

# A History of Women's Education in the United States

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Up until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, women were not allowed to be educated. Men were afraid that they would forget their primary role: to do the housework and raise children. Not only were women oppressed; they were also silenced. Women had always lived that way, so most of them did not dare to speak up for their educational needs. Since education is somewhat related to open-mindedness, men knew that educated women would not tolerate such oppressive behaviour.

During the early 1800's, girls and boys went to school together in the villages. According to the Conner Prairie website, "By 1860, it was almost as likely for a white girl as a white boy to attend school, even in farming regions of the country...From 1870 until the middle of the twentieth century, female high school graduates outnumbered male graduates"



There was no problem with boys and girls going to school together until college. At that moment, women were isolated in academies and seminaries for girls where they were taught to become teachers. According to Women's Colleges Coalition website, "Seminaries educated women for the only socially acceptable occupation: teaching. Only unmarried women could be teachers. Many early women's colleges began as female seminaries and were responsible for producing an important corps of educators." Women's job perspectives were quite limited because they did not benefit from the same level of education as men.

However, some women wanted to prove they could become much more than elementary school teachers. A lot of colleges for women were built at that time in response to women's growing desire to be educated. Some of the most popular are the Seven Sisters, seven liberal arts colleges that were dedicated to women.

Of course, a few colleges allowed boys and girls, but they were not very numerous. Franklin College, America's first coeducational institution was founded in Pennsylvania in 1787. However, it did not last very long. A few years later, it became once again a single-sex school. Oberlin College, Ohio, followed the same path in 1841. It was the first American college to accept both African-Americans and women within its walls. Because of Franklin College's change of vocation, it is now the longest continuously operating coeducational school in the United States.

As mentioned in Women's Inferior Education, girls usually have better marks than boys from kindergarten to college. However, when it comes to higher education, they are not confident enough to apply. In 1974, 7,800 men applied to Harvard, but

there were only 3,400 female applicants to Radcliffe (the female counterpart of Harvard). Even though it became socially accepted for women to be educated, most of them still did not think they were intelligent enough to succeed. They were told that they were inferior by their parents, their teachers, etc. Their lack of confidence did not help them to fulfill their dreams.

Even when women won the right to be educated, they were usually underestimated. It was nevertheless a first step towards equality. The Women's College Coalition was created in 1972 to make sure educational opportunities were equal for both genders. Women have gained ground, but there was still a lot of work to do.

All these struggles are supposed to be behind us. While only unmarried women could become teachers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 71% of American teachers were women in 1994. However, there is still a lot of work to do to obtain gender equality. Now that women are accepted in colleges and universities everywhere, is it still necessary to have women's colleges? Their relevance is even more questionable since Drew G. Faust became the first female president of Harvard University.

## Bibliography

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