The Evolution of Female Education in the 20th Century

(Comparison of France, England, and Germany)

Degrand Walker Lily 5C3

Tutrice: LOEWEN Susanne

SCHOOL HOUSE 1870

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Introduction:

I have always been interested in women's education and in my last year's 'Travail Personnel' I made a biography of Mary Anning and noticed how little education she received as a working-class woman in comparison to the 21st century. I thought that, considering there having been two WWs, that the 20th century was one of the most interesting to explore. I will also be making a sampler (traditional piece of stitching women used to have to do at school) which I think will make it even more interesting to really help transport me back to that time and put me in those women's shoes (not literally).

The Situation at the Beginning of the 20th Century

1.1 Introduction

In Western Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, women's education was significantly shaped by cultural norms, legal restrictions, and the gender roles of the time. However, this period also saw important advances in women's educational opportunities, driven by social reform movements and the evolving role of women in society.

- **Access to Primary Education:** By the early 20th century, most Western European countries had made primary education available to both boys and girls, though girls' education was often focused on domestic skills rather than academic subjects. In countries like France, Britain, and Germany, girls were taught reading, writing, and basic arithmetic, but the curriculum tended to emphasize subjects that were considered proper for women, such as homemaking and moral education.
- **Access to Secondary Education:** Secondary education for girls was much more limited than for boys, and girls' schools often offered a narrower range of subjects. Girls in many Western European countries were typically trained for roles as wives and mothers, with a focus on subjects like literature, history, music, and languages. In contrast, boys were more likely to be prepared for careers in law, science, business, or politics. Some secondary schools were exclusively for girls, while others were co-educational but still had a gendered curriculum.
    - **In Britain in particular:** The Education Act of 1870 (the Elementary Education Act) made primary education compulsory and available to both girls and boys. However, secondary education for girls was still less widespread, and the curriculum often had a domestic focus, with fewer options for more academic or professional preparation.

    - **In France in particular:** Education for girls in France was also focused on moral and domestic education. French girls had access to state-run primary schools, and by the early 20th century, a growing number of girls attended secondary

schools. However, the curriculum was gendered, and fewer girls went on to higher education. In 1904, the French government allowed girls to attend the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, although women were still excluded from most other elite institutions.

By the early 20th century, the generalization of primary schooling, the development of post-primary schooling and increasing opportunities for women to find employment in the service sector provided a context for European pedagogues (Maria Grey in England, Marguerite Bodin in France) to question the separation of boys and girls within schoolrooms or in schools. Feminists continued to defend coeducation in international congresses, but more broadly reforming educators argued for the advantages of grouping pupils together by age rather than sex. Not only was this organization judged more efficient, but it was also seen by many as an educational tool to promote better relations between the sexes. With the rise of a psychological understanding of childhood and adolescence, the International League for New Education included coeducation as one of its basic demands at the founding congress of Calais in 1921. In the inter-war period, more countries viewed coeducation as a means of pacifying gender relations rather than a claim for girls to pursue the same studies as boys. In societies where boys and girls increasingly mingled in after school activities (as the school-leaving age increased), learning in mixed-sex classrooms was seen to encourage girls to be more assertive while taming the more brutish instincts of boys.

1.2 Higher Education

- **Limited Access to Universities:** Access to university education for women in Western Europe was limited at the turn of the 20th century, with few women allowed to enrol in universities or receive academic degrees. Social attitudes at the time generally believed that higher education was unnecessary for women, as their primary roles were seen as being wives and mothers.
    - **In Britain:** Universities like Oxford and Cambridge were traditionally male-only institutions, and women were excluded from earning degrees until the early 20th century. Women's colleges, like Girton College (Cambridge) and

Somerville College (Oxford), provided higher education for women, but they were not granted full academic status. Women could attend lectures, but until 1920, they were not allowed to receive degrees from these universities.

- **In Germany:** Women in Germany faced similar challenges in accessing higher education. Although the University of Heidelberg admitted women as early as 1900, and other German universities followed suit in admitting women to their faculties, the number of women attending university remained low. In many cases, women who pursued higher education were often encouraged to study subjects considered more suitable for women, such as literature, languages, and the arts.
- **In France:** The French educational system had a few pioneering women in higher education. In 1900, the University of Paris (Sorbonne) began to allow women to study at a university level. However, women were not admitted to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure (the most elite French university) until after World War I.

1.3 Cultural and Societal Norms

- **Gender Roles and Expectations:** The education system in Western Europe was heavily influenced by societal norms that prescribed specific roles for women. Education for girls and young women was often seen to prepare them for domestic life rather than professional or public life. The goal of educating women was seen primarily in terms of nurturing good wives and mothers.
- **Barriers to Women's Education:** There was significant resistance to the idea of women pursuing higher education. Many believed that a woman's intellectual development should be secondary to her responsibilities in the home. Consequently, women often faced strong societal pressure not to pursue education beyond a certain point.
- **Women in Science and the Arts:** By the turn of the 20th century, some women in Western Europe began to make significant strides in fields like science, medicine, and the arts, challenging traditional gender roles. Women like Marie Curie, a pioneering physicist and chemist, proved that women could succeed in disciplines that were previously reserved for men.

