

Women and the professions: a very long road

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ABSTRACT

It took two centuries for women to gain access to all of the professions occupied by men. European feminists had to fight for access not only to higher education but to many professions as well. The first positions open to women at the end of the 19th century were either to be a teacher in single-sex secondary schools or the self-employed, liberal professions such as medicine or law. In the course of the 20th century other doors gradually began to open and finally women also gained access to the last male bastions such as the military and the police, thus at last becoming full-fledged citizens. This long struggle shows that co-education does not lead to gender equality, and, *a fortiori*, parity.



Fig 1. 1914. Maria Vérone (marked by a cross), the first female French lawyer to plead before the court of assize, served from 1919 to 1938 as the president of the Ligue française du droits des femmes (LFDf, French League for Women's Rights), which included many professional women (lawyers, doctors, teachers, women of letters). Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

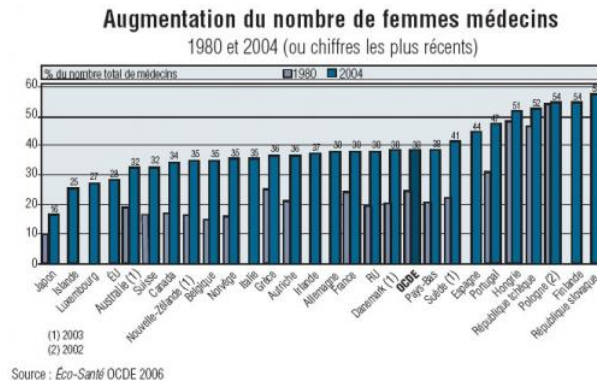


Fig. 2. Increase in the number of female doctors in OECD countries between 1980 and 2004. Source : observateurocde.org

Women have always worked, but by no means in all professions. For a long time women were excluded from positions of political, economic, and scientific power as well as from the medical professions, the bar, engineering, the sciences, the magistracy, the armed forces and the civil service. Noteworthy is how homogeneous over the long term the attitudes towards women were across all the different national cultures. This was finally resolved with the European directives on gender equality and parity at the beginning of the 21st century.

Not counting the first period of inaccessibility (up to the last third of the 19th century), we can discern three stages: a tolerated access to professions requiring a higher education (1880-1920), a formal gender diversity (1920-1970), and finally equality (from 1980 up to now), even though parity for the sharing of responsibilities has still not been completely achieved.

The times of tolerance: 1880s-1920s

During this period women were excluded from the professionalization of society, and occupations involving decision-making and authority were considered exclusively male. Thus, during the second half of the 19th century, women's demands focused firstly on access to high school diplomas, required for admission to the universities and to the growing number of specialized schools that were essential in order to meet the demands of the second industrial revolution. But it wasn't until the period between 1910-1920 that girls were able to acquire the diplomas that would give them access to higher education (the *baccalauréat*, the *Abitur*, higher school certificates, and other *maturita*), without having to request an official authorization. From the 1860s pioneering women, with the support of parliamentarians and academics, forced to open the doors of universities: in 1859, Natalia Korsini, one of the "short-haired monsters", attended Saint Petersburg University, and in 1871 Julie Daubié (1824-1874), a feminist activist and primary school teacher, was the first woman to receive a Bachelor's degree in literature from the Sorbonne. In the meantime, in 1864 and 1867 resp. the Medical Schools of Zurich and Paris opened their doors. Expelled from Middelsex Hospital in 1861, Elizabeth Garret Anderson (1836-1917), the first Englishwoman Doctor of Medicine, studied in Paris. Marie Sklodowska-Curie (1867-1934) would later obtain a Bachelor's degree in science and one in mathematics (1893-1894) from the Sorbonne. A number of other European female students enrolled in France and Switzerland. These were often Russians who were excluded from universities between 1863 and 1873, and also because of the laws of May 1882, which established quotas for Jews.

There were similar demands to gain access to law schools, where even if women had obtained a law degree, they were often not allowed to plead in court: Sweden allowed women to become lawyers in 1897 and France did the same three years later, whereas Portugal, Belgium, Germany, and Great Britain waited until the aftermath of the

First World War. However, and this is the case everywhere, the magistracy is open to women only when they have the right to vote.

