Educating Europeans

19th-21st centuries

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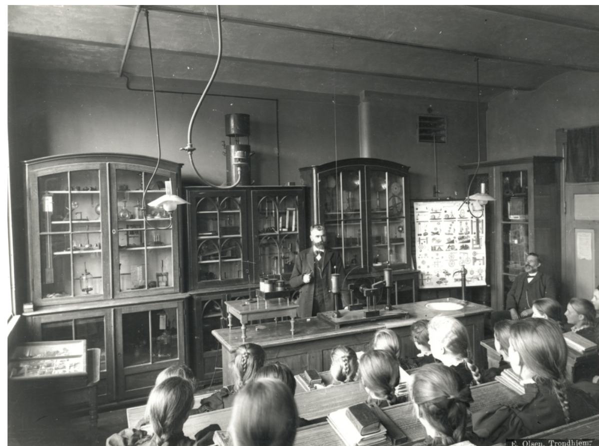
ABSTRACT

The movement towards compulsory and prolonged schooling since 1800 had a greater impact on girls than boys in European countries because girls' education significantly lagged behind that of boys in 1800. Early 19th-century schools were strictly divided by both sex and class: elementary education was directed toward the poor, whereas secondary education was mainly for wealthy boys. By mid-century national networks of schools increasingly allowed girls to pursue studies, particularly within vocationally-oriented and teacher-training programs. Between 1850 and the 1920s, many countries mandated compulsory elementary education for both sexes and single-sex secondary schools for girls developed. Feminist movements also promoted girls' schooling, including in the colonies. Women, and particularly nuns, were very present in the "civilising mission" that encouraged the creation of schools in the Empire and in Europe. From the inter-war period on, the most dramatic changes in educational systems have been the spread of comprehensive secondary education and the disappearance of single-sex schooling. After 1945 this meant that the numbers of students attending secondary schools soared.



Science courses at the Kalvskindet school (Norway), circa 1900, Erik Olsen

Modern educational systems in Europe still bear traces of the class and gender hierarchies that long characterised schooling networks. Until the second half of the 20th century in most parts of Europe, secondary education remained the privilege of the male middle classes, while elementary education concerned the poor and most girls. The most dramatic change over the course of the past two centuries has probably been the disappearance of overt gender discrimination within schools, followed by the generalisation of comprehensive secondary schooling, which has sought to attenuate social hierarchies. The explanation for this two-fold evolution lies in a variety of political, social, economic and cultural factors. Both States and employers increasingly need citizens with the qualifications achieved through secondary and higher education; as a result laws from the post-World War II period on have

sought to eliminate remaining social and gender barriers. On another level, however, secular and feminist movements as well as individuals campaigned from the mid-19th century onward to ensure that girls had similar if not identical educational opportunities. Patterns of change varied across Europe, but by the end of the 20th century coeducation had become the norm.

Social and gender hierarchies in early 19th-century schools

The twin forces of the European Enlightenment and the Protestant and Catholic reformations encouraged the development of schools throughout much of western and northern Europe. In Catholic countries (notably France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal), religious orders such as the Jesuits and the Ursulines directed their attention to the children of wealthy families while less elite congregations—the Sisters of Charity (founded by Saint Vincent de Paul in 1633) or the Christian Brothers (founded by Jean-Baptiste de La Salle in 1679), for example—set up schools for the poor where religious instruction accompanied lessons in the rudiments. In England, Scotland and Wales, charity schools for both boys and girls spread from the 18th onward thanks to the efforts of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (founded in 1698); Protestant denominations like the Quakers and Unitarians also opened both fee-paying and free schools. These institutions, whose focus was primarily on character formation, were not restricted to boys; girls from modest social backgrounds entered primarily single-sex schoolrooms to learn religious and sewing lessons, alongside reading, writing and arithmetic, in order to become hard-working and docile housewives.

Decrees establishing compulsory schooling for both sexes appeared earliest in Prussia and Austria by the mid-1770s; in England such a measure was only mandated more than a century later (in 1880). In reality, however, families often ignored this obligation, and throughout most of Europe women's literacy rates were lower than those of men—and lower in the countryside than in cities—until the end of the 19th century. This was particularly true on the southern and eastern borders of Europe where censuses revealed only 10% of women were literate in 1878 in Portugal and 13.1% in Russia in 1897. Nonetheless, by the turn of century, most French, German and English families expected all of their children to learn to read and sent them to schools for a few years.