1.5 Impact of World War I

The evolution of women's education in the 20th century was shaped by many factors, and World War I had a significant impact — and even though the war also created some opportunities for progress, several negative effects on women's education can also be noted during this period:

- **World War I (1914–1918):** The First World War was a significant turning point for women's roles in society. As men went off to fight, women took on a greater role in the workforce, including in professions that had been traditionally male dominated. This shift in gender roles led to a broader acceptance of the idea that women should be educated and trained for roles beyond the home.
- **Changes in Education:** During the war, many schools and universities began to open their doors to women who had previously been excluded. Women began to fill positions in offices, factories, and hospitals, and many institutions recognized the importance of providing women with the education needed to perform these roles.
- **Social Pressure to Abandon Education:** As already mentioned when men went off to war, women were increasingly expected to take on roles traditionally reserved for men, including working in factories and other war-related industries. In many societies, this created a shift in priorities, with women's education becoming less of a focus. Women, particularly young women, were often encouraged to leave school or forgo further education in favour of contributing to the war effort or supporting their families at home.
- **Shift in Educational Opportunities:** Although many women entered the workforce in wartime industries, the societal shift that valued women's roles as mothers and wives remained strong. After the war ended, there was a push to return women to domestic roles. Many women were expected to leave their jobs and return to their homes, which in most cases limited the opportunities for continued education, especially in higher education.
- **Negative Impact on Higher Education Access:** Women's access to higher education was still quite limited during the early 20th century. Even though women had gained some ground during the war—replacing men in workplaces, some also working in administrative or medical roles—post-war, the educational field often returned to a

more conservative stance. Universities were still overwhelmingly male-dominated, and many female students struggled to gain full access to higher education or face gender biases in their academic pursuits.

Despite these challenges, it is important to note that World War I also led to some positive changes in women's education, such as the expansion of educational roles for women in fields like nursing, social work, and clerical work. However, the setbacks for women's broader educational advancement during and at once after the war were considerable.

The Different Movements for the Suffrage of Women and the Important Figures within

2.1 International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA)

The International Alliance of Women (IAW), originally founded as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1902, played a pivotal role in advocating for women's rights, particularly suffrage. Established by prominent suffragists like Carrie Chapman Catt, Millicent Fawcett, and Susan B. Anthony, it aimed to promote the full enjoyment of human rights for women and girls. While its initial focus was on women's voting rights, the organization now champions broader gender equality, including women's education. With its consultative status at the United Nations and its global reach, the IAW continues to influence women's rights worldwide, making significant contributions to the education and empowerment of women.



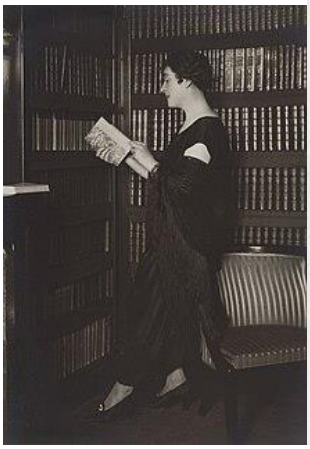
C. Chapman Catt M. Fawcett S.B. Anthony

2.2 Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes (UFSF)

The Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes (UFSF) was founded in 1909 by feminists, primarily from bourgeois or intellectual backgrounds, after attending a congress in Paris. Key founders included Jane Misme, a journalist and editor of *La Française*, who advocated for societal change for women, and Jeanne Schmahl, a woman who faced barriers to pursuing her

medical studies due to gender restrictions. Schmahl focused on practical feminist goals, notably campaigning for women's right to vote, though she passed away before seeing it realized.

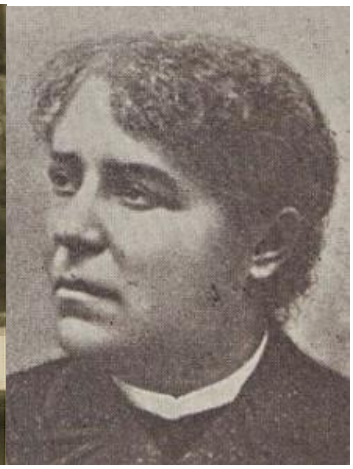
While Misme and Schmahl were instrumental in founding the UFSF, they allowed other prominent feminists, such as Cécile Brunschvicg (secretary-general) and Eliska Vincent (honorary vice-president), to take leadership roles. The UFSF was officially recognized by the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1909 as representing the French suffrage movement, marking its importance in advocating for women's rights, including the right to education.



J. Misme

J. Schmahl

C. Brunschvicg



E. Vincent

2.3 The Suffragette Movement:

The Suffragette movement in England, led by groups like the WSPU and NUWSS, fought for women’s voting rights and gender equality, using protests and civil disobedience. Their achievements, including securing the vote for women over 30 in 1918 and full equality in 1928, were key milestones in British politics. These efforts also helped pave the way for greater educational opportunities for women, as suffrage was intricately linked to broader societal changes, including access to education.

Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928) was a central figure in this movement. Her leadership helped secure women's right to vote in 1918, which empowered women in various spheres, including education. Time magazine recognized her as one of the 100 most important people of the 20th century for her role in transforming society. Though criticized for her militant tactics, her work was essential in advancing women's rights, including educational access.

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh (1876–1948), the daughter of the last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, also supported the suffragette movement. As an active member of the WSPU, she participated in protests, contributed financially, and used her royal status to raise awareness. Her advocacy was not only about voting rights but also about ensuring women had equal educational opportunities, contributing to the broader fight for gender equality.

