

# DEBATES ON WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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*In terms of pedagogy education of women is a very interesting but not a widely searched topic. During my studies I often asked myself, maybe like other female students and teachers working in higher education, why women did not go to school earlier and how long they had been allowed to go to universities and visit lectures given by women lecturers? What was the way like to our present opportunities? - My aim is to provide a historic overview on the education of women through an outstanding but not well-known woman. I did my research in the archives of the Parliament studying speeches and contributions from the end of the 19th century. By presenting and interpreting these sources I would like to give a picture of discussions and prejudices in the society about women studying at universities or colleges.*

As it is mentioned in the summary, I would like to present the problems of women becoming students, featuring some parliament speeches and contemporary journals.

My aim is not to introduce the important philosophers and pedagogists in the education of women, but it has to be mentioned that without these foretimed philosophers we could not talk about the 19<sup>th</sup> century university debates. A few names to be mentioned:

Erasmus, Thomas Morus, Campanella, Comenius, János Apáczay Csere, Peter Pázmány, Kelemen Mikes, Samuel Tessedik, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Fröbel, Zsuzsanna Lorántffy, Teréz Brunszvik, Teréz Karacs, Klára Lövei, Blanka Teleki, Gyula Wlassics, etc.

I would like to approach the difficulties of the development of university studies. The beginning of women's university studies was in the 1870-80s. In the United States and the most West and North-European countries higher education was open for women due to the changes of women's economical-social situation.

The right for culture and the social position of women were questioned. It would have led to mass pauperization of women if certain jobs had not been opened for them. Providing work did not mean full social and economical emancipation, women movements had an important part in it.

Austro-Hungary stated the biggest opposition against university education of women. First István Nyíri's thoughts were prominently progressive (Nyíri, 1838), who said that women were able to learn emotionally, and teach infants, but they were not able to cogitate on higher-level, logically. His thoughts were progressive, as women were not allowed to take part in university education in Europe at that time. Everyday people were still conservative.

The spirit of the 1848 revolution, *Blanka Teleki* et al. did much for women in university education. The ideas of women education were de-emphasised.

After the Conciliation the question of women in university education arose, thus abroad universities had been opened for women by that time. In Hungary different opinions appeared in journals and parliament speeches. The most progressives were willing to open all university faculties and jobs for women.

These thoughts did not obtain majority. Views of *Vidor Vörös*:

- allow women to take part in higher education
- allow women to take comprehensive exams
- women should be trained for certain positions
- government should control women education
- women should be allowed to attend lectures together with men

Conservatives totally riveted women to family tasks. They stressed the preconceptions, social requirements and biological differences. Even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century these views were shared in the parliament.

According to an MP, women studying medicine "must prepare for loosing the signs of their femininity, and they become some undefined creature" (Napló, November 23, 1896 e. XXI p.374-375). Another MP worried about the risk of graduated women's unemployment.

From 1871 debates continued in a women's magazine, *Nők Lapja*, and many articles were published about women's problems with university studies. Many petitions urged the parliament decision in favour of the problem. For instance women employed as shorthand-writers in the parliament, which was not forbidden, provoked a huge conflict, but the case was not solved finally.

In the 80s – in the era of *Kálmán Tisza* – fewer articles dealt with the topic, and they mentioned it very carefully. From 1872, when the publication of *Nők Lapja* was ceased, another magazine, *Nők Munkaköre* did not continue the battle for women in university education, as they found it as a left-wing manifestation. The biggest breakthrough was the *Vilma Hugonnai's* diploma naturalisation case. *Ágoston Trefort*, President of the Board of Education and Religion, did not agree with the education of women, so only a few fields opened for them.

*Trefort's* view on education of women (Sopron, Speech on November 13, 1881): "Should women be equal in every aspect with men? I allow them to become fully equal in point of civil rights, but regarding social functions women cannot be equal by generic difference and feminine nature; their strength and build, and consequently their calling do not allow it. Let us find positions for women besides teaching, in the fields of industry, commerce, and even in certain parts of administration, but do not expect them to become judges, lawyers, doctors, legislators. Professions claim a whole person with its intellectual and physical strength and it would distract time from the destiny of women. Confusing the social roles is not good, hence with my permission – however much I desire to develop women's education – universities are not going to open for women."

The Hugonnai case was a significant step in women's education, as professors hindered women's ambitions less. The first of them was *Dénes Szabó*, professor of obstetrician-gynaecologist at the University of *Kolozsvár*, who on May 29 1902 emphasised the needlessness and inequity of individual appeals, and the permission of law studies in his work, *Higher Education of Women*. He said: "Jurists dominate in the view that women are inadequate to pass a judgment because they are not objective". He saw the

connection between this problem and the fights for political rights for women.

At the end of that year, *Gusztáv Schwarz* professor of law dealt with this question, and found the permission of women's law studies reasonable, but found women adequate in only a few positions.

"I do not think that they should become judges or lawyers. But why could not they work as assistants on courts, civil authorities, assistants and apprentices in law and notary offices." (Napló, November 23, 1896 e. XXXIII p. 253)

The members of the conservative government imbued with prejudices did not permit university studies for her or anyone.

