The Education of Women: Ideas and Vignettes

My educational opportunities are almost unlimited. I was born in the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States of America. I received a free education in public schools for twelve years. I am currently attending a university as an undergraduate student and plan to pursue further studies. In my schooling, I have been encouraged to enjoy learning and to discover what it is that interests me. My sister, who recently graduated from high school, has an entire world of opportunities in front of her. She is interested in several different fields and may study a bit of everything as she finds her life direction. If I have daughters someday, I will support and encourage them throughout their educational endeavors. But young women have not always been so fortunate, even in the recent past. My mother graduated from high school and did not know exactly what to do after that. She did not know that she could go to college; she did not know that was even an option for her. No one had ever talked about that. It was thanks to her roommates that my mother began to attend a community college. Even after her first children were born, she continued to take classes. I remember attending the graduation ceremony when my mother received her associate’s degree. Her mother, my grandmother, finished high school and then worked as a switchboard operator, after two years of service as a missionary, until she married. My great-grandmother worked as a nurse so she must have received training in that field. It was, however, the exception rather than the rule for women to obtain a good, thorough, liberal education.
Looking at German girls and women in the eighteenth and even the nineteenth century, we see that most of them received very little formal education. Reading and writing and a basic, broad education were typical. In the higher social classes, girls learned conversational French, social dancing, and enough piano and voice to accompany or sing at parties. Young women were trained to become wives and mothers. For the lower- to middle-class women this meant learning household management and the raising of children, although lower-class women did it all themselves, whereas middle-class women delegated some of the work to servants and oversaw the general goings-on in the household. Upper-class women left the house and children to the servants; they were mainly to learn how to entertain. Of course, there were always people with progressive ideas about women’s education and about what it means to be educated and why it is important. These people (gradually) changed public opinion about what is acceptable learning for women and made possible my education, this course on women’s literature, and this paper. I would like to investigate three reasons why women deserve a good education, drawing examples from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary works by German women:

1. Women should be educated so that they can learn about society, improve their talents, become good wives and mothers, and teach their children.

2. Women should be educated in order to be able to support themselves financially.

3. Women should be educated because education is part of the human experience, the foundation for life-long development.

I hope to show that women and men ought to be educated equally, because education is a basic human right.
The Good Wife/Mother and Engaging Hostess

One traditional purpose of education is to prepare women for wifehood, motherhood, and social interaction. There is nothing inherently wrong with that; it is a noble goal. Education of men prepares them as well to become husbands, fathers, and members of society. Children learn how to fit into society as they learn about the world.

The problem is when training women to be obedient wives and good mothers and housekeepers becomes the sole aim of education, when a woman’s true talents and intelligence are overlooked and she receives only a superficial education, enough to entertain but not enough to accomplish anything. Rousseau writes in Book Five of \textit{Emile}:

Thus all the education of women must be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make oneself loved and honored by them, to raise them when they are young, to care for them when they are grown, to advise them, console them, make their life pleasant and sweet—these are the duties of women at all times and what one ought to teach them from their childhood. (1279).

I disagree! Women do not exist solely to make life pleasant for men. (That may, however, be a by-product of peaceful co-habitation, with men also making life pleasant for women.) When women are given the same opportunities, they make progress “so gut wie die Männer” (Lewald 143). Thus the plea: “Behandelt uns wie die Männer, damit wir tüchtige Frauen werden können” (146). Women’s education, like men’s, is to make them aware of the world that they live in and the story of humankind.

An example of a girl who is shaped from a young age for marriage and (at least at first) only poorly educated is Elisa von der Recke. She describes in her autobiography
about her early childhood years under her grandmother, when she experienced “die Hölle des Nichtstuns” (31). From the beginning, Elisa’s grandmother cares less about her mind and more about her appearance and marriage eligibility. Elisa spends hours and hours “ohne Beschäftigung” at her grandmother’s side (30). Elisa is eight years old when it is decided that she should learn French and how to read and write (43). But her conniving cousins, who along with their mother want her to look bad in front of the grandmother so she will not become the heir, convince her that if she exerts herself and tries to learn, then she will go crazy, since her head is so weak. Elisa believes them and is so afraid of becoming a fool that she decides not to learn anything (43). Her cousins and aunt ensure that her teachers are always changed, so that Elisa will not learn anything and it will look like she has a weak mind (45). Elisa then spends ten happy weeks with a friend of her mother’s in Nefit, where she begins to pick up French. She writes, “Ich war im Herzen froh, daß ich so weit kam, ohne albern geworden zu sein” (45). When Elisa is nine, however, it is decided that her cousins will see to her education, because tutors have cost so much money and she has not even learned how to read (46). But now the only thing Elisa learns is how to avoid punishment and how to say and be what is expected of her.