Emmeline Pankhurst Princess Sophia Duleep Singh

Spy school during WW2

3.1 Female spies during WW2

Female spies during World War II played a significant, often underappreciated, role in espionage and intelligence gathering. Their contributions were pivotal in the success of many Allied operations, and they worked in varied and complex roles, from undercover agents to

high-level operatives, all while navigating the danger of being discovered and executed by the enemy.

One of the most well-known female spies is **Virginia Hall**, an American who became one of the most effective spies in the history of the war. Despite losing a leg in a hunting accident before the war, Hall joined the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA. Operating in Nazi-occupied France, she organized resistance groups, gathered intelligence, and helped downed Allied pilot's escape. The Germans dubbed her "The Most Dangerous Allied Spy" because of her effectiveness. Her bravery and resourcefulness were essential in disrupting German operations and in aiding the success of the D-Day invasion.

Another famous spy was **Mata Hari**, although her involvement is more complex and controversial. A Dutch exotic dancer who became famous in Paris, Mata Hari is often remembered for her seduction of powerful men, including high-ranking officers, during World War I. During WWII, she was accused by the Germans of being a spy for the Allies. Although some historians argue her guilt is uncertain, her trial and execution by the French have cemented her as one of the most iconic figures in espionage lore, even if she may have been more mythologized than an actual spy.

Nancy Wake, a New Zealand-born woman, became one of the most decorated Allied female spies. She worked for the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a British organization tasked with conducting espionage, sabotage, and resistance activities in Nazi-occupied Europe. Wake's most famous act was leading a group of resistance fighters through the mountains of France to safety, all while avoiding capture by the Gestapo. Known for her bravery, she was dubbed "The White Mouse" by the Germans due to her ability to evade capture.

Another remarkable figure is **Vera Atkins**, a British intelligence officer with the SOE. She recruited and trained many agents who were sent to France to conduct sabotage missions and gather intelligence. She was instrumental in overseeing the missions of female spies, including **Odette Sansom**, who was captured and tortured by the Germans but survived to become a war hero. Atkins was deeply involved in the tragic fate of many SOE agents and played a significant role in organizing their work and ensuring their safety when possible.

Women were particularly valuable as spies because they were often overlooked or underestimated, which allowed them to gather intelligence without raising suspicion. They could move through the enemy's ranks, meet with key figures, and blend into civilian life, which was difficult for male agents. The skills they brought—discretion, empathy, and the ability to navigate complex social dynamics—were just as vital as their physical daring and intelligence gathering.

However, the work of female spies was often perilous, and many were betrayed, captured, and executed. Those who survived rarely received the recognition they deserved, and their stories were often left out of the public narrative for years.

Today, the legacies of these women are slowly being acknowledged as essential to the success of Allied efforts in WWII. Their courage, resilience, and ingenuity not only shaped the outcome of the war but also paved the way for women in the intelligence and military services in the years that followed. Their contributions prove how women have long played a vital, though often invisible, role in shaping history.

3.2 Bletchley Park

Bletchley Park, located in Buckinghamshire, England, was the UK's main codebreaking centre during World War II, where its work played a pivotal role in deciphering German communications, including breaking the Enigma code. This intelligence, known as Ultra, was vital to the Allied victory, significantly shortening the war and saving countless lives.

Women played a crucial role at Bletchley Park, with many serving as codebreakers, clerks, and translators. They made up a generous portion of the workforce, often working on the most complex ciphers. Women like **Joan Clarke**, a cryptanalyst who worked alongside Alan Turing, and **Mavis Batey**, who deciphered important Italian codes, were instrumental in the success of Bletchley Park's operations.

Bletchley Park also had a training campus where women, many of whom were recruited directly from university, were taught skills in cryptography, languages, and mathematics.

Their contributions to breaking codes and gathering intelligence were critical to the Allied war effort, and their work at Bletchley Park remains a lasting testament to their skill and dedication.

3.3 Spy Camps & Organisations in France

During World War II, France didn't have a formal "spy school," but several organizations trained operatives in espionage and sabotage.

1. **Special Operations Executive (SOE)**: The British SOE trained French agents in espionage techniques, sabotage, and covert communication at camps like the **Polish Camp in Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne**. These were crucial for the Resistance's operations in Nazi-occupied France.
2. **French Resistance**: Various groups like **Combat** and **Franc-Tireur** informally trained recruits in intelligence gathering, sabotage, and military tactics, often with British and American assistance.
3. **École des Opérations Spéciales (ÉOS)**: This French school trained agents in clandestine warfare and worked closely with the SOE, teaching skills such as cryptography and sabotage.
4. **OSS and CIC**: The U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) also trained French operatives in espionage techniques, often in collaboration with the Resistance.

These training programs, though informal, played a vital role in preparing agents for the war effort and the fight against Nazi occupation in France.

Females in particular:

During WWII, women in the French Resistance were involved in various key organizations:

1. **The Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP)**: Women like **Madeleine Riffaud** and **Simone Segouin** were part of this armed wing of the Communist Resistance, engaged in direct combat and sabotage.

2. **The Groupes Francs**: **Lucie Aubrac** was a member of this group, which focused on rescuing prisoners and gathering intelligence.
3. **The Organisation de Résistance de l'Armée (ORA)**: This organization included women who helped with intelligence, logistics, and communications.
4. **The BBC network**: Women like **Lise London** worked as radio operators, transmitting critical messages to the Allies.

