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American Influence on Finnish Feminism: Coeducation

19th-century Finland was very much influenced by Central European culture. The leading social classes were actively seeking for ideas in the cultural centres of the world. The best known example may be that of J.W. Snellman, who brought Hegelian political theory from Germany. But many other sides of the civilization also had their roots in Central Europe.

From the 1860s on, the Finnish government granted scholarships annually to teachers to seek new pedagogic methods from abroad. The journeys were often made to Central Europe because it was the closest cultural centre. However, many new

ideas also came through private citizens and the newspapers.

The idea of educating girls came from Imperial Russia. The first schools for girls were founded by the German-born Empress Catherine the Great in 18th century Russia, which included eastern parts of Finland. These schools for the daughters of the middle and upper classes continued to function under a Finnish government when the region was re-united with autonomous Finland in 1812, although the official school regulations did not recognize them until 1844. During this year there were even more schools for girls founded in bigger towns.

Elementary schools for the lower social classes were organized according to the ideas of Pestalozzi and Fröbel, from Switzerland and Germany. In this case as in so many others an expert was sent to learn the systems in other countries. In the case of elementary teaching Mr. Uno Cygnaeus was sent to Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and The Netherlands.

Feminist ideology came to Finland through many different channels. Some of it had French origin, because one of the first leaders of the movement, Adelaide Ehrooth, had gone to school in Paris. Some of the American influence came from Sweden or directly to Finland's educated social circles.

Particularly strong was the effect of John Stuart Mill's book *The Subjection of Women*. Finnish women were inspired by the book to found a women's organization. Richard J. Evans mentions this event as an example of the influence Mill's book had on the educated middle-class women during the first years after its publication in 1869.

Of these 19th-century cultural influences the most American was the idea of coeducation. The first private high schools were founded in 1880's for both language groups of the country, the Swedish one (Läroverket för gossar och flickor) in 1883 and the Finnish one (Suomalainen yhteiskoulu) three years later.

Earlier there was some tradition of coeducation in other forms of schooling. There was coeducational teaching in elementary schools for practical as well as ideological reasons. Only the practical aspects were considered in the schools for the deaf-mutes and the blind children, in the Commercial school and in the art school of Ateneum in Helsinki. The practical aspects concern economy and the number of pupils; in sparsely populated Finland it was not always possible to maintain separate classes for girls and boys. The ideological points relate the belief that it is good for children of the opposite sex to grow up together as they will live their adulthood together. Here it must be remembered, however, that coeducation was considered more suitable at the elementary level, because it was concluded before the teenage years.

More important than these special schools was the founding of the first seminar for elementary school teachers in the 1860s. From the very beginning it had sections for both female and male students. This caused many moral doubts, because it was not customary for young ladies to be alone with men outside the family. Consequently the classes were taught separately and the women were under strict control even during leisure time. The same uncertainties regarding the moral consequences of coeducation occurred in the United States as well.

Events at the University of Helsinki also speeded up the need for high school education for women. The first female students
entered the university during the 1870s. From then on studying in the medical faculty was possible for women without discrimination, but in all the other faculties they had to apply for special permission. This was the practice in the universities of the Russian realm. Two excellent pioneers, Emma Irene Åström, who studied philology and history, and Rosina Heikel, who studied medicine, happened not to raise moral — or any other — problems. The atmosphere at the university was very liberal: the professors were prepared to give an opportunity to study to the seemingly few women who wished to do so. However, there was no high school where young girls could prepare themselves to qualify for entrance into the university, because the schools for girls had a more modest curriculum than the schools for boys.

Within some limits women could get the same training as men at the high school level from 1825 on in the United States. News about this coeducational system in the United States appeared in the newspapers in Finland whenever there was an article about life on the new continent. This happened more and more often in the 1860s and 1870s. Among other things, Oberlin college was introduced. It was natural that coeducation was newsworthy, because it was different from the educational system in Europe.

The arguments against coeducation were also often based on the experiences in the United States. Edward Clark's very polemic book Sex in Education was quoted in two Finnish newspapers. Doctor Clark claimed that according to his medical researches coeducation was unhealthy for girls after the earliest childhood. During their youth, when they ought to rest and let their bodies develop, they spoil their nervous system and lose their ability to have babies if they work like their brothers.

These arguments were very common in the nineteenth century. They were used not only against coeducational institutions but also against all-female high schools. These same reasons for not allowing boys and girls to study in the same schools were given in many other writings, and even in the debates of the diet opposing subsidies for private coeducational schools later in the century.

