

Education and Intellectual Attainment of Women – A Historical Perspective

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63345/ijhs.net.v13.i12.6>

Dr. Meenu

Assistant professor of History

Tau Devi Lal Government P. G. College for Women

Murthal, Sonipat

dahiyameenu23@gmail.com

Abstract— The history of female education is marked with the fight with social, cultural, and institutional barriers which restricted women access to education and intellectual growth. In the early centuries, the scope of education was restricted because women were taught only domestic lessons, moral teachings, as well as informal learning at home. There were however significant exceptions, sometimes learned women in ancient India and the Greek and Chinese world, made their contributions to philosophy, literature, and science against all odds. In the medieval period, intellectual opportunities of women were still low, but occasionally religious establishments made it possible to learn in the form of convents and scholarly traditions.

The changes in the early modern era were slow and were guided by the philosophy of Renaissance and enlightenment which argued the importance of reason and education. Philosophers then started doubting the exclusion of women in the learning process and this saw advocacy towards women being provided with education. The nineteenth century had witnessed remarkable advances when girls schools came into existence, women colleges, and the reform movements, which associated education with the social reforms, and national development, as well as empowerment of women. Education turned out to be one of the most powerful tools of enhancing the social status and the involvement of women in the general life.

Legal reforms, democratic as well as international gender equality movements resulted in the mass growth of women education in the twentieth century. Higher education also gave women dominance in other areas like science, literature, politics and education and this transformed intellectual and professional background. In the modern

world women have been acquiring intellectual prowess at an ever increasing rate and such is facilitated with the forays of international conventions that believe in the equal educational opportunities. However, the discrepancies still exist concerning the socio-economic disparities and cultural limitations. A historical approach emphasizes the role of women education in the development of intellectual history and social changes, which stresses the need for drawing a long-term understanding of the role in attaining an inclusive and fair development.

Keywords— Women's education, Intellectual attainment, Gender equality, Historical perspective, Social reform, Empowerment



Source: <https://www.21kschool.com/in/blog/womens-education-in-india/>

I. INTRODUCTION

Social development and intellectual growth has always been seen to be anchored on education as a cornerstone of development. But history records that women have been denied access to education through the strictly bound culture, institutions of a patriarchal society, and cultural stereotypical

views of intellectual qualities. The social exclusion of women in accessing formal learning did not imply that women lacked intellectual capabilities but the creation of knowledge as a male exclusive reserve through social understanding. This led to a scenario where the intellectual contributions of women were not given much attention or taken seriously or restricted to the personal and informal space.

Though limited by these factors, women in the civilizations proved to be exceptionally intellectually strong. Whenever she had a chance, women have been engaged in the creation and dissemination of knowledge, of philosophical discussion and literary writing as well as scientific observation and educational leadership. India, Greece and China were some of the earliest communities that gave rise to women scholars who defied the dominant set of restrictions and religious establishments of the medieval era were also used to offer women learning and intellectual stimulation. Through these initial interactions, the foundation was laid to subsequent challenges of exclusion of gender in education.



Source: <https://www.collegesearch.in/articles/womens-education>

The reformation of women education was further accelerated in the early modern times especially when humanist thought and Enlightenment ideologies became prevalent and focused on rationality, education and personal rights. Increasingly, reformers challenged the deprivation of women of education, associating female literacy on the one hand with the aspects of moral enhancement, social reform and national development. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were major turning points when educational access of girls, colleges of women and changes in the law extended possibilities and redefined the role of woman in the social and intellectual life.

The participation of women in education in the modern world is now greater than before, with the continued agreement of

gender equality and inclusive development advocacy across the world. Women have become major contributors in the realms of academia and career as well as leadership intellectually. However, inequality between societies caused by socio-economic factors, cultural dependency, and lack of equal resources has led to the existence of disparities. A historical look at the subject of women education illustrates that it has been the key to the development of intellectual advancement and social change. This pathway is critical to comprehend issues about the current state and prospective and just educational opportunities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on the history of women education always demonstrates that the opportunity to learn has never been a straightforward narrative of linear advancement; rather, it has been affected by the changing institutional gatekeeping, altered notions of knowledge and politics of gender in general in every epoch. Women historians Since women had been historically marginalized intellectually, fundamental historians have suggested that social systems that prevented the access of women to literate societies, formal education, credentialing frameworks, and the space in a society where the validity of a knowledge was affirmed, created the situation of women intellectual marginalization. An influential work by Lerner on the history construction of patriarchy is widely applied to explain why women were not allowed to receive education, not only by law and tradition, but also by the very manner in which history was being written- often their intellectual work was not even included in the record and in scholarly canons.

