

Book Review

Women, Education, and Agency, 1600-2000

Jean Spence, Sarah Jane Aiston, & Maureen M. Meikle, editors
New York: Routledge, 2009

Reviewed by: Katie MacDonald
University of Alberta

Women, Education, and Agency, 1600-2000 is an ambitious collection that brings together 13 chapters examining women and education. The book explores women's experiences in education in both formal and informal settings and in various countries and time periods. The book spans 400 years and is ordered chronologically, ending with an in-depth analysis of the history, efficacy, and future of women's centers on university campuses in the United States. The editors write in the preface that the volume has a global perspective and that the book is a celebration of how women have engaged with educational institutions and processes. The chapters are diverse and include topics such as: Claire Jones' chapter of exploring women's involvement in mathematics in 1900 at the University of Cambridge; Barbara Bulckaert's chapter of women who, through free time and access to financial means, were able to tutor themselves when tutors were unavailable; and Barnita Bagchi's chapter of exploring social capital and gender in India through the cases of Ramabai and Rokeya, who were two female activists fighting for female education in India at the turn of the 20th century. Finally, the book draws on many different ways of recovering history and includes case studies of specific women's histories, the involvement of women in different fields, and women's engagement with advocacy. The collection engages with the perennial tension between examining the agency of women and the constraining impacts of the systems and structures around them.

The anthology works with the difficulty of reclaiming history, discussing women's activism in educational institutions and reforms therein, and particularly the naming of these projects as feminist projects. In the introduction, Aiston writes that the book operates with a broad definition of feminism, which "encompass[es] women who have improved the condition of fellow women through their activism" (p. 5). Indeed, the book spans chapters that discuss Mary Wollstonecraft's educational history—often thought to be the author of one of the first feminist texts—to a postfeminist look at feminism in 1963 America through the publishing of *The Feminine Mystique* and the 1963 Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, to the ways in which femininity and womanhood were deployed in Şükûfe Nihal's campaign to demonstrate the importance of women to the Turkish state. Each of these chapters navigates the unclear waters of naming women as feminists who would not have identified as such, as well as with naming particular historical moments as feminist. In particular, the final two chapters seem to be at odds. The first of these chapters suggests that readers look at 1963 feminism from a postfeminist perspective, and Ellis and Mitchell end the collection with a recounting of the

continuing inequities in the academy, indicating a continued need for feminist activism. The collection also works through the complicated nature of naming change as feminist due to the inclusion of women, particularly when these reforms continue gendered understandings of men and women, such as the case of women's inclusion in mathematics at the time when other sciences deemed more threatening to women's constitution were gaining popularity.

As the chapters in the anthology demonstrate, deployments of femininity, womanhood, and nationhood in women's struggle for access to education resonate across time and place. Those challenges also had far-reaching impacts outside of access to educational institutions. Marianna Muravyeva finds that women left Russia to attend European universities in the late 1800s. In her chapter, Muravyeva also explores how campaigns for education in Russia at this time were class specific and educational content was determined in relation to the pupil's imagined future, which resulted in a very classed and gendered curriculum. Women who studied abroad had a sense of nationalism in that they wanted to return to Russia and inspire change in Russian education. The influence of nationalism is also present in Katherine Storr's chapter examining women activists in the campaign for peace following World War I. The class status of women is a theme throughout the anthology in that it constrained the ways in which women were often able to gain access to education and determined the content of education.

One issue that is lacking throughout the anthology is an extended analysis of how racialization and colonization are vital to understanding women's agency, their ability to fight for the right to education, and even to conceptualizations of education. The editors suggest that the collection takes up the second wave feminist project of reclaiming history, however, the book lacks critiques of feminism as only about white women, which, in turn, results in the perennial omission of women of colour and limited understanding of women's experiences. This omission is especially felt in Eisenmann's chapter discussing *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that women of color offered critiques of, and for whom it was not as motivating or inspiring as it was for white and middle class women at the time. While Friedan is a central figure in feminist thinking, the critiques of her work, such as the argument that women of colour had been in the workplace for a long time, working *for* white women, are alluded to in her suggestion that Friedan was interviewing and aiming toward "suburban, college-educated wives and mothers who were the primary victims of what she termed 'the problem that has no name'" (p. 231). Unfortunately, this racialized perspective on postwar America in 1963 is not fleshed out. To recount feminism in America in 1963 without reference to race is to literally whitewash a diverse movement flattening the complexity of the time.

Similarly, chapters that examine women's changing roles are remiss not to consider changing ideas about who counts as human, who can vote, and the roles of *colonial* women in moral education, or how these ideas are at play in women's shifting relation to education. While this may not be the focus for the entire collection or individual chapters, this consideration would give a much more nuanced understanding of educational access. The final chapter by Ellis and Mitchell is the exception. In it, they discuss how women of colour's criticisms of white feminism changed the shape of feminism. They also recognize that women's experiences of exclusion from leadership in anti-racist and anti-colonial movements pushed them into the feminist movement.

While the book engages with many different types of education, from tutoring to higher education to women's centers, there is a lack of deliberation on what *constitutes* education. Ann Logan's chapter on feminist criminology is an exception. She argues that we must count four women as among its founders, Margareta Fry, Clara Dorthea Rackham, Madeline Robinson, and

Barbara Wooten, who were involved in criminology before it was a discipline. Logan's chapter questions what work can count in histories of disciplines. She goes on to suggest that women's work (supposedly outside of the field of criminology before it was institutionalized) should be accounted for. Therefore, Logan broadens the scope of what can count as education. The book *Learning to Divide the World* (1998) by John Willinsky would have been a useful touchstone to think about how colonial modes of thinking have structured the ways in which we conceptualize and understand what counts as education and learning.

The anthology embraces a breadth of methodology, which adds depth to the analysis and engages the reader throughout. In the introduction, the editors state the need for methodologies that rely on letters, diaries, and other historical documents because of the lack of official documentation of women's lives. Other chapters draw from women's published works and Watts in particular examines how women may have used hedges in their writing to fit into the ideas of the time. Watts suggests that Margaret Bryan's depiction of her family at the beginning of her book implies that Bryan "wanted to depict her work as naturally fitting a mother's responsibilities to her children, an enabling tactic for women in science" (p. 59). The exploration of tactics that women used to gain access to education and authority in their fields is a fascinating journey throughout the anthology. From partnering with men perceived as able to further their educational aspirations (as Wollstonecraft did) to learning on one's own, to appeals to their supposedly natural propensity to mothering, women in the anthology were clever and ambitious. These tactics read alongside of the systemic and structural ways in which women were prevented from education are inspiring stories that link to contemporary cases such as that of Malala Yousafzai.

Women, Education, and Agency, 1600-2000 is an insightful text that probes the experiences of mostly white and western women in education. The breadth of methodology, chronology, and sites for thinking about these histories gives a broad shape to understanding education and agency. Finally, the anthology contributes to conversations about naming histories and historical figures as feminist, whether they would identify as such or not. While more attention to racialization and colonization would have enriched the anthology and given the historical analysis more depth, it provides a good starting place for other historical or educational scholars to reclaim the history of women in education. This text would be a good introductory text to reclaiming women's history in education, read alongside other texts that more fully consider the impact of colonization and racialization.

References

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Katie MacDonald is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the University of Alberta. She has a Master's of Interdisciplinary Studies and a Masters of Education both from York University. Katie's research examines the pedagogical and affective aspects of encounters between volunteers and hosts in Nicaraguan volunteer tourism. She is also a Vanier Scholar and an Honorary Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Fellow.