These organizations played a pivotal role in undermining Nazi control, and women were central to their operations.

3.4 Operations in Germany during WW2

- **The Abwehr**: Women like **Marga von Etzdorf** worked as couriers and provided vital intelligence to the Allies, despite the agency's eventual compromise.
- **The Kreisau Circle**: Women such as **Frau von Moltke** supported resistance efforts, including passing on information and helping in the escape of those persecuted by the Nazis.
- **The Red Orchestra (Die Rote Kapelle)**: Female members like **Melitta von Stauffenberg** (sister-in-law of Claus von Stauffenberg) were active in gathering intelligence for the Soviet Union.
- **Operation Valkyrie**: **Friedrich and Clara von Stauffenberg** were part of a network that included women aiding in resistance efforts, such as espionage and sabotage.
- **Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church**: Women like **Ilse Stöhr** were involved in helping Jews escape and aiding with espionage operations for the Allies.

3.5 What would the average woman's education look like in WW2 Germany?

During World War II in Germany, a "normal" woman's education and job were primarily shaped by Nazi ideology, which emphasized traditional gender roles. Education for girls typically focused on subjects like home economics, physical fitness, and preparing them for motherhood and domestic life. The Nazi regime promoted the idea that women's primary

duty was to raise children and support the family, particularly for the expansion of the "Aryan" population.

As a result, many women's educational paths were centred around practical skills for running a household, including cooking, cleaning, and childcare. While some women pursued more advanced education in areas like teaching, nursing, or social work, many fields—especially those involving leadership or higher academic careers—were discouraged or closed to them.

In terms of employment, most women were expected to stay at home and care for the family. However, as the war intensified, many women took on jobs in factories, offices, and hospitals to support the war effort. Some worked in roles such as secretaries, teachers, or nurses, and others were involved in civil defence, with some even serving in auxiliary military positions, such as in the Luftwaffe or working with the Red Cross. Despite these contributions, the Nazi regime still prioritized women's roles as mothers, limiting their opportunities for broader career development.

Women's Education in Western Europe: 1940s to 1960s

The period between the 1940s and 1960s was pivotal for women's education in Western Europe. This era was marked by both the challenges of recovering from the devastation of World War II and the gradual transformation of social attitudes towards gender roles and educational access for women. While the post-war period presented significant obstacles, it also set the stage for substantial advancements in women's rights, particularly in education.

4.1 Impact of World War II on Women's Education

World War II had a profound and transformative effect on women's education in Western Europe. As men went off to fight, women were called upon to fill roles in factories, hospitals, and other sectors that had traditionally been reserved for men. This led to an increase in women's participation in the workforce and, for the first time, many women had the opportunity to attend higher education institutions or take on technical training.

During the war, women were encouraged to gain skills to support the war effort, leading to a temporary expansion of educational opportunities. However, with the end of the war, many women were expected to return to their domestic roles, and educational institutions saw a reduction in the number of women enrolling in certain fields, as societal pressures pushed them back toward traditional gender roles.

4.2 Post-War Societal Expectations and Challenges

Following the end of WWII, many Western European societies experienced a strong push to return to "normalcy," which often meant a return to traditional gender roles. This included the idealization of women as wives and mothers rather than active participants in the workforce or higher education. For many women, this meant limited access to educational opportunities, especially at the higher levels. While some women were encouraged to pursue degrees in fields like teaching, nursing, and domestic sciences, there were significant barriers

to their enrolment in more prestigious or male-dominated academic fields such as law, medicine, and engineering. Additionally, universities were still overwhelmingly male-dominated, and women who did attend were often subjected to discrimination and limited academic freedom.

4.3 The Slow Expansion of Educational Opportunities

Despite the societal push toward traditional roles, the post-war period also saw gradual shifts in the availability of education for women. Many universities in Western Europe, particularly in countries like France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, began to admit more women to their programs. Women's colleges, though still limited in scope, began to expand their curricula, and in some countries, the number of female students at universities began to rise steadily.

In the UK, for example, the 1950s saw the establishment of more opportunities for women to attend higher education, and while they were still a minority in many fields, women began to make inroads into subjects that had once been reserved for men. However, the proportion of

women in academic and professional roles remained low throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

4.4 Remarkable Women Who Paved the Way

During this time, several remarkable women overcame these societal barriers and entered higher education, paving the way for future generations. A few notable examples include:

- **Simone de Beauvoir (France)**: One of the most influential intellectuals of the 20th century, de Beauvoir was a philosopher, writer, and feminist. She studied at the University of Paris and went on to become a professor. Her groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex* (1949), challenged the societal norms surrounding women's roles and education, laying the foundation for feminist theory and advocacy.
- **Marie Curie (Poland/France)**: Although Curie's major scientific achievements occurred before WWII, her legacy continued to inspire women in the 1940s and 1950s. As a two-time Nobel laureate, Curie's pioneering work in physics and chemistry served as an example for women looking to pursue careers in science. Her educational achievements opened doors for women in scientific fields during a time when higher education was still largely male-dominated.
- **Barbara Hepworth (United Kingdom)**: Hepworth was a renowned British sculptor who studied at the Royal College of Art in London in the late 1920s and 1930s. After WWII, she became one of the leading figures in modern sculpture and an inspiration to women pursuing arts education. Although Hepworth's education began before WWII, her career blossomed in the post-war years, and she became an advocate for women in the arts, showing that higher education and a successful career could go hand-in-hand for women.
- **Hilda Taba (Estonia)**: An educator and educational psychologist, Hilda Taba is noted for her work in curriculum development. She studied at the University of Tartu and later worked in various educational institutions. Taba's contributions to education, particularly in the United States, were important in the field of pedagogy and curriculum design, providing inspiration for future generations of women in education.

