

Women's History

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Black and Bluestockings

When Rome fell, its educational system was destroyed. In the first years of the Medieval period, education was mainly the training of priests. Women, unable to hold religious positions, could not be educated. Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church closed convents girls were able to attend. In Spain and Italy, women could attend universities, but only when tolerated by men. During the Renaissance, a desire to learn appeared in women, as did an acceleration of witch-hunts of independent women. In the eighteenth century, literary clubs known as Bluestocking societies formed in England and America. Women joined in great numbers. The name, synonymous for women with literary or academic interests, became a put-down. During the Industrial Revolution, women became dependent on marriage for economic survival. Every young girl was carefully trained to be a good wife and mother; to be subordinate to her husband and to males in general. Taught to defer to men, an education might jeopardize a girl's chance to marry. One father wrote his daughter, "If you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men."

In 1821, Emma Willard argued that girls could and should learn equal with boys. Willard opened a secondary education school for girls. She sat in on the exams of boys so she could teach subjects taught only to boys, and thought unwise to teach to females, such as math and science. In 1833 Oberlin College became the first college in the nation to admit women. In 1837, Mount Holyoke Seminary opened as the first women's college. In 1879, a group of women founded Radcliffe College, to provide women a Harvard education. Founded in 1636, Harvard steadfastly refused to admit women, and did not fully do so until 1975.

Educational opportunities for American women expanded rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, most women with college degrees discovered barriers in the professions. The Association of Collegiate Alumnae formed in 1881 to address this problem and in 1921, united with the Southern Association of University Women as AAUW. Their first published research study in 1885, responded to a prominent Boston physician's statements that higher education adversely affects the health of women college graduates.

Ferdinand Lundberg's 1947 publication *Modern Women: The Lost Sex*, sounded a nearly 500-page alarm warning, "...careers and higher education [would] lead to the 'masculinization of women with enormously dangerous consequences to the home, the children dependent on it, and the ability of the woman, as well as her husband, to obtain sexual gratification.'" The conclusions put forth were echoed by the editors of popular

women's magazines in a myriad of articles that trumpeted femininity. The warning seemed heeded. The number of women attending college fell from 47 percent to 35 percent and by 1958, and some 60 percent of women left college.

A 1992 AAUW study provided research data from interviews with 3,000 boys and girls which revealed classroom teaching methods that reinforced negative stereotypes of girls and their abilities. The report synthesized more than 1,300 published studies which documented historic theories that girls were not receiving the same quality or even quantity of education as boys.

Sources

Women's Roots, June Stephenson, Ph.D.

The Boundaries of Her Body, Debran Rowland, Esq.

Gender Equity or Bust, Mary Dee Wenniger.