The spread of elementary schooling probably depended less on formal laws than on the presence of associations or individuals with the necessary qualifications to teach. Training and certification programs for teachers began in many countries in the early 19th century, with provisions for women lagging behind those for men. In countries such as France, Belgium, Spain and Portugal, the idea that women should teach girls meant that a scarcity of female teachers limited the numbers of girls who attended schools. Still, in many rural one-room schoolhouses coeducation existed for the young in both Protestant and Catholic areas. The growing need for basic literacy skills not only brought more and more children into schoolrooms but also more and more women into the profession. Indeed elementary teaching increasingly acquired a reputation for being a woman's job; the tasks of the good mother included the ability to provide basic instruction. Nevertheless, the feminisation of primary teachers varied widely across Europe: in Germany only 20.9% of full-time elementary teachers were women in 1911, compared to 70-75% at the turn of the century in Russia and roughly half of the public teachers in France and Belgium.

Historians have long emphasised the ways both religious and secular schools systems taught subjects and ways of being that ensured a docile workforce, while gender scholars have noted how the messages of girls' schooling, with its insistence on needlework, taught girls that their place was in the home (fewer studies examine the making of masculinity within the schoolroom). Yet literacy opened horizons, taken advantage of by a minority of poor men and women who challenged the social and gender dynamics of their time. Indeed, from the Revolutionary period, a minority of learned men and women argued, as had the French philosopher Condorcet or the German Theodore von Hippel, that access to education should be the same for men and women; merit rather than sex or family origins should determine the pursuit of knowledge.

At the beginning of the 19th century middle- and upper-class European families had a rather different relationship to the education of their children than their lower-class counterparts because access to culture and its trappings was part of what gave them status in society. During the Enlightenment, the ability to converse in polite or learned society was a marker for both men and women, although women had far less access to formal schooling than men.

Nonetheless many women, like the scientist Émilie du Châtelet (1706-1749), received advanced instruction in both the arts and the sciences thanks to tutors or family members who valued knowledge for knowledge's sake. In many ways the post-Revolutionary period in Europe ushered in a more conservative vision of women's place firmly anchored in a private domestic sphere. Raised to be good wives and mothers, girls were excluded from the secondary institutions that welcomed boys: the *lycées* and *collèges* in France, the *Gymnasium* in Germany, or the elite public schools in Britain. Within the latter boys studied the classical humanities, but also learned the skills and values associated with the muscular Christian gentleman, a product of Thomas Arnold's reform of Rugby school (1828-1842). While elite boys came of age within boarding schools or among their peers, girls tended to receive lessons at home, from governesses or family members. Historians have discovered, however, that both secular and religious girls' schools proliferated throughout Europe catering to an emerging middle class. This was the case in Northern Europe—in Copenhagen the Dottreskolen academy founded in 1791 was directed toward training girls who would assist their merchant husbands—in Great Britain, France, Germany and even Greece after independence in 1830. In southern Europe, however, schooling opportunities for elite girls remained few and far between in the early decades of the century; at best convent schools provided a modicum of lessons in religious and secular subjects, as well as what were termed the feminine "accomplishments" (dancing, music, painting and drawing, and embroidery).

A few state-sponsored institutions offered more ambitious educational programs generally for a specific segment of the female population. Catherine the Great founded the Smolny Institute for Noble Girls in the 1760s; Joseph II of Austria created the Officers Daughters Boarding School (1775) and the Civil Servants' Daughters school in Vienna (1786), and King Frederick William II of Prussia established the Louise Foundation (1811). These schools, like those founded in 1805 by Napoleon Bonaparte for the daughters of his officers who had received the Legion of Honour, explicitly sought to involve women in a broader effort to reform society and, as such, suggest that some political leaders perceived the need for educated women alongside educated men. In Austria, France and Prussia these schools also trained women to become teachers or governesses, which represented a respectable profession for unmarried middle-class women in many parts of Europe.

