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## Women and Education through the Ages

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## *Women and Education Through the Ages*

By: Tracie Kassai

Women have gone through many trials and tribulations attempting to achieve a proper education through the ages. Although today there are hundreds of opportunities for woman, in ancient times, and even just a hundred years ago, education for women was limited. During the Roman Era (750 BCE- 450 CE), there was no place for a woman in the educational system. Their goal was to have men become administrative personnel and hold higher positions within the empire. Military skills and civic responsibilities were a priority during Roman times, and men were encouraged to achieve such positions. The only people allocated to attend school were males from ages seven to twenty. Furthermore, The Medieval Period (500 CE- 1400 CE), was a time devoted to religious knowledge and commitment, while also understanding religious rituals. The goal during this time was to prepare people for appropriate roles in a hierarchical society. Although the focus of schools was the male children of upper-class families, there was some room for women, too. Because the schools also allowed persons going into religious life to attend, girls and young women entering religious communities were also permitted to attend schools. During Medieval times, the age group attending school was also seven through twenty and they learnt memorization, poetry, translation and many classical literatures. During the Early Modern Period (1500 CE- 1800 CE), as progressive thinkers came forward looking for more opportunity for women and their education, slowly a change started within the educational system. By the 19th century, although it was still a tough time for women, it was now possible for them to get a fuller

education. Against the former belief that women should only be in the home doing household chores, women started to attend schools and get higher education. Women studied art, music, poetry and many learnt how to become teachers so they could teach in their future. This rough equality with men in the education system required centuries, but eventually came to pass.

Rome grew from a small republic to a great empire; it was very busy consolidating its political position on the Italian peninsula and then conquering the entire Mediterranean area. Romans were wholly preoccupied with war and politics, and therefore, unable to fully concentrate on educational aspects. When Rome finally became an imperial power, it was able to focus on the administration, law, and diplomacy needed to maintain the empire. With this established, Romans were further able to concentrate on educating sensible politicians, capable administrators, and skilled generals (Triumphs, 2008). Rome was a very male-dominated society, so much so that a man was able to kill his wife or daughter if she was disobedient toward him (Simkin, 1997). "Defined by the men in their lives, women in ancient Rome were valued mainly as wives and mothers. Although some were allowed more freedom than others, there was always a limit, even for the daughter of an emperor" (PBS, 2006). Women were kept out of high positions; they could not be politicians or lawyers, and they could not even vote. Women were also not taught how to write, and therefore, they could not write about their personal stories. Although not able to vote or have a say in public life, women tried to start businesses and get help

from those in high positions when needed (Simkin, 1997). A woman's independence correlated largely with her wealth and social status, which would either get her a higher education or none at all. Some girls learnt the basics in education, if anything at all, but were still subject to the authority of man (PBS, 2006). Further down the line, slight "freedom" for women was granted by Emperor Augustus. Women with three children or more were now officially independent of man and were able to inherit and own land, and for the most part do as they wished with the land (PBS, 2006).

In Rome, only a minority of their people were formally educated. Schools were private and attended only by males who could pay tuition. The men would learn to memorize and recite all taught to them in their lower schools. When men hit the higher schools, they would study imitation and discussion as well as reading, writing, and religious literature. Upper class girls many times learnt how to read and write at home or were taught by their tutors, but, the education system had no place for them. Female slaves were very common during Roman times; they were lady maids or farm workers (PBS, 2006). The boys were treated on a higher level of importance; they attended primary schools and often a secondary school, as well, which was taught by Latin and Greek teachers. Women were expected mainly to keep to their traditional role in the household. They were responsible for making clothing and spinning yarn. "Women were expected to be the dignified wife and the good mother and, while these rules could be bent, they could [not] be broken" (PBS, 2006).

The Medieval period (c. 500-1400), also known as the Middle Ages, is the time between the fall of the Roman Empire and the start of the Renaissance. This period began with a decline in

intellectual interests but then scholarly educators revived the learned lifestyle. A step above Roman times, woman's education in medieval society varied according to their socioeconomic class; the medieval church provided educational opportunity through its religious communities (Triumphs, 2008). Education for the males flourished during medieval times, but generally, education was not encouraged for the females. Christianity and religion played a major role during medieval times, stressing woman's spiritual equality and her typical role as a wife. Therefore, women were still obliged to maintain traditional gender-prescribed roles. St. Thomas of Aquinas (1225-1274), a highly honored teacher during the medieval period, declared that women are subject to men, and man himself is the beginning of woman and the end of her. These feelings toward women were widely supported and followed. Medieval society, especially the powerful domains of church and state, had no place for well-educated women.

Girls who were part of the lower classes, that is, serfs and peasants, learnt household chores by watching their mothers, while girls of the noble families had a very different life. Noble women learnt the ways appropriate to their class by keeping to the code of chivalry and managed domestic life of the castle or manor. However, those from nobility and wealthier classes were either homeschooled or taught in private schools. Because religion played a role in education, monasteries had libraries and schools so nuns could learn to read, write, and become religious leaders who followed the rules of the community. During the 1300s, both boys and girls attended school, and noble women especially needed to be literate because sometimes their obligations required it. With the rise of medieval universities, tutors would be

frequently hired and girls would be able to join their brother's sessions. Although a step above women's education in Roman times, there were still limited resources for women to learn and universities were reserved for men. Men were still almost completely dominant in society.

In the 19th century, education for woman varied largely due to class but also partly due to the exact time during the century. The 19th century was a much more liberal time for woman than it had been in the early Roman and Medieval periods. In the early 19th century, it was very hard for a woman to pursue an education because the belief was still that she could not comprehend what a man. What is more, women were still expected to do household chores. But as time progressed, attitudes toward equal education began to change and progressive thinkers highlighted the importance of men and women having equal education (Oxford, 2007). Women were trying to find new ways to express their freedom and attempt to obtain some power, and through education, they found this voice (Richmand, 2008). As education became more prominent for woman and schools were being built, upper class women were able to have educational accomplishments focused on music, song, dance, drawing, and foreign languages. For working class girls, education became more available as the public school system expanded, which in America

occurred quite early. However, many girls only made it through school to the age of ten or twelve because they then had to work (Lousie, 2008). As far as jobs go, upper and middle class girls were able to teach due to the expansion of public schools. However, women teachers were paid a lot less than men teachers (Lousie, 2008). Working class girls worked in factories and were paid terribly, or they were waitresses. When the middle of the 19th century came around, girls' education took a new turn and taken more seriously than in previous times. More schools opened that were able to give girls an academic education equal to the boys. Women also started going to college; in America, girls began to enroll in colleges as early as 1870 (Lousie, 2008). More women were acquiring government jobs, and by 1900, about a third of government jobs were done by women (Lousie, 2008).

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of history is long but it bends toward just ice." This is also the case with women's education throughout history. During the Roman Empire, it would have been laughable for women to have aspired to an equal education with men. By the time of the middle ages, however, women had made slight progress. It would only be with the coming of the Industrial Age in the 19th century that women truly began to obtain their educational freedom.

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