The first coeducational high school in the Nordic countries was founded in 1876 in Stockholm, Sweden. This brought the argument very close to home. The Finnish upper classes, who either spoke or at least understood Swedish, could easily see how it functioned. Some historians claim that it was the school in Stockholm which brought the question of coeducation to the consciousness of the Finnish public. This school was used to prove that the pattern of the new continent worked in Europe and in the northern circumstances also.

The discussion of coeducation started in 1882 in Finland because "seven ladies in town" made an application to a Swedish school in Helsinki (Nya Svenska Läroverket) to allow girls to enter. The members of the school board, the teachers, and some other citizens wrote articles in the Swedish press of Finland before answering the ladies. They came to the conclusion that there was no real argument against coeducation, but that the time and the school were wrong. This school had a modern curriculum with more sciences and less Latin, and these two experiments together (coeducation and new curriculum) were considered to be too radical.

Foreign experiences were often mentioned in these newspaper articles. The elementary schools at home were considered to be different and therefore not relevant examples. Positive arguments came from Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, and mos of all, from the USA. The other countries were merely mentioned.

18. Wilkama, pp. 312—326 and following issues of newspapers: Helsingfors Dagblad, February 14 and 22; March 14, 17 and 18; April 1 and 2, including the articles of Miss Blomqvist, and April 14, 1883. Nya Pressen, April 2, 12, and 23, 1883 and Wasa Tidning, April 13, 1883.
The detailed information came from across the Atlantic. Coeducation was said to be good for the entire society for the following reasons:

1) It is natural for boys and girls to grow up together in the schools as both sexes live the rest of their lives together.
2) Girls become vigorous instead of nervous and helpless.
3) Marriages have a better chance of success because children learn to know each other as human-beings and not as dream-images.
4) Girls would be better qualified for being good mothers.
5) Finally, it was said that boys would be inspired by the intellectual competition with girls. They would also adopt fewer rude manners.

Many writers talked about their journeys to the new country and used the reports of the Bureau of Education in Washington. The leader of the Swedish school for girls in Helsinki, Miss Elisabeth Blomquist wrote a letter to Mr. John Eaton (who made these reports) asking for some information and for his opinion on coeducation. His answer was published in the leading Swedish language paper, Helsingfors Dagblad.

The opposing party used Edward Clarkean evidence as an example of the negative influence of coeducation of women’s health. They also claimed that if women were schooled to the adult male life, they would be diverted from their role of wife and mother, which was created by God.

In response to the "seven ladies in town" the school board made a decision on the 14th of April 1883, voting 16 to 14, in favor of coeducation. However, the winning party let it drop. They did not want to start with such a strong opposition, so they simply left the school and started a new school with a coeducational curriculum, hence freeing themselves of conflicts within the school.

The debate continued during the following spring and summer, and again the experience in the United States was brought to prove the case. Mr. Clark was mentioned in one of the few opposing writings. 19

The new school (Läroverket for gossar och flickor) received permission to start without any problems from the authorities. 20 The school principal from Nya svenska läroverket, Mr. K.T. Broberg, changed to the new school. He had visited the coeducational school in Stockholm a year earlier and in 1886 he traveled to the United States. Like many other people who favoured women’s education, he didn’t want to enlarge the social sphere of women and he didn’t want to be involved in the emancipation movement. His school was just an enlarged family, where boys and girls were prepared for life, each one to his or her sphere. 21

In reality the school was revolutionary. It opened away to the university, which could be seen eight years later in the increasing number of female students at the University of Helsinki.

In 1882 the Finnish-speaking women in the inland town of Kuopio had already attempted to found a high school for women. 22 As a consequence of their newspaper article there was a meeting in Helsinki and fund-raising began. In this early stage the possibility of coeducation was mentioned, but even the supporters of the idea believed that its time had not come yet.

It took three years to raise the money. Meanwhile times had changed. The Swedish school was successful and in 1885 another Swedish coeducational school was founded. Women’s emancipation was now being increasingly spoken about and a feminist organization had been founded to, among other things, work on women’s education. 23

Two teachers, Lucina Hagman and Fredrika Wetterhof wrote newspaper articles in 1886 suggesting coeducation as the solution to the need for high schools for girls. 24 In a public meeting in April of the same year it was decided to start a private Finnish coeducational school in Helsinki with the means that had been raised.

