



## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

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### Abstract

It is a well known fact that women were seen as inferior to men in most areas of the life in Victorian England. They were only expected to be good wives and mothers at home. They were taught to be 'angels of their houses'. Most women obeyed the rules of dominant culture while some strived to have jobs outside their homes. Despite the oppression of the patriarchal social structure on women, they could have occupations, such as teaching positions at schools. This study focuses on their role in education, the double standards shown to them in work choices and salary. To know what Victorian women teachers experienced during their work lives is of significance in terms of understanding the social positions they take in today's world.

**Key Words:** Victorian women, education, women teacher.

### INTRODUCTION

Victorian Era, 1866- was believed to be the Era of male supremacy in all areas of life. They had no legal rights. Their husbands or fathers had rights on women's property in 19th century. According to dominant ideology, women were created to do household, look after their children. Their space was limited to the house. They were expected to be the 'angel of their houses. According to Klein, Innocence and inexperience and a cultivated fragility were the characteristic attributes of the Victorian girls.

Victorian families raised their daughters in such an atmosphere that submission to men, being good at housework and looking after children were the fixed gender roles imprinted on their memories at their early ages. They were confined to their private spheres. Higher education was seen as unnecessary by their family and the society. They just could find works which didn't require high qualifications, such as needle work, cleaning, baby sitting. Men even didn't condescend to talk to them about politics, art, business and science. What was expected from a woman was to be a charming and decorative housewife who made the home and food ready for her husband and children.

It was not until 1870 that girl's education was taken into account by the British authorities. After Education Act was taken into effect in 1870, elementary education for both sexes became compulsory. Thanks to that Act, the girls began to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. Few girls had the chance to have the secondary education for the families took their sons into consideration. Thomson maintains that English families, even upper class parents didn't consider their daughters' secondary education till 1880 and 1890s.

Patriarchal society valued the sons of the families and supported their higher education in order to preserve the superiority of men in all areas of life. 1848 was a year when the hope for illumination of women opened its way to Victorian women. Because the state accepted to build a college for the girls who were over the age of twelve. Bessie Rayner Parkes states;

"Of those superior schools, popularly known as Ladies' Colleges, the earliest in foundation, and in all respects the best known and most amply supported, is Queen's College, Harley Street, London, which was

incorporated by royal charter in 1853 for the general education of ladies, and for granting certificates of knowledge.”

F.D. Maurice’s Queen’s College was a well known school in England in those times. What was striking was that there were no competent women teachers in that college. The girls graduated from these kinds of schools entered the workforce where masculinity was dominant. However, women’s improving themselves and getting professional jobs disturbed male-dominated society and decision makers. Their main worry was that family structure was shattered after women were employed in factories for women had no time for their domestic training and duties. Francis Michael Longstreth Thomson emphasizes;

“All female employment outside the home, whether of married or unmarried women, whether in factories or elsewhere, made women into bad housewives and mothers because it deprived them of domestic training or inclination ,and hence weakened the family.”

According to patriarchal mentality, women should be good at home duties and pleasing their husbands. According to that view, education for women was necessary for doing only domestic duties very well. Mary Wollstonecraft asserted that lack of education made women frivolous and socially irresponsible, unfit to be companions to their husbands, good mothers to their children or self supporting in the absence of a male provider. “

#### THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN EDUCATION

There is a fact that in Victorian times, female teachers had more teaching roles than male ones. However, there was no justice in salary between male teachers and female teachers. Female teachers were humiliated by having been payed lower wages compared to male ones. Lydia Murdoch specifies;

“No matter what the job, women faced a set of common obstacles in the workplace. The wages for female workers varied tremendously, as did the nature of their work, but in practically all professions, women earned less than men. In 1883, for example, the School Board of London specified that the salaries of female teachers should be three quarters of those for male teachers of equal qualifications and experience. In 1890, male assistant teachers had an average annual salary of 117 pounds, while women earned 88 pounds for the same work. In addition to their subordinate status in relation to men of their profession, all women workers shared the experience of being judged by the evolving, contradictory Victorian gender ideal of femininity, which held that women shouldn’t work outside the home and that women’s paid labor was unnatural.”



A typical victorian class full with only girls and a female teacher

There were two types of Victorian female teachers: public schoolmistress and private schoolmistress. Private school mistresses were working in private schools. Public school mistresses were in charge of teaching in public schools. Sara Delamont quotes from Pedersen;

“ The disparity in the sources that survive for studying the two types of teachers reflects the different roles they sought to play. Whereas the private schoolmistress aspired to a leisured, amateur role in secluded, quasi-domestic setting, the public school heads aimed rather to secure professional recognition and sought distinction in the public sphere.”