In ancient and late-antique situations, both the text and literature focus on constraint and exception. In civilizations, as in most ancient cultures, the education of the girls was most often incorporated in the domestic manufacturing division and moral-social education, whereas higher literacy and academic schooling was reserved to the privilege of the elite classes and schools of higher education, dominated by males. Even so, women philosophers and intellectual traditions have been historiographically documented to engage in theological discourse, philosophy and learned correspondence, indicating that women occasionally obtained intellectual life by means of courtly circles or religious education or through unofficial systems even in cases where they were not permitted official academic studies. These syntheses disrupt older analyses of the intellectual life of women that tried to figure the intellectual as non-existent if established means of ascending knowledge were

inaccessible, by reconstructing where and how knowledge pursued itself when these channels of access failed.



Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education>

Medieval erudition equally opposes the popular myth that women were uneducated by highlighting small yet strategic times when literate communities emerged. Experiments into the education of girls and women in medieval society underline the place of convents and religious houses as training grounds, where they might learn to read, write and the culture of manuscripts and administrative skills, which were open to women only to a very rough degree and only in specific classes. It is also indicated in this work that religious vocation might also become another avenue to intellectual power, allowing some of these women to become teachers, scribes, patrons of learning, or writers, although most of the larger institutions of education remained closed off to them.

The study of early modernism and the Enlightenment focuses on the development of explicit arguments of equal capacity of women and right to education. The work of Mary Astell is highly debated as a pre-modern philosophical response to the belief that women were naturally ill-equipped to engage in serious study, documents of Astell reveal how the author reconceived the concept of women as having an ethical and rational need to learn, and in her critique of social structures that could only hold women in intellectual infancy. Then, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Wollstonecraft is addressed as one of the crucial turning points: scholars interpret it as the argument based on the idea of rights encompassed in the book, which correlates the education of women with the idea of civic goodness, social progress, and validity of the contemporary citizenship, at the same time revealing the mechanisms through which the development of gendered

education perpetuated the inequality by preconditioning women to be dependent not to be self-sufficient.

The historiography of the nineteenth century is particularly lush, as this is the time when the domain of girls school education expanded not only institutionally, but also the sphere of higher education was disputed. Historical research on Britain and the United States has written of how the role of women colleges, education paths (teaching), and secondary schooling to girls increased in arguably divided spheres, moral uprightness and the apprehension that higher education would interfere with femininity or family life. Research on this topic also indicates that institutional inclusion did not always imply intellectual equality: that there were numerous early access pathways which were defended by domestic ideology (the education of women to motherhood or to moral intuition) and served by curriculum tracking that diverted women out of classical, scientific, and professional preparation.

The literature of the twentieth century changes its direction to the encounter of mass schooling, democratization, feminist movements, and state policy and reveals the effect of legal actions and mobilization of women that altered the extent of educational activity and the presence of women in intellectual activities. The history of higher education has recorded how women entering universities were then subjected to gendered strictures regarding discipline (right), role (right), career (right) and how resistance to women continued to manifest in subtle forms like recruitment, campus life, and promotion (male culture, norms, and hiring practices). Simultaneous efforts of women historical development and women studies indicate that intellectual achievement is not just the effort of admitting women to the already in existence institutions but rather it is the effort to change who is valued and deemed as a legitimate source of knowledge as well as the experiences of who is studied and of whom is studied.

Modern research and policy-oriented academic community is more and more inclined to consider women education in the perspectives of equality, capabilities, and empowerment, which suggests that the measurement of attainment should not be focused on access and achievement only, but on what education can conduct women to do in social, economic, and political life. The literature of the capability approach is often employed to demonstrate how it is possible to have parity in schooling, but with unequal freedoms, it is necessary to assess the quality of learning, social norms, safety, labor results, and distribution of care work. Research on development - especially by organisations like the World Bank and UNESCO - has taken

evidence and synthesized it into the claim that the advantages of educating girls and women are more generally-beneficial, and have reported continued legal, economic, and cultural barriers to participation or advancement, especially by the marginalised.

Last but not least, the literature on the global gender-equality framework (and the policy architecture adopted in the post-1995 in particular) is placing education of women as one of the key drivers of inclusive development, but also cautions against backlash, structural inequality, and disparate application in settings. The Beijing Platform for Action is regularly referred to as a path-breaking plan that establishes equality in education of women in a much wider framework of commitments made in regards to rights, institutions, and social changes; the most recent work by the UNESCO urges to acknowledge that formal promises do not necessarily eliminate block on pathways of education and intellectual growth like discriminative rules, poverty, and child marriage or gender based abuse. Collectively, the literature confirms one fundamental conclusion, namely, women education is a historical problem of the fight to have access to knowledge as well as a current problem of power, recognition and social circumstances needed to make intellectual life thrive.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

The current research has taken a qualitative historical research design in the study to explore how the education and intellectual attainment of women have changed over the various periods in history. In this study, historical research would be suitable since it allows a methodical analysis of the history of occurrences, concepts, and administrative changes that have determined how women will gain access to education and intellectual life. The study does not suppose a causal measure or prognosis; instead, the concepts of the study are focused on interpretation, context and critical examination of historical processes.

