

The Educated Woman

Minds, Bodies, and Women's Higher Education
in Britain, Germany, and Spain, 1865–1914

Katharina Rowold

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To Ella and Ergin

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Introduction

Women's Higher Education and the Female Mind and Body

In 1874, the English psychiatrist Henry Maudsley famously suggested that 'there is sex in mind' and that thus there should be 'sex in education'.¹ His claim went to the core of a debate that was held all over Europe in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Was the mind sexed? If so, what were the mental characteristics and abilities of women? And if there was 'sex in mind', was that the reflection of some essential differences between the sexes? Or did environment and nurture have anything to do with it? What was the relationship between the female mind and the body? And what were the implications of knowing the answers to such questions for the opening up of higher education to women, a move demanded by feminist campaigners in this period?

The woman student became an intensely debated figure in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe. Discourses of sexual difference were integral to the social, political, economic, and cultural order, and the possibility of admitting women to spheres of education hitherto open only to the male sex questioned certainties about the differences between men and women. The feminist campaigns for women's higher education, the appearance of female students and the first women doctors, and, in the case of England, the foundation of women's colleges, were accompanied by intense debates about women's minds and bodies, their natural aptitudes and limitations, and how these related to women's place in society. There were many similarities in the unfolding debates in Europe, but there were also sharp differences in the ways in which different approaches to women's higher education intersected with understandings of the female mind and body in individual countries. Not only were conceptions of sexual differences subject to continuous negotiation, but they were also contingent on specific historical contexts. Furthermore, the cultural meanings, functions, and statuses of the universities varied in different countries.

The Educated Woman explores how debate on one issue, women's higher education, had different resonance in three countries: Britain, Germany, and Spain. The following chapters will centre on the ways in which a demand that was voiced internationally was formulated, contested, and

2 *The Educated Woman*

negotiated within specific national contexts of debate. As the title indicates, this study focuses on the ways in which debates over women's higher education were permeated and shaped by questions about the female mind and body in three European countries in the years between the 1860s and 1914, the period that saw the development of campaigns for women's higher education, the admission of women to university, and the eventual overshadowing of the controversies the issue generated by the outbreak of the Great War. In this introduction, I will begin by briefly addressing the importance of higher education to nineteenth-century feminism, by raising some issues about comparative women's and gender history, and then by introducing the importance of ideas about the female mind and body to the higher education debates. Finally, I will explain the organization of the book as a whole and outline the content of individual chapters.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education was embraced as a key aim by the organized middle-class women's movements that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, first in Western and Central Europe, and then in Southern, Northern, and Eastern Europe.² Often a dominant concern of the women's movements, in many countries the entry into higher education was one of the campaigns that met with the most success. There were variations in the importance attached to women's admission to university by diverse feminists in different countries. In Britain, education, including higher education, was always one of the many foci of the organized women's movement that emerged in the 1860s. In Germany, education for a long time was the defining preoccupation of the women's movement that also developed in the 1860s. By the end of the nineteenth century, the middle-class women's movement in Germany divided into different wings and a proletarian women's movement emerged. The issue of higher education continued to be given great importance by both wings of the middle-class movement and also attracted some attention from some members of the working-class movement, although feminist campaigning in Germany now focused on a much broader range of issues and embraced a variety of definitions of 'emancipation'. Spain, on the other hand, was quite different in this respect. An organized women's movement only appeared at the end of the 1910s, after women had already been admitted to the universities of this country. Women's entry into higher education in Spain thus came about in the absence of a women's movement. Nonetheless, from the late nineteenth century onwards, there were a number of individual activists who called for women's admission to higher education and the professions, and debate about the issue was fostered under the auspices of other political movements, including the liberal 'Krausist' reform movement and the labour

movement.³ A 'woman question' developed in Spain long before the emergence of an organized women's movement and the question of education was very important to it.

The absence of a women's movement in Spain begs the question of the use of the term 'feminist' and 'feminism' in this book. It is well known now that these terms were first used in the late nineteenth century by the French suffragist Hubertine Auclert and that by the end of the century these terms were in currency in Europe. The historian Karen Offen has defined a 'feminist' as a person at odds with male domination in culture and society, who advocates the elimination of institutionalized injustice against women as a group.⁴ Following this broad definition, there were feminists in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spain as elsewhere in Europe, although not everyone who was supportive of the idea of women's entry into higher education was necessarily a feminist.