_Briefe an Lina_ is full of useful advice on growing up and preparing to run a household. It is important to have a clean house, just as it is important to have a pure heart and open mind. It is good to have “Alles in Ordnung und reinlich” (27). The soul and mind need nourishment, just as the body does. A young woman can learn early the value of knowing how to care for herself and the people she loves.

I learned in my earlier years about becoming a spouse and parent, and I still continue to learn about it. I learned from having younger siblings how to care for
children and how to get along with people. My mother taught me the basic skills of cooking and cleaning, grocery shopping and budgeting. It is my anticipation to have the arrangement that my husband and I will share the responsibilities of child-rearing and household maintenance. It takes work to build a family.

I also learned other things that interested me. I learned to play the piano because at a very young age I asked and asked for lessons until my mother agreed. Even when I did not always want to practice, I did want to play the piano, so I kept at it (with some reminders from my mother to practice). I think that I can be a good listener. I am a quiet person, not much of a talker, but I can participate in conversation. These are all useful skills in social interaction.

Although it is not the only reason for women to learn and grow, it is a good thing that women can teach their children and build a relationship with their husbands and with the people around them, thanks to what they have learned. Education prepares women to take on many roles.

The Self-Supporting, Independent Woman

Another important reason for women to be educated is so that they are able to support themselves and do not have to be financially dependent on anyone. A woman should be able to earn her own salary and live independently. Women make a great contribution to the world through their work. Even those women who choose not to work should have the qualifications to be able to work if they ever found themselves in a situation where that would be necessary. Independence is key.

Fanny Lewald is an active advocate of education for women, so that they can take care of themselves. She argues that “die Frauen sich selbst ernähren dürfen” in any
manner, “Wie sie können und wollen!” (109). If women’s knowledge is superficial, it is because the education they receive is superficial(145). That is why schools are necessary, why material of genuine substance must be taught. Girls’ education needs to be as good as the boys’.

Three female characters in Elisabeth Heinroth’s *Jenseits der Mauer* are living independently. Jutta, the main character, owns and manages a large estate. Her friend Luise Schott is the head gardener. Luise „[hat sich] in der Gärtnerei ausgebildet“ (I. Band, 3). The governess, Ottlie, is talented “in all den angenehmen, kleinen Künsten” and teaches Margareten languages, music, drawing, and handiwork—the things for which Jutta herself has no real skill (I. Band, 29). These women do not need to rely on men for their sustenance.

I have learned the value of work and earning one’s own salary. I have worked at the library for most of my college years. The skills and knowledge that one acquires in school and through other kinds of learning are useful and effective in earning money. In high school, I taught beginning piano lessons and tutored algebra students, in addition to babysitting. I have also taught English to speakers of other languages. And although I believe in education for education’s sake, and not just to start a good career, the higher education that I am receiving now will make me even better prepared to work and support myself. It is important to be self-sufficient.

Education prepares people, women and men both, to be able to work in a field that they find interesting and challenging. The more enjoyment a person gets from a job, the more satisfaction that person is likely to get from life in general. Education also makes possible better jobs, so that people can benefit from a higher standard of living.
The Educated Human Participating in the World Discourse

The best and most important reason for women to receive a good education is that they are members of the human race and they play a role in making the history of this world. "Gottsched understood this. He held lectures in his home and left the door half-open so that his wife could listen (Brinker-Gabler 44), since at the time women were not allowed to attend lectures. Any reasonable person realizes that education, equally available to everyone, is vital.

Sophie von la Roche encourages young women to always be learning and growing in Briefe an Lina. Even within the "women's sphere" exists a myriad of possibilities for learning. Lina is fortunate that her brother teaches her geography and history, her aunt teaches her how to run the household, and she has music and drawing lessons. On top of that, Lina can search things out on her own and learn about the world around her. Lina's mentor writes: "Du kannst auch deine Seele . . . mit Ruhm und Ehre zeigen . . . durch die Bemühung, sie mit nützlichen Kenntnissen zu schmücken" (11-12).

