ethical collection of digital materials. As one feminist digital archives project has shown, "the critical digital archive is a site of exchange between multiple archivists, cultural heritage institutions, academics, students and users, all of whom inform the character of, and access to, the resource" (Wilson et al., 2022). Construction of such a resource requires feminist activism at a number of levels: collection and organisation, description/metadata, approaches to copyright, and access. These levels can conflict with one another, and collaboration is critical. While this kind of collaboration has been valuable in digitization projects, more work is required for the creation of archival materials – the active preservation of current women's and gender collective action.

Such projects do exist, though they are not common in Sweden. The Documenting the Now project[23] funded by Princeton University and the Mellon Foundation sprung up during the Black Lives Matter protests and evolved a set of guidelines and practices for documenting and archiving protests against the police. This work illustrates the intertwined nature of representation, technical systems, and ethical guidelines. Importantly, contributors should be able to retain control over their materials even after they have been archived, in case of deleted posts, changes in accessibility status, and similar personal choices that may be connected to protecting individuals from the state. This project also demonstrates that new challenges require a breaking down of institutional boundaries in favour of flexible collaboration with local communities. The DoN project has a database of volunteer archivists with different skillsets[24] who can assist activists with documenting, organising, preserving, and making accessible different kinds of materials.

A feminist information activism approach would demand the development of digital archiving policies and practices in cooperation with the individuals and groups whose documentation will be archived. A dialogue is particularly important given the fuzzy boundaries of an archive in a digital landscape that is built on networks. What is a personal or organisational archive in this context? Do comments count? Should the personal accounts of activists be included in a network archive? Who needs to be involved in archival creation and description? How should donors and archivists deal with the increasing presence of bot-created disinformation and digital detritus? How have activists dealt with the rise of AI and algorithmic curation of digital content? How can the right to privacy and control over one's digital identity and footprint be translated in an archival environment? These are all complicated questions that, in a feminist information activist approach, would need to be answered together with the prospective donors whose "communicative strategies" are being archived (Bossewitch & Sinnreich, 2012, p. 237). The results of this discussion – our future archives – might look quite a bit different from traditional, paper-based "private archives" in Sweden.

Negotiating what this more flexible and protected definition of private archives might look like would also demand working across institutions, to connect back to our definition of acquisitions as a question of why "my institution" should collect a particular set of documents. The institutions surveyed here are small, chronically underfunded, and rarely work together on projects, though archival conferences in Sweden are voluminous. This isolation does not allow for collaborative, planned specialisation. Curation, training, oral history, and grant-writing are underdeveloped skills. Institutions are also notoriously risk-averse; as

one recent study notes, many institutions "interpret legislation in a very restrictive way" to "protect their own reputations" (Jaillant, 2022). Yet the SAMDOK project shows that collaboration within Sweden is both possible and fruitful, even if it is potentially resource-intensive (Axelsson, 2014). It is highly likely that certain institutions will develop the resources and personnel to collect, for example, social media accounts, but not have the infrastructure to deal with email. Collaboration to cover various kinds of digital born documentation is also important.

Lastly, researchers have a role to play here. Our research demonstrates that institutions closer to the grassroots are already in dialogue with local communities, and organisations devoted to particular subject areas tend to recognize power imbalances including gendered hierarchies of archival creation and access. State and university institutions are the notable outliers. Both categories have large, blurry "target groups" of the public and researchers. Researchers are on the whole more likely to work collaboratively with these institutions in the context of research projects; Anna Nordenstam's (2008) initial study of women's and gender archival infrastructure in Sweden needs a follow-up. Academics have a role to play in lifting the needs of future researchers, helping archives to think about practical solutions, and integrating archival thinking into how their own research projects are structured. Ashlyn Velte's (2018) observations about the role of big data in archival collections and research are critical. Gender and women's archival researchers need to think about and intervene in these developments to ensure that older inequalities are not thoughtlessly reinscribed.

Feminist information activism to create and collect women's and gender archives and collections will require a collaborative and flexible approach that moves beyond the individual institution, coupled with a particular focus on a feminist "ethics of care" (Odumosu 2020). Collaborations between the Stockholm City Archives and Kvinnohistoriska indicate that cross-institutional support is important and produces results. However, the geographically bound nature of such collaboration is still a problem. Most importantly, bringing activists and other individuals into the conversation remains a challenge. Digital information and data feel ephemeral to many, and at the same time people are rightly concerned about privacy and ethical handling of data. The concept of "enskilda arkiv" or private archives needs to be more flexible in practice and needs more protection from the state. Navigating this minefield to collect, store, and make available the women's and gender archives of the future is a project for archivists together with the researchers, citizens, and community groups creating those archives.

