

Female student mobility in modern Europe

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ABSTRACT

The revival of student mobility in late nineteenth-century Europe was an important factor in the feminization of universities. Despite being in the minority, the Russian and Romanian women who came to Western Europe paved the way, inspiring generations of female students who took advantage of the first travel grants for Western countries in the early twentieth century. Despite specific difficulties, especially with gaining access to student housing, female mobility—which was different than that of men in terms of geographical distribution and disciplines studied—continued to increase during the twentieth century, and is in the clear majority today.



Library of the Foyer International des Étudiantes (Student hostel for women), Paris. Postcard, n.d.

The late nineteenth-century was marked by a considerable revival of student mobility, a practice that was frequent during the early modern period, but one that was adversely affected by the nationalization of universities and the decline of Latin as a universal language of instruction. It was during the era of consolidating nation states that European countries grasped the impact that the attractiveness of their universities—and their capacity to send their future elite to study abroad—had on their standing. Women played a particular role in this process, due to the late and slow feminization of higher education, as well as the gendered nature of means of travel in Europe at the turn of the century, when unaccompanied female travel became normalized.

Female pioneers of student mobility

The history of international access to universities and the feminization of higher education are inextricably linked. Switzerland played a pioneering role in both areas, being the first to welcome female students from Russia: the first woman accepted to a European medical school was the Russian Nadezhda Suslova (1843-1918), who earned a doctorate in 1867, while another Russian, Nadezhda Smeckaya, was the first woman to enroll at the Federal Polytechnic School in Zurich, in 1871.

A number of factors explain the importance of this Russian presence in Switzerland. The first is connected to the difficulties that young Russian women, who were nevertheless well educated by a proficient secondary education system, encountered in pursuing studies in their country of origin. Russian universities, which had briefly opened in the late 1850s, denied women access to their classrooms. At the same time, Switzerland—first Zurich and later Berne, Geneva, and Lausanne—emerged as the only destination able to welcome them. As restrictive measures were lifted somewhat later, many female students from Russia attended Western European universities. In France, the first woman licensed to practice law was the Romanian Sarmiza Bilcescu (1867-1935) in 1887, who three years later completed the world's first law dissertation by a woman. Russian and Romanian women represented over one third of the female students at l'université de Paris from 1905 to 1913, at a time when women made up a little less than 10% of the student population. The same phenomenon occurred a few years later in Germanic and Scandinavian universities as rules changed, with Denmark allowing women to enroll in 1873 and Sweden in 1875. The geographic origin of these mobile female students also tended to diversify in the early twentieth century with the arrival of American women in massive numbers, as well as the emergence of internal mobility within Western Europe.

Access to higher education and intensifying migration seemingly fueled one another. The large presence of foreign women in the student population accelerated the feminization of universities, as domestic female students—who were at first not particularly encouraged to pursue higher education, and were hardly prepared by high schools for girls—followed on their heels.

The gender of destinations

The mobility of female students was not simply limited to movements away from universities that were closed to women and toward those that were tentatively opening up to them. The feminization of higher education was, more generally, a concomitant effect of its broadening international access. In the late nineteenth century, most European countries established grant programs for mobility, either at the instigation of the state, as in Italy beginning with unification, or through patrons such as in France, where the Rothschild, Albert Kahn (1860-1940), and David-Weill (1871-1952) foundations played a fundamental role in making student mobility possible. Many young women took advantage of the opportunities that were unequally offered to them, as Albert Kahn gave them access to its scholarship after a few years but not the world tour provided for male students, whereas David Weill extended funding on an equal basis as for men. It was not until the interwar period that grants specifically reserved for women were created, such as those of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), which was founded in 1919 to promote women's access to studies.

However, even when conditions of access were equivalent for men and women, the geography of student mobility remained thoroughly gendered, as men left France massively for Germany and Austria, while Italy attracted more women, with only England showing a kind of gender balance. This difference can of course be explained by variables relating to disciplines: more women studied art history and thus headed for Italy, while there were more male physicists, who were attracted by the advances in their field made in Germany. This did not prevent female scientists from going to Italy, Switzerland, and England instead, and applying in smaller numbers in Germany, where they were in any event accepted less often. Study destinations were therefore gendered, due to both the

inclinations of female applicants and the admission process itself.

Housing female students

The emergence of a growing community of foreign students around major European universities raised the issue of their housing with renewed intensity. Major projects, such as la Cité internationale étudiante in Paris launched in 1925, sought to meet this challenge, although the slow construction of new housing did not keep up with the increasing pace of demand, with lodgings for women rarely being seen as a priority.

England emerged as a pioneer by providing English and foreign female students with women's Colleges in major universities such as Cambridge, which saw the founding of Girton College in 1869 by Emily Davis (1830-1921) and later Newnham College between 1871 and 1875 by Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900). Switzerland, which also welcomed many foreign female students, took longer to take stock of the problem, with the first university residence for women coming only in the interwar period, and female students having to lodge in hotels or boarding houses that were often more costly and less adapted to student life. In France, female students had to once again rely on transnational private patronage to find housing while they awaited the opening of la Cité internationale étudiante. The American patron Grace Whitney-Hoff (1862-1938) was behind the foundation in 1906 of a *Student hostel*, which would become the Foyer international des étudiantes designed to expand housing for foreign women in Paris.

Female mobility and mass access to higher education

The proportion of women among students continued to increase during the first half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, which saw most European countries move past parity, with a subsequent rise in female mobility, especially with the huge increase of such mobility thanks to the Erasmus program for university cooperation created in 1987. Better yet, the proportion of women among all mobile students is much higher than that of the feminization of higher education, as 61% of mobile students in the European Union in 2000 were women. A number of aspects nevertheless attest to the permanence of gender differences in mobile student populations, as women continue to orient themselves in much larger numbers toward Mediterranean Europe and disciplines in which they remain the majority, such as management science, the Humanities, and social sciences, whereas they remain underrepresented in the hard sciences and engineering.

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