

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jean Spence, Sarah Jane Aiston, Maureen M. Meikle, eds. *Women, Education, and Agency, 1600-2000*. Routledge Research in Gender and History Series. New York: Routledge, 2009. 280 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-88836-3.

Reviewed by Liberty Sproat (History, Purdue University)

Published on H-Education (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



The reality that many women have had limited access to formal education, both in past and present societies, is no surprise to historians. Of more interest to scholars are the ways in which women have utilized their agency to accommodate constraints on their academic opportunities. In the spirit of such inquiry, *Women, Education, and Agency, 1600-2000* explores how women have accessed informal learning and used it to contribute to personal and social betterment. This work, edited by Jean Spence, Sarah Jane Aiston, and Maureen M. Meikle, compiles essays written by internationally renowned scholars to illustrate how women carved a place for themselves within paradigms that restricted their formal education.

This work contributes to the Routledge Research in Gender and History series, which includes several associated books, such as *Women, Educational Policy-Making and Administration in England: Authoritative Women since 1800* (2000), edited by Joyce Goodman and Sylvia Harrop; and *The Educated Woman: Minds, Bodies, and Women's Higher Education in Britain, Germany, and Spain, 1865-1914* (2009), edited by Katharina Rowold. Together, these books paint a fuller picture of women's education in history. *Women, Education, and Agency*, however, differs from these other books in the series, due to its emphasis on agency. In addition, the essays show progress over the centuries in terms of women's access to education while confirming persistent gender inequalities. The longer time span allows for identifying such progress and patterns. Like Mary Ann Maslak's 2007 book *The Structure and Agency of Women's Education*, this anthology approaches women's education from a global and comparative perspective.

This text is based on papers from the fifteenth annual conference of the Women's History Network held at Durham University in September 2006. The conference's theme was "Thinking Women: Education, Culture, and Society." The essays, fourteen in total, are each fairly brief and presented in a clear and straightforward format. Many have the feel of a conference presentation rather than a book essay, though all are well researched with plentiful references. In addition, several essays include graphs and pictures that work with the prose to make a readable and engaging book.

The essays are presented chronologically, but clear themes and theoretical frameworks emerge. For instance, all chapters provide examples of women being empowered by education and the centrality of education in improving women's conditions. Additionally, the work traces intersections between public and private, showing the fluidity of women's lives across these spheres as women's education was typically practiced under informal, or even marginal, circumstances. As Aiston states in her introduction, "This book is about the history of individuals and groups of women who wanted, via education, to make a valuable contribution to society—a contribution that went beyond the structures that situated them outside such possibilities" (p. 4). In exploring women's contributions, the book fits within the context of the second-wave feminist tradition as it attempts to reclaim women's history; although, the term "feminism" is used broadly.

Several of the essays present case studies, identifying specific individuals who stood outside social norms because of their educational achievements. Barbara Bul-

ckaert's essay, "Self-Tuition and the Intellectual Achievement of Early Modern Women: Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678)," explores women's attempts at self-education in the seventeenth century. Facing very limited access to formal education, the wealthy middle classes of European society began educating daughters, such as van Schurman, at home. Aynur Soydan Erdemir's "A Woman's Challenge: The Voice of Şükufe Nihal in the Modernisation of Turkey" contemplates the role of Nihal in the women's movement in Turkey. In the context of the modernization of the Ottoman Empire and creation of the Turkish Republic, Nihal's academic endeavors came amid larger social reforms. In striving to build a new society, women's education was vital. These two essays emphasize the significance of individual women's efforts during periods of social change.

Like those already mentioned, most of the essays in this book are not about prominent historical figures. There are, however, a few exceptions. Joyce Senders Pedersen's essay explores Mary Wollstonecraft's support of education as a means to empower women. "Women and Agency: The Educational Legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft" notes that Wollstonecraft encouraged others to improve themselves through education. Pedersen analyzes Wollstonecraft's book, *The Rights of Woman* (1929), to show her belief that education was meant to uplift women individually, fortifying them amid life's disappointments, rather than intended for systemic change. Stephanie Spencer's "'Knowledge as the Necessary Food of the Mind': Charlotte Mason's Philosophy of Education" brings attention to one of the forgotten, though widely influential, scholars of education. Mason, a contemporary of Maria Montessori, emphasized child-centered educational theory, viewing the child "as a person." She also encouraged a wide liberal curriculum, seeing the intellectual, spiritual, and physical as interlinked. These essays demonstrate the influence that these women have had on current attitudes toward education and the intersections between individual and systemic change. It is also no surprise that the book includes an essay about Betty Friedan, who is often seen as the founder of the second-wave feminist movement. Linda Eisenmann's "Thinking Feminist in 1963: Challenges from Betty Friedan and the U.S. President's Commission on the Status of Women" challenges the role of Friedan in advocating realistic perspectives on women's education. She contrasts Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) with the U.S. government report *American Woman: The Report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women* (1963) to point out similarities and differences and to argue that

the presidential commission represented a truer picture of female agency in 1963 than did Friedan's book.