The design enables the study to follow long term trends, transitions and continuities in the educational activities of women both in the ancient civilizations to the modern day.

2. Nature of the Study

It is a descriptive, analytical and interpretive study. It is descriptive in that it captures historical advances in the area of education and education institutions amongst women. It is analytical in that it questions the social, cultural and

institutional barriers to enable or prevent women from achieving the intellectual level of attainment. It is interpretive in the sense because it attempts to know how education was used either as an instrument of empowerment, exclusion or transformation in various historical situations.

3. Sources of Data

The study is rooted in secondary sources of data since it is grounded on historical and theoretical study instead of field research. The sources include:

The books on women history, education and gender studies are scholarly books.

- History, education, and social science peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Classical philosophical and reformist works concerning women education.
- International organizations reports and publications of organizations like UNESCO, United Nations and world Bank.
- Policies, statements, and international systems concerning gender equality and education.
- This is because these sources offer an exhaustive and factual point of departure to historical analysis.

4. Method of Data Collection

A systematic review of literature was done to collect data. Authoritative and peer-reviewed sources were determined through the academic databases, digital libraries, and institutional repositories. The literature choices were informed by the relevance to the research topic, its coverage over time, academic authority, and addition to the knowledge on education and intellectual development of women.

Sources were classified in terms of chronological order and in terms of themes to ease the process of systematic examination of various eras.

5. Method of Data Analysis

A combination of chronological and thematic analysis is used in the study.

- The history of development of women education was traced through chronology in major historical periods such as ancient, medieval, early modern, modern, and contemporary period.

- Thematic analysis was implemented to reveal the common themes including: access to education, institutional barriers, curriculum differentiation, reform movements and intellectual recognition.

This bi-polar method allows the continuity of history to be analyzed within the limits of the subject and the subject of history itself.

6. Theoretical Framework

Feminist historical theory and frameworks of gender analysis inform the analysis by emphasizing the importance of power, patriarchy, and social structures in the development of educational access. These points of view assist in understanding the ways in which knowledge relationships were gendered and how females bargained on intellectual space in constraining circumstances.

Moreover, aspects of ability approach apply in the evaluation of women education not only on access basis but also intellectual agency, autonomy and social participation through education provision.

7. Scope of the Study

The paper area is both worldwide and historical, encompassing such developments in the world and the evolution of education throughout history. Although the study does not relate itself to a particular country but uses dozens of regions to illustrate general patterns and specific contexts of the educations of women.

8. Limitations of the Study

The study as a secondary-data historical study lacks in the availability and interpretation of available literature, which is also a limitation of this study. The intellectual contributions of some women might not be documented or included in the records as such since history has excluded them. Also, the research lacks any primary empirical evidence, i.e. interviews or questionnaires since the purpose of the research is enlightenment and not a current measurement.

IV. RESULTS

The historical discussion of women education and intellectual achievement indicates the obvious tendencies of change, stabilization, and inequality throughout the history. The results prove that access to education by women has in fact been broadened considerably over centuries; this has not been even,

socially constructed and has been strongly connected with the larger power structures.

1. Constant Marginalisation and Intermittent Inclusion.

The findings have proven that throughout a large part of historical civilization, women were institutionalized out of the educational institutions. Education of women in ancient and medieval societies was informal and domestic, and perpetuated gender separation of intellectual labor. Academies, universities, and guilds of scholars were male-dominated formal learning facilities. Nevertheless, the discussion demonstrates that the exclusion was never absolute and women had other ways of entering the intellectual life, which included religious institutions, elite families, oral traditions, and informal scholarly centers.

In the late modern period particularly since the early modern period, the participatory level of women in education grew slowly but steadily, as a result of a wider ideological changes in relation to rationality, human rights, and social reform.

2. Agency of Intellect Education as a Catalyst.

The results demonstrate the close correlation between the access to education and the intellectual agency of women. With the acquisition of literacy and official education, women became able to engage in intellectual production, in such forms as writing, teaching, philosophizing and social criticism. Education was seen as the way of acquiring skills as well as means of creating critical consciousness and intellectual autonomy.