She advises her to be "vernünftiger im Denken" (16) and to become (like herself) "nützlich" (83). There is an emphasis on obtaining practical knowledge, the sort of things that can be learned from everyday life. If, taking her silk dress as an example, she were to read about silkworms and how silk is made, she would know that much more about the world and its workings. The friend explains:

Similarly, Lina’s correspondent encourages her while in the kitchen to ask where things come from and to learn about their discovery and uses. She can learn in the following manner: “Da gehst du zu deinem Buche, und suchst den Artikel auf, wirst darübert belehrt, und freust dich dein ganzes Leben” (36). If she will have such a thirst for knowledge and a willingness to investigate, she will have fewer empty hours and fewer complaints about boredom. Lina’s brother gives her “einen kurzen Begriff von dem Verdienste jeder Gattung der Gelehrsamkeit” (48) and because of that, the author writes to Lina, “Du sollst deutlich wissen, was Jurisprudenz, was Mathematik ist—und zu was sie gebräucht werden” (49). It is certainly „Glück des Lebens auf Erden, wenn man Gelegenheit hat, jede Menschentugend, jede Wissenschaft kennen zu lernen“ (55). It is important to learn about „verschiedene Menschen und Sitten“ (51). Several times Lina’s friend mentions the importance of good books. I agree—books are one of the best sources of learning. One point that La Roche emphasizes is: „Ich weiß auch, wie viel Nützliches und Angenehmes ein Frauenzimmer . . . lernen und thun kann“ (53). It is true. A woman can make a difference in the world.

Elisa von der Recke begins to gain a better education when she goes to live in her father’s house. When Elisa’s new stepmother learns “wie man alles tät, um [Elisas] angeborenen Fähigkeiten zu unterdrücken,” she convinces her husband to let her free Elisa “aus dieser Sklaverei” and undertake Elisa’s upbringing herself (70). Elisa learns from her stepmother that it was out of maliciousness on the part of Tante Kleist & Co. to prevent her from learning that they lied and said that she would go mad if she tried to learn. When she discovers that she actually can learn something by memory, she is overjoyed, and tells her stepmother in tears of joy, “Ich habe ein Gedächtnis! Ich habe
ein Gedächtnis! Nun will ich auch recht fleißig sein!” (75-76). She takes lessons from the family tutor, piano teacher, and dance instructor. She also begins to read aloud to her step-mother, which awakens in her “Neigung zum Lesen” (76). In her adult years, reading is her passion! (10). This education contributes to Elisa’s sense of well-being and suits her better to live happily.

Margarete, the daughter of Jutta in Jenseits der Mauer, receives a high-quality education. She is described as “eine gesinnungstüchtige, moderne Tochter” (Heinroth II. Band 48). Margarete has a private tutor who teaches her many subjects and she also receives instruction from her governess as well as her mother. Jutta’s friend Luise is astonished when she discovers that Margarete is going to learn Latin and asks if she will study at a university (I. Band 30). Margarete does plan to do exactly that. When they visit Berlin, she speaks to her mother and Dr. Frentzius about the time when she will live there as a university student (II. Band 47). Dr. Frentzius has high hopes for the young girl and thinks it is very likely that she will be able to study at the university. He says she is “hochgradig intellektuell veranlagt” (I. Band 30). She has the desire to learn (30). Dr. Frentzius says something very important: “[M]an soll keinem Menschen den Bildungsweg, dem er zustrebt, verrammeln” (30). It is necessary to respect each individual’s right to learn and never hinder that individual’s development. Margarete is the product of progressive ideas and has substantial opportunity for formal education.

In gaining an education, I have learned about life, learned “of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—of cabbages—and kings”—I am grateful for the opportunities I have to learn and the people who encourage me along this path. I realize that there is still a lot that I do not know about the world, people, and things, but I have a beginning. My
journey through life is more rewarding because I have opportunities to learn along the way.

In order to take part in cultural interactions and find a niche in the big picture of life, women need education. That is true for all people. When we learn about other people, other times and other places, we understand ourselves better. We can discover more about what it means to be a human and we can establish a connection to other people all over the world. Education helps us to learn from history and prepare for the future, while enjoying the present. Continuous education should be a goal for every person.

When women are educated, they are prepared to fill many positions and interact on different levels. Our homes and our societies need educated women, women who are aware of humanity and its undertakings, women who make a difference in the world. The basic needs of food, clean water, clothing, and shelter are vital to survival, just as education is vital to the existence of the soul. When women are better educated, the world at large is a better place and people can work together to improve society.
Works Cited


Works Consulted