Essays in the book note the importance of not just individuals but also location. The university, and women's place in it, is the theme of three essays. Marianna Muravyeva's "Russian Women in European Universities, 1864-1900" explains that because women in Russia were banned from their home universities, hundreds of them went abroad to gain an education in such countries as Switzerland and Germany. Muravyeva argues that these women were the first example of "mass academic mobility" (p. 86). Claire Jones's "Femininity and Mathematics at Cambridge circa 1900" describes the process in which women became associated with mathematics, as opposed to men's association with natural science. Mathematics began as an elite and rigorous degree but was eventually feminized as women gained greater access to math coaching. Consequently, the prestige of the mathematics degree was devalued as women entered the field in larger numbers. Bringing the significance of the university in women's education to the present day, Sylvia Ellis and Helen Mitchell's "'Enhancing the Quality of the Education Experience': Female Activists and U.S. University and College Women's Centres" traces the origins and evolution of women's centers on U.S. campuses. It looks at the challenges faced by these centers and their role in enhancing women's academic achievements while challenging institutional sexism. The authors conclude that women's centers have made campuses more comfortable for women, but their full effect remains yet to be seen.

Although the book attempts to take a global approach to the topic, it is, nevertheless, heavily focused on British history. In addition to individual British women already discussed, two essays show how women have utilized learning to transform British society and culture outside of academia. Ruth Watts's "Scientific Women: Their Contribution to Culture in England in the Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries" looks at women's contribution to scientific culture in England despite impediments against them. Through private tutoring, periodicals, public lectures, and other means, women studied science. Anne Logan's essay, "Feminist Criminology in Britain circa 1920-1960: Education, Agency, and Activism outside the Academy," argues that women made an important, though often overlooked, contribution to criminology. By looking at female justices of the peace in England and Wales, she demonstrates how women used both formal and informal education and networks to develop distinctly feminist perspectives on criminal justice policy. These essays show women's role in cultural and social

change, but additional works about women's influence on culture outside Britain would have strengthened the geographical scope of the work.

Rather than focusing on individuals, some essays examine key women's organizations, both national and transnational. Katherine Storr's "Thinking Women: International Education for Peace and Equality, 1918-1930" counters previous notions that peace education was a result of the progressive educational movement, and instead argues that peace and equality education derived primarily from the women's movement. Using examples of the International Council of Women and the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, Storr shows the integrated nature of peace, equality, and education within female activism. Jane Martin's "London's Feminist Teachers and the Urban Political Landscape" looks into the National Union of Women Teachers to show the potential of education to prompt social change within the context of socialism. Barnita Bagchi's "Ramabai and Rokeya: The History of Gendered Social Capital in India" compares how women writers and activists Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) promoted women's education. Bagchi argues that these women attacked patriarchal norms through their educa-

tional and welfarist associations. Of particular note in this chapter is the idea of gendered social capital, which refers to "how certain kinds of social capital can be analytically viewed as constitutively gendered" (p. 69). This would include caregiving institutions, elementary school teaching, voluntary welfarist associations, and the like. These essays demonstrate that, through the aid of organizations, women could promote educational opportunities for others.

The contributions to *Women, Education, and Agency* demonstrate that women have found methods of gaining access to formal education; utilized a variety of informal educational tools; and sought to use their learning to influence other women, society, and culture. Women have been active players in educational history and only forgotten because their means of learning have most often been nontraditional. This book, however, asks readers to also consider the relevance today in reflecting on the long history of women attempting to fulfill their potential as human beings and the importance of accessing education in that struggle. It is a book that begins historical inquiry, urging readers to consider problems that persist and looking for methods to remedy these problems.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

**Citation:** Liberty Sproat. Review of Spence, Jean; Aiston, Sarah Jane; Meikle, Maureen M., eds., *Women, Education, and Agency, 1600-2000*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34441>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.