## ACQUISITIONS POLICIES AND THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S AND GENDER RESEARCH

Caitlin McKinney's *Information Activism* begins with a series of quotations from activists in the nascent "Women's Information Exchange", including this revealing citation: "We recognize that many women are fearful about having their names on a computer. It is important to remember that most of us are already on any number of computerized mailing lists, none of which are voluntary nor oriented towards feminists…" (p. 1). This fear was voiced in the early 1980s, and most organisations – including cultural heritage institutions – have yet to take it seriously. Dealing with the technical, organisational, ethical, and legal quandaries of today's documentation landscape is key to shaping acquisitions policies that remove barriers for groups that are less powerful and historically underrepresented in current archives. This process will necessarily be collaborative, requiring increased communication between civil society and memory institutions, as well as increased cooperation between these memory institutions.

What is in the archives – and what is not – delimits and defines women's and gender history in the future, as well as affecting how activist communities in these areas understand themselves and their tools for political and social activism (Eichhorn, 2013; McKinney, 2020). The current research funding

landscape prioritizes doable projects, research that application assessment panels deem safe enough to fund. It is true that information about women and the gendered nature of contemporary life will be possible in the future, but it may be so difficult that only a few large projects run by established professors get funded. This situation would be a threat to a field that is still in its infancy in historical terms. Swedish women's and gender history is most often dated to the 1960 publication of Gunnar Qvist's dissertation "Kvinnofrågan i Sverige 1809–1846". Qvist was instrumental in ensuring that KvinnSam, founded as a private initiative in 1958, received support from the University of Gothenburg. Similar advocacy on the part of researchers may be necessary now.


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## NOTES

[1] These institutions are the Women's Historical Museum (Kvinnohistoriskt museum) in Umeå and Women's Historical (Kvinnohistoriska) in Stockholm.

[2] A recent network – The Future of Women's Research in Sweden – has created the test bed for this conversation; the author is one of two network founders. See https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/en/research-coordination-and-projects/research-projects-0 (accessed 12 November 2025).

[3] https://www.folkrorelsearkivet.se/om-oss/stadgar/ (accessed 12 November 2025). Thanks to Amanda Vesterlund lifting this practice.

[4] https://rohsska.se/uploads/2020/09/rm_policy_for_forvarv_och_accession_2020.pdf (accessed 25 Jul 2025).

[5] https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/arkivsamlingar/donera-material (accessed 25 Jul 2025).

[6] https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/enhetssida/regionarkivet/arbeta-med-arkiv/arkivordlista (accessed 25 Jul 2025).

[7] https://tam-arkiv.se/arkiv-och-samlingar/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[8] https://riksarkivet.se/resurser/riksarkivets-forvarvspolicy-for-enskilda-arkiv (accessed 25 July 2025).

[9] https://www.ub.lu.se/sites/ub.lu.se/files/forvarvspolicy-specialsamlingar-2019-09-26.pdf (accessed 25 July 2025).

[10] https://rohsska.se/uploads/2020/09/rm_policy_for_forvarv_och_accession_2020.pdf (accessed 25 July 2025).

[11] https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/arkivsamlingar/donera-material (accessed 25 July 2025).

[12] For information on their collective work attracting donations from historically important women in the Stockholm region, see https://www.kvinnohistoriska.se/arkivism-hyllmeter (accessed 25 July 2025).

[13] https://jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se/ska-du-jobba-med-jamstalldhet/framtidens-arkiv-skapas-i-samtiden/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[14] https://qrab.org/#about (accessed 25 July 2025).

[15] https://saqmi.se/events/saqmi-x-transammans/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[16] https://www.skanearkiv.se/Portals/15/Broschyr%20Skriv%20kvinna%20skriv%202025.pdf (accessed 25 July 2025).

[17] https://www.kvinnohistoriska.se/arkivism-hyllmeter (accessed 25 July 2025).

[18] See the Gothenburg 1968 project listed at https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/forskningssamordning-och-projekt/forskningsprojekt (accessed 12 November 2025). The author is involved in this project.

[19] These stories can also be submitted electronically. See https://qrab.org/index.php?p=varhist (accessed 12 November 2025).

[20] https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/enhetssida/regionarkivet/arbeta-med-arkiv/ordna-arkiv/praktiska-rad-om-arkivhantering-hos-foreningar (accessed 17 December 2025).

[21] https://stadsarkivet.stockholm/stadens-arkiv-och-informationshantering/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[22] https://jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se/ska-du-jobba-med-jamstalldhet/framtidens-arkiv-skapas-i-samtiden/ (accessed 12 November 2025).

[23] http://www.docnow.io/ (accessed 16 January 2026).

[24] https://archivist.docnow.io/#/web/index (accessed 16 January 2026).



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