- **Hildegard Hamm-Brücher (Germany)** (1921–2019). She was a politician and a strong advocate for democracy and human rights in post-war Germany. After World War II, she became a member of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and worked on promoting civil rights, social reforms, and women's rights. Hamm-Brücher was also one of the first women in Germany to hold a senior political position in the federal government.

4.5 Economic and Political Factors Supporting Women's Education

During the 1950s and 1960s, as Western European economies grew and modernized, the demand for a more educated workforce became more apparent. In countries such as France, Germany, and the UK, the increasing industrialization and economic growth created a need for skilled workers, and women were increasingly seen as an important part of the solution.

While economic factors pushed for greater educational access for women, political movements advocating for gender equality also contributed. The early seeds of second-wave feminism began to take root in the 1960s, challenging the traditional roles of women and calling for greater access to education and professional opportunities. Although the impact of these movements would not be fully realized until later in the century, they began to shift societal attitudes towards the idea of women as capable and equal contributors to academia and the workforce.

4.6 Challenges and Progress in the 1960s

The 1960s was a period of notable change for women's education in Western Europe, with more women enrolling in higher education and entering professional fields. However, barriers remained. Cultural norms and family expectations still played a significant role in limiting women's educational choices, and many women were still steered toward traditionally "female" professions like teaching and nursing.

Despite these limitations, the 1960s marked the beginning of a significant increase in the number of women pursuing university degrees. In some countries, such as the UK and France, women began to make greater strides in fields like law, medicine, and social sciences.

Universities slowly began to recognize the importance of supporting female students, with some offering scholarships and other initiatives to increase female enrolment.

4.7 Legacy of the 1940s-1960s on Women's Education in Western Europe

The educational progress made by women in Western Europe between the 1940s and 1960s laid the foundation for the greater gender equality in education that would unfold in the following decades. While significant challenges remained, the changes started during this period helped to reshape the educational landscape for women in Western Europe. Women were no longer confined to the margins of academia, and the 1960s set the stage for the more significant breakthroughs in gender equality that would follow in the 1970s and beyond.

The Change of Higher Education in the 70's

The 1970s were a transformative decade for women's education in Western Europe, marking significant strides toward greater gender equality in academic opportunities. The period witnessed the effects of the second-wave feminist movement, which demanded equal access to education and challenged the societal norms that had historically limited women's roles in the educational system. This decade was characterized by legislative reforms, shifts in social attitudes, and the expansion of opportunities for women in higher education, all of which laid the groundwork for future advancements in women's educational rights and achievements.

5.1 Legislative Reforms and Policy Changes

Throughout the 1970s, numerous Western European countries implemented legislative reforms aimed at eradicating gender discrimination in education. One of the most notable pieces of legislation was the **Sex Discrimination Act of 1975** in the United Kingdom, which made it illegal for educational institutions to discriminate against students based on their sex. This law significantly impacted women's access to education by removing legal barriers that had previously restricted their opportunities in both primary and higher education.

In France, the **Law on Equal Access to Higher Education (1972)** was another critical step in ensuring that women had the same educational opportunities as men. This law sought to eliminate gender-based barriers to university admissions and facilitated the increase in female students at higher education institutions. Similarly, in West Germany, reforms in the 1970s saw an increase in co-educational schools, promoting gender equality in the classroom and making higher education more accessible for women.

These legal reforms were vital in dismantling the traditional educational structures that had largely excluded or marginalized women, providing them with the legal right to pursue academic success on equal terms with men.

5.2 Changing Social Attitudes

The feminist movement of the 1970s played a crucial role in reshaping public perceptions of women's education. Women's liberation movements across Western Europe emphasized the importance of education as a tool for achieving social, economic, and political equality. The growing demand for women's rights extended to all aspects of life, including education, where there was increasing recognition that women should not be confined to gender-specific educational tracks or limited career choices.

Women's education was increasingly seen not only as a personal right but also as an essential part of broader societal progress. As women began to demand equal opportunities, there was a growing acceptance that women had the same intellectual ability as men and deserved access to the same academic subjects. This shift in mindset helped break down the traditional segregation of academic fields, particularly in the sciences and higher education.

5.3 Access to Higher Education

The 1970s marked a significant expansion of women's participation in higher education across Western Europe. More women were enrolling in universities and pursuing degrees in fields previously dominated by men. For example, in the United Kingdom, the proportion of women attending university increased dramatically during the decade. The growing

availability of scholarships and government funding for female students, as well as the easing of entry requirements, contributed to this surge in female enrolment.

In countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands, the number of women attending universities rose steadily throughout the 1970s, reflecting the increasing acceptance of women in higher education. However, while women began to enter universities in greater numbers, they still faced significant barriers, particularly in fields such as engineering, mathematics, and the sciences, which remained male-dominated. Nevertheless, the increase in female enrolment in higher education signalled a monumental shift in the educational landscape, one that would continue to evolve in subsequent decades.

