Chapter 6

The Historiography of Education for Girls and Women in the United States

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The historiography of female education in the United States grows out of two major fields, each with its own trajectory and contribution: women’s history, and the history of education. In women’s history, work has developed from a movement for inclusion of female experience in historical narratives, to a sociocultural approach that interrogates the meaning of gender itself. In education, work also has been transformed in the last few decades. As early as 1960, the historian Bernard Bailyn wrote that he hoped to see fewer institutional histories or histories of formal schooling, as they tended to be written as though schooling existed apart from the culture in which it was embedded. He challenged historians to write about education as a process of cultural transmission, in which a particular institution might play a specific role. Research on education, including the history of female education, has heeded this call. In this chapter, I provide a brief discussion of trends in women’s history, with examples of how women’s educational history has built on these trends. Most notably, recent historiography on female education includes discussions of class, race, and gender identity, and the roles of education in
creating or altering those identities; transnational perspectives; and challenges both to periodization and to the presumed rationales for female education. I conclude with thoughts about promising avenues for future research.

**Trends in Women’s History and Educational History**

The modern field of women’s history emerged in the 1960s. As Nancy Cott outlined in a recent retrospective on the state of the field, the initial goal of women’s history was to render women visible, given the near total absence of any inclusion of women or women’s contributions until then. This work was fostered by new social histories, which moved beyond political and military histories to include far more historical actors, conditions, and perspectives. Several historians created theoretical models for the growth of women’s history. The most familiar is that of Gerda Lerner and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault’s model, which moves from male-defined history, to compensatory history (often referred to as the “add women and stir” approach, because it added a few notable women to the existing narrative without changing or challenging any of the basic assumptions), to contribution history (exploring women’s contributions to society), to histories that analyze the framework of oppression in which women lived, and finally to histories with a female consciousness.

The first major comprehensive work on the history of women’s education since the revisionists, Barbara Miller Solomon’s *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America*, fits the early goal of inclusion. Solomon provided a broad synthesis of women’s education, documented women’s fight for access to institutions and for fair treatment once admitted to colleges and universities, looked at opportunities for non-elite and immigrant women, took academies and seminaries seriously as institutions providing higher education, and investigated the opposition to increased access to education for women. A plethora of studies built on Solomon’s work, adding rich detail about women’s experiences in particular institutions, as students, faculty, and administrators.