As it is emphasized by Pederson, private school mistresses just thought of spending their time by enjoying themselves with their friends at home, while school teachers focused on their self- development and professionalization.

Middle class women weren't permitted to desire both work and marriage, and thus they were forced to make a choice, which men were not. Also, while not a reason for social ostracism, choosing to remain single was seen as possibly selfish, although it should be noted that marriage was viewed as necessarily subjugating woman's individuality to her husband's will. These attitudes were to a large extent characteristic of this period. Hubbard reflected his fellow creatures' views in his article called Work and Leisure about what aspirations they could have in life, what they couldn't, that is, the limitations put by the male-dominated society. In the Woman's Gazettee, Hubbard writes an article which argues that women need to subordinate to male supremacy;

“...it can't be too earnestly enforced on the minds of all who voluntarily seek work that lays them under the authority of others, That subordination to constituted authority is a duty from a high point of view and necessity from a worldly point of view. Let no one accept a post without a settled resolution to believe that their superiors in official position are superiors or they would not be so placed. The law of subordination runs through the whole course of social life. Why then should women attempt to reverse that law by foolish jealousies, unjust fault findings or unworthy suspicions? If a girl will not submit in the home life, let her not imagine herself fitted for encountering the various little roughnesses which must inevitably crop up between subordinates and superiors, equally unknown to each other.”

In those times, Victorian ideology always imposed the idea that women must have knowledge about art, music and language to be angels of the houses. Despite all the difficulties, Victorian women faced with, they succeeded to be governesses. By working outside their homes, and ignoring the harsh criticism of their families and husbands, they started to work as governesses. They were humiliated for their inadequate education in music, foreign languages by the middle class families. The striking point is that they didn't give up working as governesses. They did their best to improve themselves in all aspects. It is important to note that there were great efforts of some women writers and thinkers to help the women have career in teaching profession. Copelman states that these efforts to provide better training for governesses are usually considered the starting point of feminist efforts. As a profession, secondary school teaching witnessed some of women's great successes and provided some of the most significant opportunities for advancement, power and community. Victorian female teachers were criticized for being strict and scary. They believed that discipline was of vital importance in teaching. Student's psychology, learning levels, cognitive skills were never taken into consideration by the teachers of both sexes in those times. They were punished with canes.

The role given to the Victorian female teachers was not teaching the principles of physics, astronomy, or social sciences. As Alison L. Prentice remarks, they focused on ornamental ideals rather than social science. They aimed to fit their pupils to adorn a drawing room, not to spend time in the kitchen or behind a shop counter. For the purposes of shining in polite society and attracting a husband who could afford to give her a leisured life, a facility in music, dancing and learning French were seemingly more functional to a young lady than great skill in computation or an easy familiarity with the nicer points of English grammar.

Victorian Universities were male-dominated institutions. Women lecturers weren't accepted to work in the universities for they were believed to have no capacity to have command of university subjects. What is queer



is that most women agree with the men about the education's bad impact on women as Herbert Tucker remarks;

"It was by the end of century that not all university teachers were men. Women had been excluded from the universities by the Victorian assumptions that women were not suited by temperament or intellect either for the clergy or for public life. and they were not capable of the sustained rigorous work required by the university studies...and many proper Victorians, men and women alike felt that advanced education would spoil women's cherished innocence and nurturing instincts. During the course of the century, increasing numbers of women and a few male advocates like John Stuart Mill argued that women were in fact as intelligent and as capable of higher education as men."

On the other hand, there was a majority of men in the society thinking that women were never equal with men. One clerical opponent of admission of women to Oxford declared in a sermon in 1884: "Inferior to us(men) God made you (women) and inferior to end of time you will remain."

### CONCLUSION

Female teachers' getting jobs in the schools helped to change the views of male decision makers in Victorian England in terms of giving the women more job opportunities. Middle and upper class preferred female teachers at their homes to teach their son and daughters different subjects, such as music, art and language.

In spite of the fact that the female teachers were under the oppression of patriarchal administration and domination at home and society, they could take roles in public sphere, which belonged to men. They had teaching positions in the schools and became successful in teaching language, art and language. Their appearance in public sphere formed inspiration and aspiration for female students to leave private sphere and get active roles in the society. In particular, their attempts to take role in teaching the girls had a positive impact on the girls in terms of changing their attitudes towards life and their identity and having self awareness and activating their capabilities. The Victorian girls realized that "to be the angel of the house" was not what they had to be. They comprehended that they could do other facilities in the public sphere, thanks to the governesses at their homes and female teachers in the schools.

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