5.4 The Rise of Female Participation in Non-Traditional Fields

One of the most striking changes in the 1970s was the slow but steady rise in women pursuing education in fields traditionally dominated by men. For example, women began to enter disciplines such as law, medicine, and economics in larger numbers. While they still faced societal resistance and were often seen as "exceptions" in these fields, their increasing presence marked a significant departure from earlier decades, when women were generally expected to study subjects like teaching, nursing, or the humanities.

This shift was partially fuelled by societal changes that encouraged women to take on professional roles beyond domestic responsibilities. Feminist activists advocated for women to pursue careers that required higher education, arguing that education was the key to achieving both personal and professional autonomy. This message resonated with many women who, during the 1970s, began to challenge traditional gender roles and pursue careers in sectors that had previously been closed to them.

5.5 Continued Gender Inequalities in Education

Despite these advances, women in the 1970s still faced significant gender-related challenges within the educational system. While legal reforms had removed many of the barriers to women's education, societal expectations and stereotypes persisted. Women were still often encouraged to pursue "feminine" subjects, such as nursing, teaching, and the arts, while

subjects like engineering, physics, and mathematics were still seen as male territories. This segregation of academic fields limited women's opportunities in certain professional sectors and perpetuated the idea that women's intellectual abilities were best suited to particular roles.

Moreover, many women in the 1970s continued to face challenges balancing academic careers with the societal expectation of domestic duties. For some, the pressure to marry and raise children often conflicted with the pursuit of higher education or professional success. Despite this, the 1970s laid the groundwork for future generations of women to challenge these constraints more effectively.

Conclusion

The 1970s were a defining decade for women's education in Western Europe, driven by a combination of legal reforms, social change, and shifting gender norms. While noteworthy progress was made in terms of access to education and the expansion of opportunities for women in higher education, challenges remained, particularly in overcoming gendered stereotypes about what women could or should study. Nevertheless, the progress made during this decade was instrumental in opening doors for women in education, setting the stage for further advances in gender equality in the years to come. The 1970s represented a crucial moment in the history of women's education, one that laid the foundation for future generations to achieve academic and professional equality.

Women's Education in Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s: A Clear Shift Toward Equality

The 1980s and 1990s were decades of major change for women's education in Western Europe. These years saw a sharp increase in the number of women attending school and university, entering new academic fields, and beginning to challenge long-standing gender roles in both education and society.

6.1 1980s: Breaking Through the Barriers

In the 1980s, more women were staying in school longer and enrolling in higher education than ever before.

- **More Women in University**: In countries like the UK, France, and West Germany, women began to enrol in universities in far greater numbers. By the end of the decade, women made up nearly half of university students in many countries — a dramatic change from earlier generations.
- **Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Education**: Feminist movements pushed schools and governments to examine gender bias in textbooks, classroom dynamics, and subject choices. For example, girls were often steered toward "feminine" subjects like literature and languages, while boys were encouraged to study science or technology. Activists and educators began to challenge these assumptions.
- **Limited Progress in STEM**: Despite some efforts, women remained underrepresented in science, engineering, and technology. Girls were still less likely to choose STEM subjects in secondary school, and those who did often faced discouragement or lack of support.

6.2 1990s: Moving Toward Gender Parity

By the 1990s, the presence of women in education was not only accepted — it was becoming normal. But new questions emerged: not just "Are women in school?" but "What are they studying, and what happens after graduation?"

- **Women Outnumbered Men in Many Areas**: In many Western European countries, more women than men were enrolling in higher education by the mid-1990s — particularly in the humanities, social sciences, and healthcare.
- **Policy Support for Gender Equality**: The European Union began to push harder for gender equality across all areas of life, including education. Laws were introduced to promote equal treatment, and schools were encouraged to remove barriers that discouraged girls from pursuing certain subjects or careers.
- **Support for Adult Women and Career Returners**: The 1990s also saw more government support for women returning to education after having children, especially through vocational training and adult education programs. These helped many women re-enter the workforce with new skills.
- **The "Glass Ceiling" in Education**: While women were achieving more academically, they were still underrepresented in leadership roles in universities and research institutions. Men continued to dominate the top academic and administrative positions.

6.3 Why This Matters

The changes in women's education during these two decades had a profound impact on Western European society:

- **Greater Workforce Participation**: With higher education levels, more women entered the labour market, contributing to economic growth and reshaping traditional gender roles.

- **Delayed Marriage and Childbearing**: Education gave women more independence, which contributed to trends like later marriage and fewer children — particularly in urban areas.
- **New Social Expectations**: As women's educational achievements became more visible, society began to rethink assumptions about gender roles at home, at work, and in politics.

Conclusion

The 1980s and 1990s were a turning point for women's education in Western Europe. Women gained access to higher education in unprecedented numbers, began to challenge long-standing gender norms, and laid the groundwork for future progress in gender equality. However, the progress was uneven: deep-rooted stereotypes, inequality in certain fields, and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions showed that the fight for full educational and professional equality was far from over.

During the 1980s and 1990s, women's education in Western Europe underwent significant changes, driven by shifting societal attitudes, policies, and increasing demands for gender equality. These decades marked a period of transformation, as women gained greater access to educational opportunities and began to break down the barriers that had historically limited their participation in various academic and professional fields.

