WELL-READ AND WELL-BRED: WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN 19TH CENTURY UNITED STATES

Margaret Mancini

History 102: United States History: The 19th Century

November 6, 2017

In today's society, much thought and attention is given to the cause of educating women and girls across the world. Europe and the United States are pioneers in that fight, which has its roots in the late 1700s and into the nineteenth century. Within the United States, this movement to educate women and girls was not born out of feminist ideology, but rather a belief that classical education could aid in women's domestic lives, and could aid in the education of their children. The expansion of these basic ideas grew into the movement for largely exclusive female education. In the 19th century, ideas about female education were centered around domesticity and the education of children in the home; however, these ideas led to the inclusion of women and girls in schools across the United States on a grander scale.

The movement for women's education expanded upon the idea that women were the solution to the nation's insecurities about its system of children's education. By the 1840s, almost one million American adults were illiterate, and more than two million American children were illiterate.[1] Catherine Beecher, a powerful orator and author of *A Treatise on Domestic Economy: for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and in School*, was a leader in the movement and the person credited with the idea that women are more suited to educate children than men, though mostly as a result of their domestic responsibilities and lack of public influence. As the United States moves through the market revolution and the beginnings of industrialization, the need for education on a wide scale becomes almost essential to the survival of the nation outside of the overwhelming institution of slavery. Historian Andrea L. Turpin writes of Beecher's ideology that "Beecher argued not only that the teaching profession ought to be open to women, but that it should become entirely women. Women, she claimed, were better-suited

[1] Beecher, Catharine E. *The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy*, page 3. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846.

temperamentally than men to instruct children."[2] Beecher's ideology reinforces the shared opinion that women were not suited for public or political life, and therefore their education should be used to influence the development of children and encourage patriotic values. Beecher's ideology, as well as other advocates for women's education, mapped out the scope of female schooling. Author Jill K. Conway explains that the actions of these pioneers "fostered the belief carried on by [their] students and readers that women's intellectual life found its purpose in achieving for American culture some of the tasks which men, because of their economic and political responsibilities, could not fulfill."[3] While these beliefs carry on the nineteenth century tradition of excluding women from the public sphere, they are rooted in the notion that women are useful outside of quiet domesticity and childbirth. Though this ideology expands as other advocates for women's education open the United States' first women's colleges, it is still an important argument. It encouraged the idea that motherhood was not an obstacle for women who desire education, but rather, a strength.

A lot of discussion and debate about what women were supposed to learn to be useful in society followed these early thoughts on the movement. However, it remains clear that most male policymakers of the time did not intend for newly educated women to enter the public sphere. From its beginnings, female education was supposed to be instruction of general education. While it was important to know what women wanted to learn, legislators and policymakers settled on classical education, a combination of Greek and Latin, as well as basic mathematic skills. The intent was not to prepare them for careers, but to give them general

---

[2] Andrea L. Turpin, "The Ideological Origins of the Women's College: Religion, Class, and Curriculum in the Educational Visions of Catherine Beecher and Mary Lyon," *History of Education Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2010): 140.

[3] Jill K. Conway, "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States," *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1974): 5.

knowledge to pass onto their children.[4] However, the implementation of the classical curriculum opened a door for women to enter the public sphere, as they were able to form their own belief systems and fully understand their role in society. In an address given in 1858 by Edward E. Rankin entitled "Design of Women's Education", it is noted that "Although we [men] freely admit the wisdom of adapting the education of woman to her peculiar tastes, yet do we claim for her the foundation of classical and mathematical study, upon which alone a firm and beautiful superstructure can be raised."[5] Though many male voices during this period emphasized the idea that educating women in a formal setting was important for both women and men alike, it is clear that this education was not intended to exceed foundational knowledge. From this time period came a unified reform movement. Author Jill K. Conway explains that "Access to this kind of higher education modelled on the classical and literary curriculum of the male elite schools produced a batch of women reformers in the 1890s who were different from any preceding generation."[6] From here, the movement for women's education expanded further. While the 20th century would bring women into the workforce at a more rapid pace (especially during wartime), the late-1800s is where the focus began to shift.

Women's education at the end of the 19th century is, thus, a mix of classical education in literature and the domestic values introduced in earlier decades. While both are intended to aid in the education of children, the infiltration of formally educated women into public life presented a unique clash of societal ideals. Early advocates for female education such as Catherine Beecher, Mary Lyon, and Emma Willard did not set out to establish women's colleges as feminists,

---

[4] Charles Burroughs, "An Address on Female Education, delivered at Portsmouth, New Hampshire" (1827), Childs & March (1827), 39.
[5] Edward E. Rankin, "Design of Woman's Education: An Address" (1858), Sherman & Son (1859), 7.
[6] Jill K. Conway, "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States," *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1974): 8

though many of their students used their education to become active abolitionists and feminists.[7] The formal education they received in an female-controlled school prepared them for entrance into the public sphere in a way that had not been done before. It was clear to women in the movement that they had been led to believe they were naturally more ignorant than their male counterparts. Catherine Beecher notes that "Where education is most prosperous, there woman is employed more than man."[8] Women began to dominate the teaching profession, as Beecher wanted. As women exercise their right to education into the 20th century, it becomes clear that women have a place in the workforce, even if they have to force their way in.

Female education is a topic that has been debated and discussed for centuries. The establishment of Eastern women's colleges in the 19th century incentivized elite and quality education for women across the country. What was intended to be a model for educating children became a revolution to educate women and prepare them for success both in the home and in the public sphere. The movement for women's education in the 19th century established teaching as a profession dominated by women, and helped to strengthen activism in the United States at the onset of the abolitionist movement. The actions of early reformers in the 19th century greatly impacted and still influences education in the United States.

---

[7] Andrea L. Turpin, "The Ideological Origins of the Women's College: Religion, Class, and Curriculum in the Educational Visions of Catherine Beecher and Mary Lyon," *History of Education Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2010): 135-136.

[8] Beecher, Catharine E. *The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy*, page 9. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846.