There exists a long history of isolated incidences of women studying at European universities that goes back for centuries, but the admission of women students on the same terms as men was part of the major developments that took place with regards to middle-class girls' and women's education in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. In many countries, education for girls expanded at elementary and secondary level and eventually the doors of the universities were opened in this period. The chronology and developments that led to women's admission to the universities of the three countries looked at in this study differed considerably. Britain was amongst the first European countries where women entered higher education and could receive degrees: the first women's college, Hitchin, later Girton, was founded in 1869, and the University of London, which had been set up some forty years earlier, admitted women to its degrees in 1878. In the context of a decentralized university system with a mixture of private and public institutions, women's entry into university education occurred in a piecemeal process. They were gradually admitted one by one to a growing number of universities in England. The opening of degrees to women at the Scottish universities was recommended by a Royal Commission in 1892, and the charter of the University of Wales, granted in 1893, stipulated that women were eligible for degrees. The two most prestigious universities in Britain held out the longest. It was only in 1920 that Oxford awarded degrees to women. Cambridge admitted women to the 'titles of degrees' in 1922, but to full membership of the University only in 1948. Germany and Spain, on the other hand, were amongst the last European countries where women could receive degrees. In Germany, where universities were controlled and funded by individual states and admission until 1900 depended on the possession of the *Abitur*,⁵ women were admitted to the universities of the various states between 1900 and 1909, with Baden being the first and Prussia opening the doors of its universities in 1908. In Spain, where the university system was strongly centralized and dominated by the Central University

of Madrid, women were admitted by Royal Order to all the universities on the same terms as men in 1910. This included the Central University, which was the only one that could award doctorates in all faculties.

The case of Spain has received little comparative attention, but the question of why it took so long in Germany to achieve women's admission to higher education has preoccupied historians.⁶ Sometimes seen as an indicator of Germany's cultural and political backwardness understood through the *Sonderweg* thesis,⁷ Patricia Mazón, in her recent study, has focused on the peculiar institutional structure of German universities and usefully reminded us that a 'superficial comparison of "firsts" in each country can be misleading'. Women's admission to German universities did, no doubt, come comparatively late. However, the result was more uniform in that in 1909 women could attend and receive degrees in all disciplines from all the German universities.⁸ The same was true of Spain in 1910.

An extensive literature has established the actions and developments that led to women's admission to the universities in Britain, Germany, and Spain.⁹ *The Educated Woman* draws on this literature but will not explore this history in any great detail. Rather, it will explore the ways in which contemporaries thought about and debated the question of women's higher education in the three countries, focusing particularly on the ideas about women's nature that informed the evolving debates. Historians of women's entry into higher education have integrated discussions of ideas about femininity into their studies. Carol Dyhouse, for instance, in her early work has discussed the formulation of social Darwinist ideas in relation to women's higher education, and Joan Burstyn has reflected on physicians' responses to the proposal.¹⁰ James Albisetti introduced his book on nineteenth-century changes in girls' and women's education in Germany with a chapter on 'German ideals of womanhood'. More recently Patricia Mazón has integrated consideration of aspects of constructions of femininity into her lucid analysis of women's admission to German universities, which centres on exploring the contradictions between the woman student and the masculinity of university life in Germany, which, she argues, depended on a notion of 'academic citizenship', a concept she developed to refer to a gendered code of conduct and scholarship that went back to medieval times. Curiously, however, neither Albisetti nor Mazón make reference to the tremendous changes in the ways in which the relationship between higher education and women's nature was discussed at the turn of the twentieth century. While these nation-based discussions afford helpful points of reference, *The Educated Woman* seeks to do something different: to adopt a comparative perspective in exploring the underlying and changing ideas about the female mind and body that informed higher education debates. Naturalized ideas about the differences between men and women were commonplace during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this study pays particular attention to the multiple roles that medical and scientific theories of female nature played in anti-feminist approaches

to women's higher education, and explores how feminist discourse echoed, modified, and reconstituted these ideas in different contexts of debate.

THE COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

This study places the higher education debates in comparative perspective by focusing on three European countries: Britain, Germany, and Spain. Although the number of women's and gender historians who conduct comparative research remains relatively small, the volume of such studies has steadily grown, as have the reflections on the comparative method in women's and gender history.¹¹ There are now a number of comparative studies of the nineteenth-century European and western women's movements,¹² while other studies have concentrated on exploring the comparative dimensions of one particular aspect of women's campaigns.¹³ While some studies take a transnational approach, others put national movements in the context of debates about the nation.¹⁴

Overall, there have been a number of studies which discuss Britain or Germany, but Spain has received less comparative attention.¹⁵ My choice of these countries enables a study which juxtaposes a European country where women were able to receive university degrees comparatively early, with two where this was not the case until much later; Germany being commonly mentioned in this respect while Spain is not. Including Spain into this study has made it possible to explore the debate over the woman student in a country that had an agrarian economy with pockets of industrial development, a comparatively small middle class and associational culture, only a weak parliamentary system, and no organized women's movement, and where the influence of the Catholic Church was strong. Nonetheless, the admission of women students to university on the same terms as men was achieved in Spain only a little later than in industrialized, predominantly Protestant Prussia, which possessed a large and highly organized women's movement. *The Educated Woman* seeks to highlight the different reverberations of the higher education question in these diverse national contexts.

