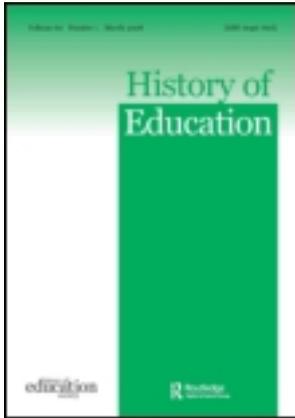


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### Women, education, and agency, 1600-2000

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**Women, education, and agency, 1600–2000**, edited by Jean Spence, Sarah Jane Aiston and Maureen M. Meikle, New York, Routledge (Research in Gender and History Series), 2009, v + 280 pp. £28.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-88836-3; £80.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-99005-9

It is difficult to review an edited volume of essays like *Women, Education, and Agency, 1600–2000*, as some of the pieces influence the reader more than others, due to their unique topics, beautiful language and the reader's own preferences and knowledge. This difficulty is exacerbated by the volume's international character and diversity of subjects, but in the end these are also its strengths. The book tends to move closer to Eurocentrist definitions of education and women's liberation, but somehow balances this tendency with Indian, Turkish and Russian cases. Some of the persistent themes are self-tuition, women's exclusion from the public sphere, women's spheres and informal education, class and science. The essays are about how women's agency transformed existing structures of gender inequality from 1600 onwards and how those structures were built and rebuilt.

As 400 years is rather a long time over which to pursue agency, the structural aspects could have been the focus of the book, for example, how modernisation processes created an aura of change – a lot of it through education – but how the precariousness of women in academe remained persistent. Muravyeva's essay, for instance, on Russian women in European universities in the latter half of the nineteenth century is an excellent example of structural change. Other essays, such as Bagchi's on the internationalist and organisationalist approaches of Ramabai and Rokeya, Erdemir's on Şukufe Nihal, and Pedersen's on Wollstonecraft, also give a sense of how women's agency is placed within larger contexts of social and economic transformation.

The book takes off with a superb foreword by Carol Dyhouse that brings the essays together under a broad definition of agency. This is followed by Sarah Jane Aiston's descriptive introduction. The similarity between these pieces lies mainly in the patterns of exclusion women face and how they resist it by transforming both the public and private spheres. However, in addition to problematising the public and private spheres, Aiston's introduction also dwells on a third sphere that women create. This is exemplified in the last essay where Sylvia Ellis and Helen Mitchell describe how women created a new sphere in university and college women's centres in the US, and how this transformed their systematic exclusion. In the other essays, the interconnectedness of the public and private is more visible than a 'third sphere'. Many of the women who manage to bring together self-tuition with private, informal and at times public and formal practices of education, and who manage to educate other women and girls, also manage to transform both the positive and negative aspects of family life into an active position within public spheres.

Barbara Bulckaert introduces Anna Maria van Schurman's (1607–1678) 'self-tuition' as a way to exist within public webs of knowledge. Self-tuition, along with homosocial spheres of informal education, is presented as a new area of inquiry for the broad topic of women and education. She underlines how self-tuition has been thought of in relation to men, and how self-taught men dominate the subject of self-tuition even more so than men dominate the field of public education. Joyce Senders Pedersen describes how Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) also gave importance to self-tuition. Wollstonecraft's education of a lady's daughter and the daughter's

alienation from her mother is quite an interesting account of the transformative dimensions of homosocial education practices within the private sphere.

Ruth Watts's essay focuses on how scientific women of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England were excluded despite their valuable contributions to science. In this essay, as in Schurman's and Wollstonecraft's stories, religion stands out as an important motivation for women to write. Barnita Bagchi also emphasises the role of religion in India and the importance of inter-religious women's networks in the all-women stories of Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932). The contribution of the Indian case to the book is important as transnational connections are most evident in this essay. Marianna Muravyeva also focuses on international networks of education that women tailored for themselves in the face of limitations in the second half of the nineteenth century. Her essay provides many statistics, and uniquely evaluates the role of religion and ethnicity both in Russia and, for example, in Switzerland, which stood out as having one of the newly founded university traditions.

