



Maria Sztuka

19th Century Europe Was Not a Woman



The groundbreaking 19th century set civilisation on a new track, known as the age of steam and electricity, and imposed a pace of development never before experienced by humankind. An avalanche of discoveries and inventions resulted in rapid industrial and economic growth. The history of the transition was shaped by people such as Pierre-Émile Martin, Werner von Siemens, Thomas Edison, Michael Faraday, Rudolf Diesel, Gottlieb Daimler, Louis Pasteur, Wilhelm Röntgen, the Lumiere brothers, Samuel Morse, Alexander Bell, Ignacy Łukasiewicz, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, and Piotr Curie. These are just a few of the hundreds of people whose work helped put humans on the Moon in the 20th century.

Highly industrialised countries experienced a population explosion. Cities began to grow in size, giving rise to such great metropolises as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, London, Paris, Berlin, Osaka, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg. The social hierarchy also underwent changes. The increasingly powerful bourgeoisie, led by entrepreneurs and financiers, established itself at a record pace somewhere between the aristocracy and the landed gentry and peasantry. The gigantic new labour market attracted large numbers of working-class people.

Although the explosion of knowledge and progress took over the globe, half of the population, i.e. women, invariably remained under the special protection of men, resembling children with special needs under the laws of the time.

It might seem as though the pillars of patriarchy would be shattered when women (first in America and later in Europe) began university studies and the struggle for suffrage. Unfortunately, women's struggle for equality continued throughout the 19th century, and before legal equality could be achieved, the legislation treating women as inferior beings had to be scrapped, e.g. the Napoleonic Code (effective from 1804 in France, 1808 in the Duchy of Warsaw, and 1815 in the Congress Kingdom of Poland). *Code civil* became the foundation of civil law in most countries of the Old Conti-

ment. By adopting a patriarchal conception of the family, the code subordinated the wife and children to the authority of the husband or father, which extended to all spheres of life, even personal ones. Women were deprived of the ability to buy, sell, and pawn property, and were barred from education. According to Magdalena Piekara, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor, a literature historian from the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia specialising in the Polish Positivism, a woman was considered a permanent minor by the legislation in force at the time. The education received by well-born women did not withstand confrontation with the reality outside the classroom, exposing the superficiality of education and the lack of basic skills. Music, painting, foreign language, and social skills lessons were only useful at afternoon tea parties, but did not offer a chance to take up any occupation, making independent living impossible. It was only the lowest social classes – unmarried women living in the countryside or factory workers – who took up employment. Education for girls and women preparing them for household work, childcare, or at most teaching, did not begin to develop until the second half of the 19th century. European women gained access to higher education (only in a few degree programmes) at the end of the 19th century.

How was a woman to fare in an era of the primacy of education, when until she got married she was under the absolute guardianship of her father or a male relative, and after getting married she was not even allowed to have an identity document, leave the place of residence designated by her husband, or keep the income she earned? Men raised what they regarded as canonical arguments against the women's right to acquire knowledge. Prof. Magdalena Piekara summarises them briefly: a woman's place is in the home, her duty is to care for her husband and children, and any pursuit of knowledge may cause her to neglect these sacred duties, while her mind is simply incapable of solving complex mathematical problems.

Eliza Orzeszkowa, to whose works Prof. Piekara devoted many academic publications, repeatedly took up the issue of women's emancipation, exposing their lack of preparation for an independent life and economic self-reliance. Through the history of Marta, the titular character of one of her novels, the writer exposed the absurdities of the patriarchal family model and discrimination against women in access to education.

As an impoverished noblewoman educated only to the extent necessary to run a household and discuss art or culture, she led a carefree life at her husband's side. His untimely death, however, shattered the peace, prosperity, and security she once had. Left on her own, Marta is unable to support herself and her young daughter. Her substandard education makes it impossible to take up any professional work. She cannot be a governess, as she is not qualified; her poor knowledge of French prevents her from tutoring; although she has studied drawing, she has not mastered the basic techniques, which prevents her from entering art studios; she is not qualified to

be an illustrator; she is not even suitable to be a maid. So how can she save herself and her daughter from starvation? Marta finds the only solution – suicide at the wheels of a speeding omnibus. Orzeszkowa captures the tragedy of women in the 19th century in the plight of an impoverished noblewoman – as remarks the protagonist, 'The world demands of them the skills it has not provided them with'.

Although half of humanity was allowed to attend lectures and even study at university, in the age boasting the development of all sciences no permission was given to practise their profession. Prof. Piekara recalls the first Polish female medical doctor, Anna Tomaszewicz-Dobrska, who completed her medical studies in Zurich and successfully defended her doctoral thesis, but upon her return to Warsaw, the Medical Association refused to recognise her diploma due to her gender. She got it recognised in Saint Petersburg with the support of the local sheikh whose harem she was looking after.

'The end of the 19th century was marked by a tumultuous struggle of women, not only for the right to vote, but also for decent working conditions and pay, and the abolition of all discrimination. A surge of strikes, protests, and demonstrations erupted. The road to equality was paved by suffragettes, suffragists, and feminists. The well-laid foundations delivered results several decades later. Polish women gained the right to vote in 1918, and a year later there were eight female MPs in the Polish parliament. The equal rights for women in social and political life were confirmed in the Polish March Constitution of 1921. However, we must not forget that women's rights were not gifted to them. As history shows, women successfully fought for these rights', emphasises Prof. Magdalena Piekara.



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