However, the varying cultural and religious traditions of nations (catholic, protestant or orthodox) did not have an impact on how women gained access to higher education and neither was there any difference between “Common law” and “Civil law” countries. Nonetheless, the paths of these pioneers and feminist women do not reflect how slow the breakthrough for women was: until the aftermath of the First World War there were only a few hundred in each country; medical doctors often took refuge in working with women and children, and lawyers did the same by focusing on their legal defense.

Formal gender diversity: 1920s-1970s

From the 1920s to the 1970s, one by one top executive positions in industry, commerce, and administration, opened up to women. Yet social inertia was reinforced by the differences of gendered social norms of each country: neither management nor technical work was considered suitable for women. For example, women were only admitted to engineering schools in France in 1917, in Portugal in 1918, in Belgium, England and Germany in 1919, and in Sweden and Greece in 1920. However, young women rarely attended them: the Polytechnic School of Athens counted fifteen female graduates between 1923 and 1949, an insignificantly small number; but then the percentages rose gradually, from 2.8% in the mid-1960s to 8% in the late 1970s. In other countries, women were also in a very small minority, even when there were schools for women, such as l'École polytechnique féminine, which opened in France in 1925 (in the 1960s over one hundred degrees were awarded to women each year).

A notable exception was the USSR, where gender equality was affirmed, where co-education was the rule at all levels of the education system, and where no profession was closed to women: in 1970, the majority of engineers were women (58%), already 40% were in the magistracy and 76% in the medical professions, proportions that were only attained by other European countries at the beginning of the 21st century.

Governments have not set an example. Positions of responsibility in Western civil services did gradually open up from France to Finland between 1920 and 1927, but only to the limits that were long in line with a gender segmentation of professions. Teaching is a good example: while there was a large presence of women in the education of children, higher education remained a male preserve: in France there was just one woman university professor before the Second World War (the lawyer Suzanne Basdevant-Bastid (1906-1995), whereas Belgium had five (the “first” was also a lawyer, Madeleine Dwelshauvers-Gevers (1897-1994), and Germany had none. In 1953, a survey among German academics showed that a quarter of them were irremediably hostile to higher education for women, and 80% were opposed to the idea of a woman being a professor: “ Women don't need to study in order to climb the social ladder: all they have to do is marry an *Akademiker* (academic) ”. The feminization within academia was slow, for in 2006 only 11% of the professors in Europe were women with national variation : 5% in the Netherlands and Germany, 13% in France and Sweden, 17% in Portugal. And women were more strongly represented in languages and literature rather than in physics or mathematics, scientific fields that are supposedly unsuitable to women's “nature” and “capacity.”

From equality to parity: 1980s-2020s

The disruption of social norms and the demands for equal rights of the 60s revolution brought about women's control over maternity (contraception and abortion), both essential in order to have a career, as well as co-education in secondary education (1974 in France and Germany, 1979 in Sweden and Greece) and in higher education. Coeducation expanded due to an increasingly dense regional network of universities and professional schools, which in turn led to an increase in the number of female graduates.

During these decades, women advanced in all the professions requiring higher education, but to varying degrees:

between 1980 and 2004, the percentage of female doctors rose from 25% to 38% on average for OECD countries (fig. 2). These numbers, however, obscure the prerogative of men : for example in orthopedics, which requires the supposedly specific male attribute of physical strength, only 5% of women specialized in this field in France at the beginning of the 21st century. These preserves reveal an invisible glass ceiling that restricts the advancement of women to decision-making positions and/or those with a high salary. They also explain to a large degree the gender pay gap. Despite the European Community directives (the European Charter for Equality of Men and Women in Local Life in 2006) and the backing of the EU Court of Justice for their application, these differences are only gradually disappearing.

At the end of 2019, two symbolic indicators are regularly published in order to assess the slow advancement of gender equality in EU states: firstly the number of companies headed by women, which was on average about one third, but with large disparities remaining (42% in Poland, 30% in Germany, 18% in Luxembourg). Secondly, the number of women in parliaments, which in 2019 was 30% on average, but only 12.6% in Hungary and 28.8% in Poland, as opposed to 46.7% in Sweden. There are only two female head of states (Angela Merkel, 65, in Germany and Viorica Dancila, 55, in Rumania), which underlines an old truism: one woman more means one man less.

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