One influential conceptualization that has informed comparative approaches to different feminisms and women's movements is Karen Offen's distinction between what she has called 'relational feminism' and 'individualist feminism'. Rejecting a tradition that presented equal-rights feminism as a norm against which European movements could be measured, Offen maintained that relational feminism, which celebrated sexual differences and promoted women's rights on the basis of women's distinctive contribution to society, especially as mothers, was the prevalent form in nineteenth-century Europe; Anglo-American individualist feminism, which demanded individual rights and self-realization, constituted the exception.¹⁶

This understanding contributed to a revision of the interpretation of the German women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pioneering studies had aligned an increasing emphasis on gender difference in the movement with a retreat from the emancipatory tenets of liberal feminism and a catastrophic move to the right in national political and feminist terms.¹⁷ Historians since have noted, however, that relational feminism, or what is now more frequently called 'maternalist' feminism, was not unique to Germany but could also be found in countries with strong democratic traditions, and they stress the 'protean character' of maternalism, which meant that it could encompass the widest possible political spectrum of positions.¹⁸

Offen's distinction has been immensely useful and fruitful in drawing attention to different forms of feminism. The, albeit tentative, alignment of relational feminism with continental Europe and individual feminism with Anglo-American feminism, however, flattens the nuances and complexities of different feminisms in the western world. According to Offen, advocates of relational feminism insisted on the 'physiological and cultural distinctions between the sexes and adhered to the concepts of womanly or manly "nature" and to a sharply defined sexual division of labour both in the family and throughout society.' Individualist feminists, however, focused 'more exclusively on demands of women's "natural" rights, for freedom from social restraint and opportunities for personal development for women (and for men), and for self-determination, or autonomy as the essential condition for the growth and development of human potential.'¹⁹ Historians of feminism in Britain, however, acknowledge that Victorian domestic ideology, based on an understanding of essential differences between men and women, was one of the decisive influences on nineteenth-century feminism in Britain. Liberalism certainly greatly influenced mid-Victorian feminism in particular, but the idea of women's nurturing capacities and their moral superiority to men was also important in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century feminism, informing ideas about specific womanly duties. It was an emphasis that gave rise to the idea of women as 'equal but different'.²⁰ Furthermore, by the turn of the twentieth century, women's reproductive role and their duties to the 'race' were given increasing importance in feminist campaigning in Britain.

The Spanish case does not easily fit into this dichotomy either. Historians tend to locate Spanish feminism in the camp of relational or maternalist feminism.²¹ Many feminist writers demanded higher education and access to the professions for women based on understandings of women's difference and their gender-specific contribution to society. At the turn of the century, however, there existed also a number of feminist writers, including some of the best known of the time, who explicitly contested such a 'relational' understanding of women's nature.²²

'Individual' and 'relational' feminism had thus varying implications and impacts in different countries. However, the interaction of these forms of

feminist conceptualization was always complex, shifting, and difficult to reduce to patterns in specific countries. *The Educated Woman* seeks to contribute to the historical understanding of European feminism by paying particular attention to exploring the role of ideas about 'physiological and cultural distinctions between the sexes . . . concepts of womanly . . . "nature"', which Offen, as we have seen, associates with relational feminism.²³ Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century feminists operated, argued, and lived in a context in which naturalized understandings of sexual difference were pervasive. In none of the countries explored here (Britain, Germany, and Spain) did feminism remain unaffected by considerations of how women's nature and their difference from men related to their specific social roles.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION QUESTION AND WOMEN'S NATURE

Historians have analyzed the emergence in the late eighteenth century of a naturalized body, which constructed the genders and races as natural, biological entities, and they have explored the incessant elaboration of the gendered and raced body in the sciences—in anatomy, physical anthropology, phrenology, craniology, reproductive physiology, and evolutionary biology.²⁴ Londa Schiebinger has traced how the belief that the mind, as much as the body, was gendered underlaid the exclusion of women from scientific and academic institutions as they developed in Europe over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, just as constructions of natural differences between the sexes more generally justified women's marginalization in the public sphere and the realms of politics.²⁵ The feminist campaigns of the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries which contested the exclusion of the female sex from the universities supposed a process of reconceptualizing women's nature. Campaigning for, as much as opposing, women's entry into higher education led to extensive engagement with the nature of the female mind and its relationship to the body. In Britain, Germany, and Spain alike, the introduction of women to spheres of education previously open only to men generated intense debates about female nature and how it related to women's social roles.

The female mind thus became a focal point of debates over women's higher education. The mental powers necessary for university education were commonly considered to be less developed in women than in men. However, the causes, implications, and future character of mental differences between the sexes became the subject of much controversy. Ideas about female nature were never monolithic or univocal, and at any one time and in any one country there existed competing ideas of the female mind. Questions that were raised in relation to the consequences of the mental differences between the sexes for university education also varied