Stephanie Spencer, through Charlotte Mason's (1842–1923) philosophy of education, teaches us how the prescribed notions of conservative and progressive and of home education and public education have been contested in relation to the role of women in education, and how the application of pre-existing conceptual frameworks mostly results in misunderstanding even if we are coming from a feminist viewpoint. Aynur Soydan Erdemir describes how feminists were able to remember Ottoman activist women, marginalised by the Turkish Republic only towards the end of the 1980s. After an overview of the structural changes that brought about the constitutional and republican rules in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic respectively, she analyses the role of Sükufe Nihal, who was first at the centre and later on the margins of these processes. Claire Jones tells the story of women resisting marginalisation through empowerment by winning the tripos – mathematics competitions, based on masculine physical and rational strength, at the turn of the century in Cambridge. She describes how this happened in terms of both structure and agency. She tells us about how women prepared for this competition, how they were discouraged and how their agency transformed the gender of mathematics and how mathematics lost its importance as a result of both this accomplishment and a general tendency to overlook creativity while focusing on competition.

Katherine Storr demonstrates how the peace movement was closely connected with women teachers and feminist aspirations. Her point about teaching women's history to achieve peace is worth thinking about further. Jane Martin's 'London's Feminist Teachers and the Urban Political Landscape' takes readers from this point, where she has been imagining how military history that has been taught in schools as history can be reversed, and introduces them to London's feminist teachers, how they were organised and how they worked for social change, including changing their own positions in the workforce despite attempts to exclude them. Like Erdemir, Jones, Watts, Ellis and Mitchell, who focus on women's exclusion from different perspectives with different emphases, Anne Logan studies exclusion with regard to the history of feminist criminology in Britain circa 1920–1960 and reminds us of women who influenced the main trends in science and who were systematically forgotten.

Linda Eisenmann compares Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963) and the US Government's *American Woman: The Report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women* (Washington, 1963) and finds similarities

between the two despite Freidan's passionate language. However, whereas Eisenmann initially argues that the report better reflected the position of US women at the time due to its milder approach, she concludes by acknowledging the great transformation that Friedan's more radical approach obtained. Finally, as I have already indicated, Sylvia Ellis and Helen Mitchell's essay on American women's centres leaves the reading of an international women's history in education with hope by describing how spheres can be formed within spheres: how women's centres, no matter how difficult they are to establish, can change how the public sphere operates in terms of women.

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**Conduct books for girls in Enlightenment France**, by Nadine Bérenguier, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, x + 283 pp., £60 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7546-6875-6

**Child of the Enlightenment: revolutionary Europe reflected in a boyhood diary**, by Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker, translated by Diane Webb, Leiden, Brill, 2009, xii + 554 pp., £80 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-17269-2

The eighteenth century witnessed an increasing plethora of books on education and child rearing as Enlightenment thinkers saw education as crucial for rational development. Literature on this is growing, these two books offering new and differing ways to investigate education in this period. Nadine Bérenguier stakes new ground in examining some of the principal conduct books for girls in France. Her work is grounded primarily in literary analysis, exploring not only the major themes of the conduct books but also their textual strategies and prefaces. Subsequently, she probes reviews of the books, albeit that few journals reviewed all, if any, of them, since books for or about girls had low status. Nevertheless the reviews shaped opinions of subsequent generations by first of all being used for the bio-bibliographical histories and dictionaries that became popular in the late eighteenth century and subsequently absorbed by editors of those works republished in the nineteenth century. Women dominated the writing of these conduct books despite their reiterated compunction about publishing but Bérenguier demonstrates in detail how an author's gender, social status and way of life affected the way her/his writings were judged as did the religious, political and ideological bent of journalists, reviewers, editors and their publications. Thus it was not surprising, for example, that someone of Marquise Anne-Thérèse de Lambert's social distinction should receive more respect than a governess such like Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont or those overshadowed by their relationships with men such as Louise d'Épinay from her association with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Madeleine de Puisieux through her relationship with Diderot. All the women examined strove to justify their need to appear in print and to establish their credentials to address girls through their experience either in the family or as governesses.