Efforts to address the plight of the penniless or "surplus" middle-class woman began in Great Britain and spread to many western European countries after 1848. Queen's College (1848) and Bedford College (1848) were founded to raise the educational qualifications of governesses; while the Ladies of Langham Place in London campaigned for lower-middle-class girls to receive vocational training. Higher vocational training developed in many European countries in the 1850s and 1860s as industrialisation and the development of state bureaucracies created a need for workers and employees. Although little studied, opportunities for girls and women were part of this movement. In France Saint-Simonian men and women opened schools with a vocational track in such cities as Paris, Nantes and Saint-Etienne, while in London the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women similarly encouraged women to acquire vocational skills from 1859. The concern to train middle-class women for the market-place is evident in the German *Lette Verein* (1866) in the Netherlands and in Belgium. In Spain the *Asociación para la Enseñanza de la Mujer* was particularly active in the creation of vocationally-oriented institutions through the provinces in the 1880s.

The gendered politics of education (from the1850s to the 1920s)

While economic needs explain to some extent the increasing success of elementary and higher primary education, political factors were often dominant in the decision to mandate schooling opportunities for all, as well as in the decision to open secondary schooling to girls. Within boys' secondary education the emergence throughout Europe of a modern track that privileged the sciences and modern languages over the classical curriculum not only benefitted the sons of middle- and lower-middle-class families, but also their daughters. Since most girls' institutions did not offer training in the classical humanities, this structural change within secondary schooling often inadvertently opened the door for women to pursue the same studies as men and even to pass the diplomas that allowed access to higher education. More generally, the increasing mobility of educational administrators, the showcasing of educational innovations at universal exhibitions and the structuring of an international feminist movement provided information about the existence of initiatives elsewhere that could be used to promote reform at home.

In 1880 when the French state finally established public secondary education for girls in *collèges* and *lycées*, the promoter of the law, Camille Sée, offered a panoramic sweep of the western world; he noted the presence of

serious secondary schools for girls in Russia, where the first girls' *gymnasia* appeared in 1858; in Belgium, where Isabelle Gatti de Gamond founded a model secondary school in 1864; in Austria, where *Mädchenlyzeen* were created after 1870; even in Greece a private institution known as the *Arsakion* offered secondary education as well as teacher training. James Albisetti has argued that the German model of secular secondary girls' schools that were already widespread in the 1860s provided the impetus for many of these national developments; immediately after the French law, Italian reformers introduced the first state-run *istituti femminile* [feminine institutes]. In Catholic countries, such as France and parts of Belgium, anticlerical reformers and feminists often campaigned together for girls to have access to secular training schools and secondary institutions; for the former convent education introduced ideological divisions within families, while the latter saw secular education as the necessary first step toward full citizenship. In Italy, Spain and Portugal girls' secondary education was not high on the political agenda given relatively little public demand in the second half of the 19th century; as a result, by the 1880s a handful of girls had enrolled in boys' schools despite persistent hostility to coeducation in these Catholic countries. One of the advantages of "under privilege" was that these girls followed the same program as boys, which was not the case in most European secondary girls' schools. In France, the female secondary curriculum in public schools was only aligned on that of boys' in 1924; in Russia this was achieved in 1916, while in Bulgaria the feminist of Ukrainian origin Lidiya Shishmanova had led as early as 1897 a successful campaign to equalise girls' high schools with boys with seven grades for all.

Both politically progressive and conservative voices promoted girls' education during this period for quite different reasons but with similar results in that they championed the spread of literacy and access to knowledge that would allow women to fill their role either within the home or in the workplace. Women's and gender historians have revealed the extent to which professional organisations and individual feminists lobbied to open doors or to create new structures for women. In Austria, Marianne Hainisch was the first person to call for a *Realgymnasium* for girls in 1870. Other notable figures in the struggle to provide middle-class girls with a more rigorous education include the Irishwomen Margaret Byers, Anne Jellicoe and Isabelle Tod who founded institutes to provide secondary education for girls in Dublin and Belfast in the 1860s. In the Netherlands Elise van Calcar and Minette Storm-van der Chijs campaigned for women's education in the 1860s as statesmen debated an important law on Education; the first girls' *Hogere Burgerscholen* [Citizen's High Schools] then opened their doors in 1867.

