

2018

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Recommended Citation

Ludowise, Elizabeth (2018) "The Education of Women in the 20th Century," *DEMOS*: Vol. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://publications.lakeforest.edu/demos/vol1/iss1/3>

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THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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This essay was originally submitted to POLS 251: Family Structure and Political Theory with Dr. Siobhan Moroney on March 3, 2017. The topic of this essay is the barriers women faced when they attempted to gain a degree between 1920 and 1990.

The argument that women are not rational or equal to men is a belief that many still hold today. This can be seen in the political structure regarding the number of men elected to office verses women elected. One of the reasons women are participating more in public service is because of the higher percentage of women getting college degrees. This increase in education started around 1900 and dipped down after World War II when many men came home from the war. This essay aims to look at the barriers women faced when they attempted to gain a degree between 1920 and 1990. Some ideas to consider are family values, getting into school, and careers after schooling was complete.

A major theme found throughout my research is the idea that a women's only purpose in life is to get married and have children. "Failure to become a wife and mother meant living a tragic, wasted, or at least an unhappy life" (Nash & Romero 2012, p. 9) Women that wasted their time on an education or career were considered a danger to humanity. They were not focusing on creating and raising the next generation. It was also believed that a woman should only have an education on one specific topic: home and family life. "Many felt women should only receive an education for the purpose of better being able to perform womanly tasks" (Feldman 1947). The idea was that a woman educated in home and family life would make a better wife and mother and would help her to be a better companion for her husband and teacher for their children. One of the first colleges to open its doors to women was Oberlin College in 1834. Classes were co-educational, meaning both men and women attended

classes together (Watson 1977, p. 133). Although women could take academic courses, most "were enrolled in the Ladies' Department" (p. 134). Because of the stigma that women faced such as being too emotional or only fit for the home, many did not go into academic studies even though these were offered to them. The idea that all they needed to know was how to please a husband was just one barrier they faced and not on how to take care of themselves if they were alone. The problem was not just the focus on a women's domestic role. Women also had little chance to attend school because of money. Only wealthy families could afford to send children to school. If a woman's only job in life was to care for a home, then the money would not be wasted on her since she would likely not use her education. A lack of money combined with family norms and values regarding women being the caretaker were barriers to women getting an education.

Men also argued that women should not have access to an education because they would not get married if they were educated. It was argued that they spent those years of courtship studying instead of focusing on men that were interested in them. By the time they were done with college, all the good guys would taken and it was assumed these women would live sad, lonely lives. If a woman was not procreating then it could be assumed that she was worthless to the men who were contributing to the world. The purpose of women was only to serve men, and if they were not doing that, then they faced criticism for being different. It was believed that "College also caused women to have unrealistic ideas and beliefs not conducive to marriage" (Nash & Romero 2012, p. 10). It was believed an educated woman wouldn't follow the normal roles of a wife or mother. It is possible that this argument was made for fear that a woman would want to have a career instead of a family or marriage. Some began to claim, "the college girl puts marriage first. Her career now ranks second, though she hopes to

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fit it in” (Nash & Romero 2012, p. 12). This argument was made to prove that a woman wouldn’t let a career hold the family in the second place slot and helped allow women to earn an education. It helped some women get over the cultural barrier. Colleges that admitted women had to fight back because a woman was either expected to get married and have children or remain unmarried and childless. Later in the 1930’s, many women began working and raising a family, something that hadn’t been done before (Soloman 1985, p. 173). Once women overcame certain cultural barriers, they were able to show that they could get an education, get married and have children.

A topic discussed in class was the idea that women got married because it was a way of ensuring you and your children would be cared for. Women with an education could provide for herself and her children. Maybe men realized this and saw this as a disadvantage to them. Men could lose having someone to care for them if they had a spouse who was educated and working. It was thought that marrying a college educated woman would result in a bad marriage, but others argued that it was beneficial for both the husband and the wife. It was argued by Plato in *The Republic*, that women in the guardian class should be educated to benefit the children they raise. An education was not allotted to them for their benefit, but to help men with what they were too busy to do. Another reason men believed that women should have an education was because it would benefit society (Nash & Romero 2012, p. 13). Women won the right to vote in 1920, and by 1929 women were able to serve on juries, which lead to the greater need for women to be educated due to an increase in participation in public affairs (History.com Staff 2010a; Nash & Romero 2012, p. 15). If women can vote, which means making rational decisions that means they can make one in a courtroom as well. This was the beginning of a shift towards women learning more than just about caring for the home. Although there were some men that agreed that women should be educated to help them, others made the excuse that education would hurt women mentally and physically, especially when she is pregnant.