The Act of 1883 gave opportunity for private high-school exams in special cases. Opening a girl's grammar school would have been a precondition for university studies, which became reality later. Girl grammar schools would have been the second purpose.

With the changes of ministers the approach changed as well. After *Trefort's* conservative thoughts, *Albin Csáky* conveyed neutral, dilatory tactics. He found this problem a social matter and dependent on foreign experiences. The foreign results were angled and informed about mostly in countries where universities did not open (Germany).

When *Gyula Wlassics* was the minister, women's education stepped ahead. He conveyed slow but sure step tactics.

The *Act of 1895* allowed women studies at faculty of arts and medicine, in certain cases the permission was given by the ministry for the proposal of the university. Wlassics first suggested opening all faculties, but the monarch permitted only three, the pharmaceutical as well, but it was hindered.

The *Hungarian Pharmaceutical Association* clearly opposed training women for pharmacists. Five counties argued for and thirteen against it, and dismissed it.

Their arguments were (in *Pharmaceutical Weekly*, 1894. 680-681. p., 1895. 98-100. p., 197-199. p., 210-212. p., 220. p., 386-390. p., 410-412. p., 450. p., 453-454. p., 465-470. p., 769-770. p.):

- physical weakness, anatomical and physiological attributes
- moral worries, work with male colleagues, dealing with male venereal patients, dangers of night shifts
- working with toxins when they are exhausted, enervated
- prescription privacy
- loss of prestige of pharmacists
- it would distract women from their destiny

The action was taken ambivalent, Wlassics mentioned in his article: "many open-minded statesmen and scholars opposed the reformation". The progressive forces and some unprejudiced professors proposed the extension of university education of women. Wlassics was not in favour of founding girl's grammar schools, but realised that these schools would be needed.

The small number of women students was due to the lack of final high-school exams. The Act of 1895 disposed only the question of the few private students, hence *Pálné Veres* established the first 8 year girl's grammar school.

Efforts against the developing of university education of women emerged in the 1900s. As a result of the increasing number of women students (at

universities in Budapest in 1899/1900 31, 1903/04 185 women studied, their number at the faculty of art reached 'awful rates'), in 1903 the faculty of Art in Budapest, next year the whole university proposed a severity in the admission with the amendment of the Act of 1885.

The act issued during *Berzeviczky* allowed the admission of women only with top-marks, women with good marks were to sit for examinations after two special semesters, and became full students depending on these results.

The number of women students – after a temporary decreasing – increased despite of these rules (1906/07: 207, 1909/10: 326 students).

*Károly Kmety* (*professor of law*) spoke about the risk of women with diplomas and called them female "beasts".

Minister *Apponyi* agreed that the natural role of women is in the family, but admitted that a great number of them cannot reach their natural function due to social circumstances, and it should be respected as well.

The feminist movement fought for the extension of university studies of women in the second part of the decade. In March 1907 it claimed the opening of the law faculty, and in June 1910 it claimed equal standards for women and men on the admission exams, opening the faculty of law and technical university, de-restriction of studies at faculties of medical and art. First the faculties declared themselves. The faculty of theology refused the request unequivocally. The faculty of law refused it by majority and the faculty of art as well. Only the faculty of medical was in favour – according to *Ernő Jendrassics* – unopposed! "...There is no point of making difference regarding previous studies if the secondary education is the same... Anyway, the secondary school qualification is very doubtful in evaluating mental abilities." He was even in favour of opening technical fields as well (II. National and Universal University Educational Congress 1898 p. 1245-1255). Thereafter the university board dealt with the request and refused it.

*Manó Beke*, the dean of faculty of art emphasised, that "he sympathised with the approach of the faculty of medicine, that would open law and technical field for women." The request of the feminists was refused in 1912. *Antal Genersich* medical professor analysed the exam results of women in his rectorial speech on May 13, 1911. It turned out that 21.2% of women and only 11% of men passed with excellent results, the rate of failures was 11.5% of women and 28.8% of men.

In 1912 the first women (*Margit Láng*) filed her habilitation request with the faculty of art, it was refused at the rate of 30:13.

The faculty of law developed significantly: at the meeting on May 6 1914 it stood for the private tuition of women, and even found it possible that women became *egyetemi ny. r. tanárok*, but the ministry did not accept it.

The University of Kolozsvár proposed the abolishment of admission limitations in 1912/13, but the board of the technical university voted against the admission of women in 1912.

The struggle did not end during the world war, it even intensified. The number of women students increased (in the year 1917/18 it exceeded 1500 at the two universities) and professional women, especially doctors had an important role in the years of the war. The faculty of medicine in Budapest requested the abolishment of limitation again in 1914.

In April 1915, at the initiation of women art students, 242 women requested the abolishment of limitations. The faculties of medicine and law would have been opened but the faculty of art resisted. The board of

university was more liberal at that time and abolished the limitation for women, it was published on December 15 1915.

I found it necessary to mention the more than two-decade long struggle for the equality at universities, because the approach, the combination, the opposition and the battle of progressiveness and conservatism, democracy and reaction at universities manifest themselves very plastically.

Today women are in majority at universities, more men represent themselves in research work only. Women were able to achieve the most important thing, that everyone can study according to one's personality, ability, or one can undertake family roles or both. Women proved that they deserve the possibility of being students and women as well.

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