In the 1980s, there was a continued push for gender equality, spurred by feminist movements that had gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. By this time, women had made notable strides in primary and secondary education, but disparities remained in higher education and certain professional fields. Women were still underrepresented in disciplines like science, engineering, and economics, while they dominated traditionally female fields such as teaching, nursing, and social work.

However, the 1980s also saw significant improvements in these areas. Educational reforms and affirmative action policies were introduced across many Western European countries, aiming to close the gender gap. For example, scholarships and initiatives were created to encourage women to pursue non-traditional fields, and women's access to higher education became more broadly accepted and promoted.

The 1990s brought even more progress, as women began to outnumber men in many areas of higher education. By the end of the decade, women accounted for more than half of university students in several Western European countries, including the UK, France, and Germany. The increasing number of women in academia led to a shift in the professional landscape as well. More women were entering professions that had been historically dominated by men, such as law, business, and medicine.

The 1990s also saw a rise in the recognition of gender equality in education as a fundamental human right, reinforced by international agreements like the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Policies aimed at improving work-life balance, such as parental leave and affordable childcare, further supported women in balancing education with family life.

In summary, the 1980s and 1990s in Western Europe were transformative decades for women's education. The expansion of educational opportunities, coupled with societal and policy changes, led to greater gender equality in academic achievement and professional representation, setting the stage for further advancements in the 21st century.

The Use of Samplers throughout the 20th century

The English word 'sampler' derives from the Latin 'exemplum', or the old French term 'essamplaire', meaning 'an example'. Before the introduction of printed designs, embroiderers and lacemakers needed a way to record and reference different designs, stitches and effects. The answer was to create a sampler – a personal reference work featuring patterns and elements that the owner may have learned or copied from others, to recreate again in new pieces.

The upheavals of the First World War contributed to a decline of the sampler in the 20th century. However, needlework guilds and art schools, alongside dedicated individuals, helped to keep needlework skills alive. Even though it became less popular in the 20th century, samplers where still kept alive by the small-town schools and local village schools (including Luxembourg). Boys and girls were still separated in various lessons and girls where partly still taught how to cook in the 1950's.

Embroidery samplers in the 20th century underwent significant transformation and even though they were used much less reflecting shifts in social, cultural, and artistic trends; here's a brief summary of how they were used during that period:

7.1 Early 20th Century (1900s-1930s)

- **Traditional Use**: In the early 1900s, embroidery samplers were still largely seen as educational tools for young girls, helping them learn needlework techniques like cross-stitch, satin stitch, and hemstitch. These samplers often included alphabets, verses, and motifs such as flowers or animals.
- **Domesticity and Craft**: As part of the broader domestic arts, samplers symbolized home skills and femininity. Women and girls were often taught embroidery as a form of moral education, reinforcing the ideals of patience and diligence.

7.2 Mid 20th Century (1940s-1960s)

- **World War II Impact**: During World War II, there was a shift toward practicality, with samplers evolving into more decorative items for home interiors. Embroidery became part of a broader "make-do-and-mend" culture, where women sought ways to express creativity within the constraints of rationing and limited resources.
- **Art and Craft Movements**: The rise of the Arts and Crafts movement earlier in the century influenced the design of samplers, leading to more artistic and intricate patterns. Some samplers were created as expressions of artistic individuality rather than just functional learning tools.

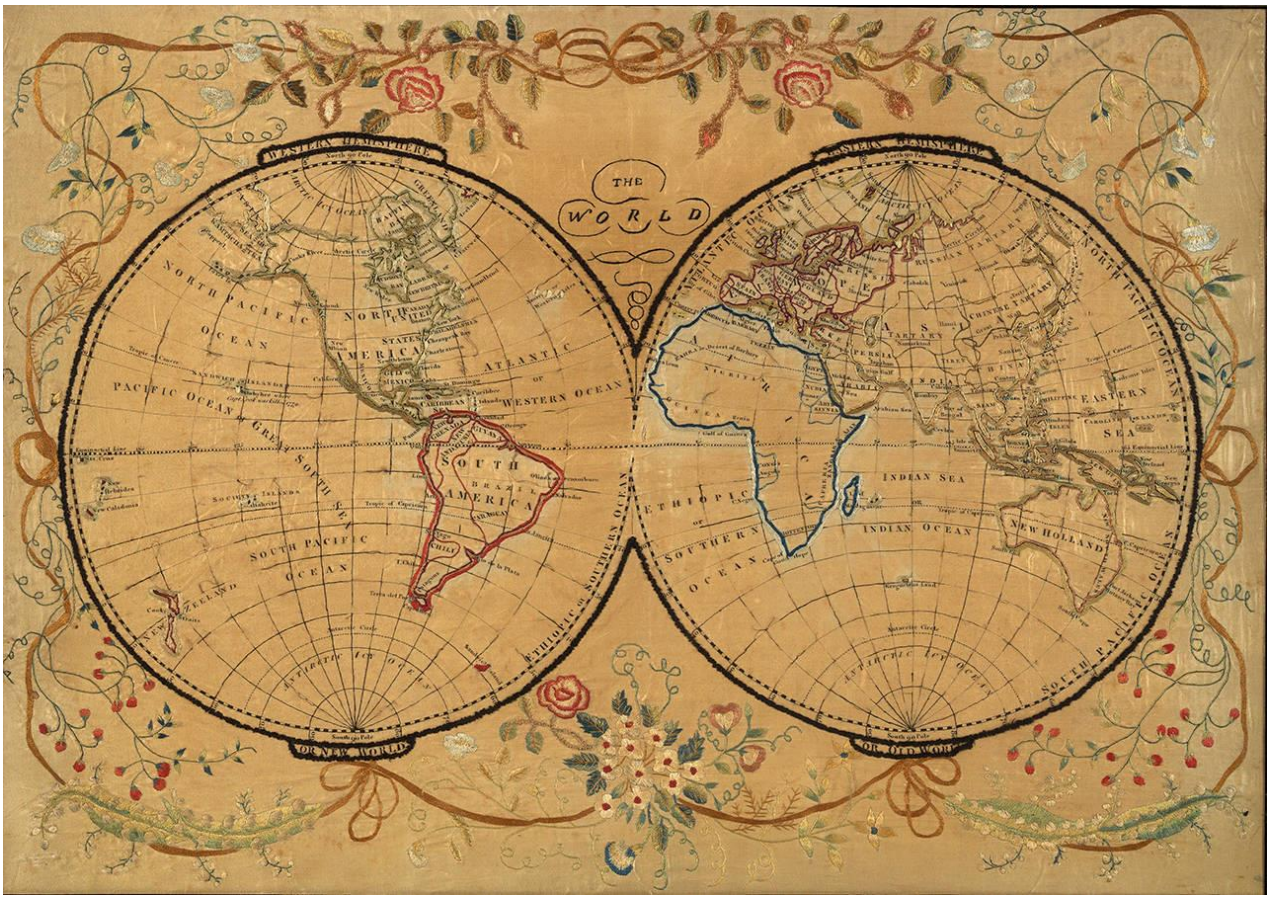
7.3 Late 20th Century (1970s-1990s)