Some men in the mid to late 1800s thought too much thinking could cause a woman to give birth to a sickly child that would die. “Her children born amid these cares, and injured before their birth by the undue activity of brain which weakens their mother’s physical powers, come into the world feeble or die in her arms, quenching out her courage in the bitterest waves of personal suffering” (Orton 1873, p. 105). Men thought that a mother who thought too much would damage an unborn child. Women faced an idea that too much thinking wore their brains out because they were not built to study like men. “Young women, as we find them have not the same

powers of endurance, in severe and protracted study, that the young men have,” (Nash & Romero 2012, p. 135). The argument that their health would be affected by too much studying and that their bodies were not built for such work was used to hold women back. This is a fine example of men thinking women are fragile and weak. Yet women had to take the places of male school teachers during eras like the civil war, which is yet another reason why women needed an education (Nash & Romero 2012, p. 137). At this time, the men were at war and there was a shortage of eligible workers. If women had to teach young boys, then they need the education to teach them. This opened the door to women attending college, but it was at the benefit of others and not themselves. One reason women were not welcome to an education was because men lost recognition that could help them further their careers. A few “critics warned that bestowing fellowships or other academic honors on female students, who, it was assumed, would become wives and mothers (and therefore, not “use” their education) denied men career-enhancing recognition,” (Walton 2012, p. 383-400). Those that did well in high school deserved the awards and if men did not work as hard then they do not get it.

Of the number of students attending school in 1890, “31.9% of students were women” (Walton 2012). This number continued to rise until the end of World War II when there was a drop-in enrollment. Just after World War II, when men were coming home, women saw a decrease in college admittance. “The number of women with a bachelor’s degree or first professional degree in 1890 was seventeen percent, and by 1940 it was forty-one percent, but by 1950 it was down to twenty-four percent” (Solomon 1985, p. 133) This was due to the increase in men attending college because they could afford could it due to the G.I. bill. The G.I bill was introduced in 1944 not too long before the end of World War II. It was created because of a shortage of jobs, to help with the cost of school, and to decrease the number of men joining the workforce (History.com Staff 2010b; What Was the Purpose of the GI Bill?). There were women who used the G.I. bill to pay for college, but it was not openly discussed that women qualified for the bill just as men did. Some women thought they didn’t deserve the right to use the advantages of the bill because they hadn’t been on the front lines, and thus did not use the bill.

The cost of an education made it hard for women to work towards getting a degree, especially if they had already started a family (Eisemann 2006, p. 212). Someone had to care for the children if they were not old enough for school, and men were typically seen as the breadwinners of the home. Most women just married and had children instead of working towards getting a

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higher education such as a master's degree or a Ph.D. Not until the 1970's were programs put in place to help women with families complete or earn a degree. In 1950, the number of women with a bachelor's degree was 104 out of 1,400 and by 1990 it was 591 out of 1,400 (Statista 2017, December). Men were getting a degree twice as often as women from the 1940's to the 1990's (Statista 2017, March). There was an increase in the number of women getting a degree over time. Those that did get a degree during the 1950's-1970's still faced the barriers of not being seen as credible as men or having to choose between a career and a family. Some women were ignored in the classroom during masters programs because men still believed that women did not belong there and did not understand what they were talking about.

Although women were pressured into putting careers aside to have a family, they still attended college. Many women moved on to receive a higher education. It was a goal of theirs to have a family and a career (Solomon 1985, p. 174). Yet women faced the challenge of balancing a family and having a career. The number of married women in the workforce in 1920 was four times larger than it was in 1890 (Solomon 1985, p. 175). Women worked for their education and were determined to use it and raise a family. During the 1970's when women did try to go back to school, some struggled to transfer credits and get old credits to transfer to the newer programs they were entering (Eisenmann 2006, p. 181). With many veterans also going back to school, schools needed to change some rules to allow credit transfers. While the change occurred to benefit men, it helped many women finish their degrees and move on to their careers.

The reason women were finally able to get an education was because they overcame the barriers that were put in front of them. Women got an education because it was eventually seen that men could benefit, like in cases of giving women education for jobs teaching children so that men could focus on government and the sciences. Teaching children was always seen as something that men were too busy to do once people realized that women could do it. Many pushed the boundaries to get degrees in science and other fields to prove the point that they are not just good for one or two things; that they can do all that men can do. Equality between men and women was starting to seem like a reality. Women in professional fields are making almost as much as men are and women may have to enlist for the draft in a few years in a push to make things more equal.

There are still barriers that women face in the workforce and in the classrooms, but they are slowing

falling away as more women push the boundaries that others pushed through when education for them was nonexistent. A switch has occurred. In the 1890's it was economically better for a family to send the boys to school, now it looks like girls are the ones being sent to school as number of women with a bachelor's degree is 1,207 out of 1,400 and the percentage of women who have completed a four-year degree is 34.6% (Statista 2017, December; Statista 2017, March). Regardless of the reasons of why, it proves that the barriers that once held women back are no longer doing just that.

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How to cite this journal article:

Ludowise, E (2018, April). The Education of Women in the 20th Century. *Demos*, 1, 16-19.

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