Among the members of the board were the most prominent figures of the Finnish Women’s Association, such as Miss

19. Helsingfors Dagblad, April 20, and 1, 6, 10, 12, 17, and 24 (Mr. Clarks critics) and June 1, and August 24, 1883, Morgenbladet, June 7, 1883 (opposing), Nya Pressen, May 22, 23 and 29, and August 24, 1883, Åbo Tidning, May 10, 1883, Ostra Nyland, May 16, 1883 (heavily opposing).

22. Uusi Suometar, December 5, 1882.
Aleksandra Gripenberg who two years later took part in the preparatory work in the founding of The International Council of Women in Washington.

The board nominated Miss Hagman to direct the school. She was soon joined by co-principal Mr. Mikael Johnsson. He had recently made a journey to Boston and Washington to study education and published a dissertation on education in the United States.

These two people were the most prominent speakers in favor of coeducation. They wrote articles and published books to promote their cause. The Finnish national movement added incentive to the struggle for high schools for Finnish speaking youngsters. Many of its members, the "Fennomen," wanted Finnish schools at any price. They fought for coeducational schools although in other legislative cases they were against any emancipational changes. The frequency with which other countries were mentioned declined.

The first debates in the diet on public subsidies for the coeducational schools and of converting some male schools to coeducational took place in 1888. The same reasons were heard at the Estates. There was much discussion on the ideological part of the subject, but the practical reasons were clearer now. In the small country towns it was simply the most economical way of educating the children.

In any case, the origin of the idea was known to the members of the diet. In the Estate of the Peasants Mr. Avellan expressed his doubts and said that this was the first time "the ideologies of America" were brought before the Estates. His often repeated opinion was that the aim of education in "old world," namely to prepare the clergy, civil servants and scientists, was different from the aim of education in the "new world." In his opinion the

schools in the USA were more elementary. To prove this argument wrong the colleges of Oberlin, Cornell, Antioch and Michigan were mentioned. These were famous for their ambitious aims and high standards.

At this time the supporters of coeducation failed, but later in the 19th century and especially in the first decade of the 20th century the coeducational high school became the most common type of school in Finland, thus making it different from many European countries at the time. The very first schools of Broberg, Hagman and Johnsson were no doubt founded for ideological reasons, in the belief that growing up together made both sexes happier in adulthood and thus the entire society benefited.

Later, many supporters of the new system had other motivations also. It was practical in small towns and in the countryside, because the authorities avoided keeping two schools, one for each sex. It was also used for promoting Finnish nationalism as has been shown in many researches.

It seems that the liberal circles in Finland brought the system of coeducation from the United States and many of its supporters had idealistic views of equality. But also economic reasons were important in the new colonies in the west: "The need to keep

28. Mr. Avellan at the estate of the Peasants May 22, 1888; see note 13. This, of course, was his personal impression, but half a century earlier there was in the United States the same dispute over the aim of the education paid by society, Newcomer, pp. 5—6.


30. Anna-Liisa Sysharju, "Historiassa — ja ehkä tänäänkin? — ’näkymättömiksi' jääneistä yhteiskasvatuksen tavoiteista" in Kasvatus, 1/1986 pp. 25—32. In this very controversial article she criticizes earlier studies on the history of coeducation for forgetting the pedagogic idealism of the early founders of coeducational schools and for exaggerating the practical and political (Fennoman) aspects.

31. Heikkilä, pp. 213—214, claims that the head of the ecclesiastical department of the Senate (Ministry of Education) Mr. Yrjö-Koskinen changed his opposing attitude towards coeducation, when he saw it as a tool in the language dispute. The language question between growing Finnish and declining Swedish leading classes was the most important political factor in the country. See also Kyösti Kiuasmaa, Oppikoulu 1880—1980 (summary "The Secondary School in Finland"), Oulu, 1982, pp. 34—35. The Finnish nationalist arguments were strong in the debate on coeducation in the Estates, too (note 26).
costs down and the demand of equal opportunities favoured the development of coeducation, especially in the vast new areas beyond the Appalachians.”

It is not clear, why Finland was different from the old mother country Sweden and similar to the United States. Perhaps nationalism united men and women in Finland in the same way as the hard conditions of life united the settlers of the new country. Due to the sparse population in both countries the question of the costs of education was essential in the nineteenth century, when the demands for schooling became stronger.

* I would like to thank Mrs Nancy Nuottamo for correcting the English text.

32. Edward Alwey, *Coeducation in Encyclopaedia Americana*, New York, 1968, p 178. The low costs of coeducation are also mentioned by Mabel Newcomer, p. 10