More recently, the "imperial turn" in European history has also drawn attention to the way religious organisations and especially teaching congregations contributed to the growth of schooling in the colonies. The "civilising mission" was a powerful force in Britain, France and the Netherlands that encouraged women teachers to travel to distant lands in order to set up schools both for indigenous and European girls. In France missionary orders, such as the sisters of Saint-Joseph de Cluny, had schools throughout the world in Africa, the French Antilles, French Polynesia, Latin America and Asia by 1900. But the civilising mission had a European dimension as well. The Sacred Heart, for example, set up elite Catholic boarding schools all around Europe where girls learned the French language and French manners, which prepared them to enter a cosmopolitan high society. Although scholarship tends to focus on national developments in education (with infant education being an exception), transnational approaches increasingly reveal the extent to which ideas about education were shared within Europe thanks to common pedagogical programs and practices, travelling pedagogues and foreign schools. Naturally patterns of development varied, given the increasing importance of emerging educational systems within Nation-States.

The rise of mass secondary education in democratic and authoritarian Europe (1920s to the present)

School systems in twentieth-century Europe experienced a number of significant structural changes with the advent of the comprehensive secondary school after World War II and the generalisation of coeducation. With the latter, in particular, the distinction between boys' and girls' schooling experiences became far less obvious as separate schools with different programs and teachers ceased to exist. The pace of these changes was, however, relatively distinct depending on national political regimes. The Soviet Union led the way with the creation of a nine-year common school from ages eight to seventeen, which was free and coeducational. Although education only became compulsory for children from ages eight to eleven in 1930, enrolments soared in a country where illiteracy rates had been high, particularly for women (87% in 1897). Like in many countries, the justification for mass education that included girls was not primarily to improve women's status.

In the interwar period many countries adopted measures that democratised access to secondary education and

compulsory school-leaving ages were raised (to fifteen in England, to fourteen in Italy and France, for example). These measures had a greater impact on girls than on boys throughout Europe since their access to post-elementary schooling had been lower. In France girls outnumbered boys in higher primary education by 1939, which offered the necessary training for admittance into normal schools; unlike in most of Europe at the time, the French had no bar on married women teachers. A contrary movement occurred in fascist Italy with the 1923 Gentile reform. Introducing a form of selection after five years of schooling, it sought to limit the overproduction of professionals. This had a specific impact on girls as it sought to reduce the flow of girls toward technical, post primary or vocational schools while opening separate secondary schools for girls with no vocational aspirations; schooling prepared boys and girls for highly gendered roles in this authoritarian regime. This is the period, as well, where women became a significant minority in French and British universities, although neither fascist Italy nor Nazi Germany encouraged such aspirations and female enrolments remained low.

Since 1945 the educational landscape has dramatically changed as students attend compulsory schools until ages fifteen or sixteen in most countries and single-sex secondary schools have virtually disappeared. In 2007, in Europe, over 78% of all young people between the ages of twenty and twenty-four had successfully completed secondary education (although this figure falls to less than 60% for Portugal, Malta and Iceland). As secondary schooling became available to all, girls throughout Europe came to outnumber boys and by the 21st century were outnumbering them within universities as well (the latter welcome approximately one-third of all young people between the ages of twenty and twenty-two). In the Federal Republic of Germany, where gender disparities in education were particularly striking, girls moved from being 32.2% of the formerly elitist *Gymnasium* graduates in 1950 to 50% by the end of the 1970s.

The massive presence of girls in secondary and higher education has not eradicated, however, deeply-held convictions that biological distinction between the sexes should condition social roles and hence educational aspirations. As a result, sociological studies of European educational systems all reveal the persistence of gender inequalities despite evidence in many countries that female pupils outperform their male companions at all levels of elementary and secondary education. These inequalities are most evident in the curriculum orientations of girls and women, their overwhelming tendency to pursue studies in literature and the arts, leaving the sciences and technological subject to boys and men. These “choices” have lasting consequences within European workforces as men monopolise positions of economic and political power often thanks to their educational trajectory. Ironically, education is precisely one of those realms where women are massively present: in 1985-86 90 % of pre-school teachers in France, Greece, Sweden, Spain and England and Wales were female, and the proportion of women primary teachers ranged from 61% in Spain to 79% in Great Britain in 1988-89. Using this power over young minds to promote truly egalitarian educational systems and societies represents, then, the challenge for the twenty-first century.

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