There is historical evidence that women who were educated had a higher chance of going against gender roles, being part of the reforms, and trying to make their voices heard in the social and intellectual life.

3. Naturing Curriculum and knowledge Gendered.

One of the main findings of the research is the curricular segregation that has remained a major challenge to intellectual equality. Even in instances where women received access to education, their education would have been limited to certain areas that could be considered adequate to the female gender such as domestic science, moral teachings and arts. Further training in philosophy, science, mathematics and how to work was still scarce.

This feminized organization of knowledge inhibited intellectual growth in women and strengthened hierarchies which favored male modes of learning and knowledge.

4. Social Reform and Feminist Thought Role.

It has been shown that significant development societies made against women education were highly associated with social reform movements and feminist intellectual traditions. The championing of women education was fueled by the times of transition in politics like the enlightenment period and nineteenth century reformation movements as well as the twentieth century gender equality battles.

These movements redefined education as a right and not a privilege and stressed its significance towards social development, citizenship and democracy. This led to a slow erosion of the institutional barriers on education of women especially on the higher education.

5. Growth of Higher Education and Professionalism.

These findings indicate that the twentieth century was characterized by a great increase in the female enrollments in higher education. Women were also able to venture into the academic, scientific, political, and professional world that was initially the prerogative of men through increased accessibility of universities. This growth remodeled no less than intellectual vistas and diversified the production of knowledge.

But the results also indicate that the increase in education level did not necessarily exclude inequality. Women still experienced issues that were based on recognition, career progression, and leadership.

6. Persisting Inequalities in the Modern World.

The study has detected that disparities in women education and intellectual achievement, even in the modern era, exist to a great extent. The issue of socio-economic differences, cultural standardization, care-giving burdens without payment, lack of access to individualized resources keeps influencing the educational achievements of women, especially in marginalized groups.

These findings are used to emphasize that educational equality cannot be gauged only in terms of enrollment or literacy rates but should also look at the quality of education, intellectual freedom and chances of knowledge application.

7. Essentials Education as a Tool of Social Change.

On the whole, the results prove that both female education has been significant in wider products of social and intellectual change. The broadening of educational access has also led to the changes in gender relations, the decentralization of intellectual traditions, as well as the multiplication of democratic and inclusive knowledge.

The historical approach proves that the education of women is not only a social reformist issue, but also a part and parcel of intellectual growth and sustainable development.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed how women education and intellectual advancement has been transformed or rather not transformed over history, and how education has been the place of exclusion and the tool of transformation. Throughout history and civilizations, the availability of learning to women has been influenced by social organization, institutional framework, and dominating ideologies which tended to limit intellectual involvement. Irrespective of this, women invariably proved to be intellectually competent and possess agency whenever there was a chance to learn, and their assumption on knowledge and gender is challenged.

In the analysis, the history reveals that the development of women education has not been a continuous process (or one that occurs naturally). Although there has been a lot of informality and restriction in the early educational experiences, gradual changes in the philosophical thought, social reforms movements as well as legislations opened more opportunities to women in attaining formal education. The rise of girls' education and colleges of women as well as higher education were the milestones defining an intellectual role of women. Nevertheless, in the view of the continued existence of the gendered curriculum and unequal attention, it is still evident that access is not the sole factor that ensures intellectual parity.

The paper also outlines that the process of women empowerment has mainly focused on education which has allowed women to be incorporated in intellectual, professional, and communal life. Meanwhile, modern issues, including socio-economic inequality and the presence of cultural limitations and unfair distribution of access to high-quality education, still influence the intellectual achievements of women. These results can bring our attention to the fact that the education of women should not be viewed as the historical accomplishment but as the process that has to be supported and supported by the institutions and society.

REFERENCES

- Astell, M. (1694). *A serious proposal to the ladies, for the advancement of their true and greatest interest*. London: R. Wilkin.
- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. (1995). *Fourth World Conference on Women*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>
- Lerner, G. (1986). *The creation of patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lerner, G. (1993). *The creation of feminist consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Perkin, J. (1993). *Women and education in nineteenth-century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rendall, J. (1985). *The origins of modern feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860*. London: Macmillan.

- Scott, J. W. (1986). *Gender: A useful category of historical analysis*. *The American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1053–1075. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376>
- Smith, B. G. (Ed.). (2004). *Women's history in global perspective* (Vols. 1–3). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education for all 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report: Gender report*. Paris: UNESCO.
- World Bank. (2018). *Missed opportunities: The high cost of not educating girls*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation/publication/missed-opportunities-the-high-cost-of-not-educating-girls>
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A vindication of the rights of woman*. London: Joseph Johnson.