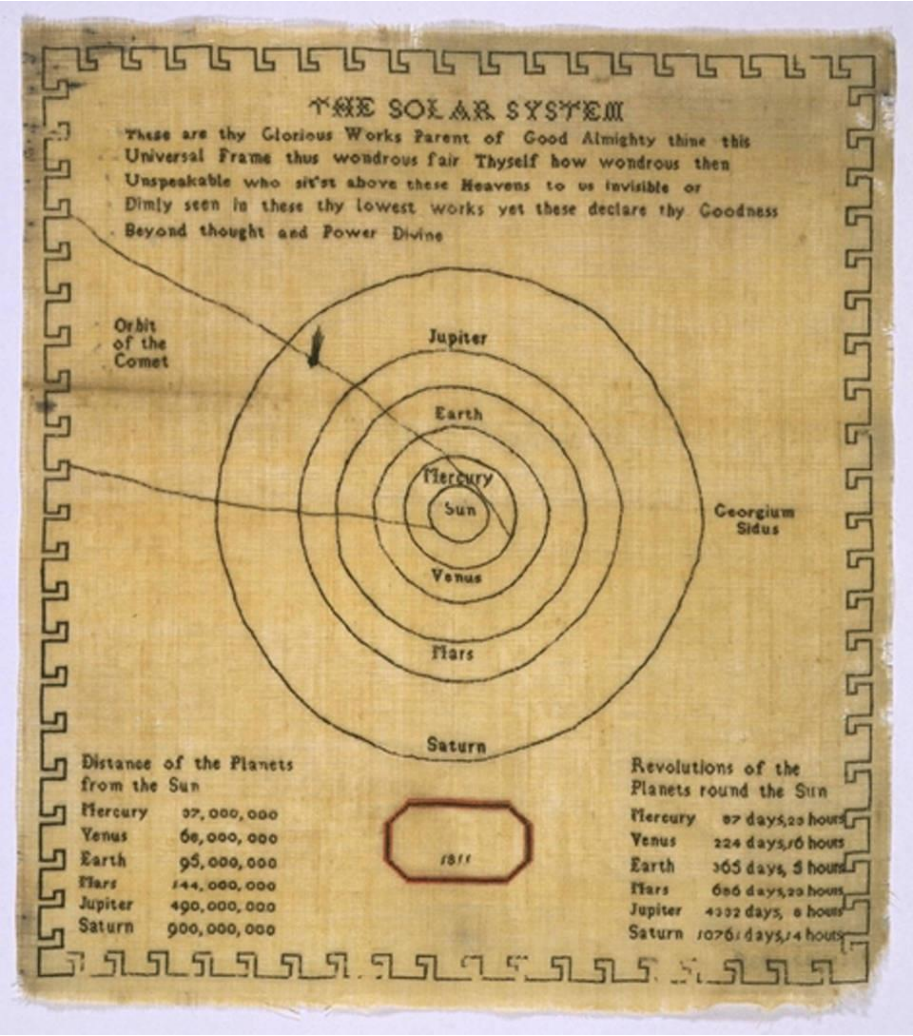
- **Feminist and Craft Revival**: In the 1970s and beyond, embroidery samplers became part of the feminist craft revival. Artists and crafters used samplers to explore themes of identity, gender, and personal history. This period saw samplers being reimagined to reflect contemporary issues, with messages and motifs that were far from the traditional.
- **Pop Culture Influence**: Samplers began to reflect popular culture, incorporating slogans, humour, and elements of modern life. The simple and repetitive nature of embroidery was sometimes juxtaposed with messages about social change or political commentary.

7.4 Expressing yourself through your sampler

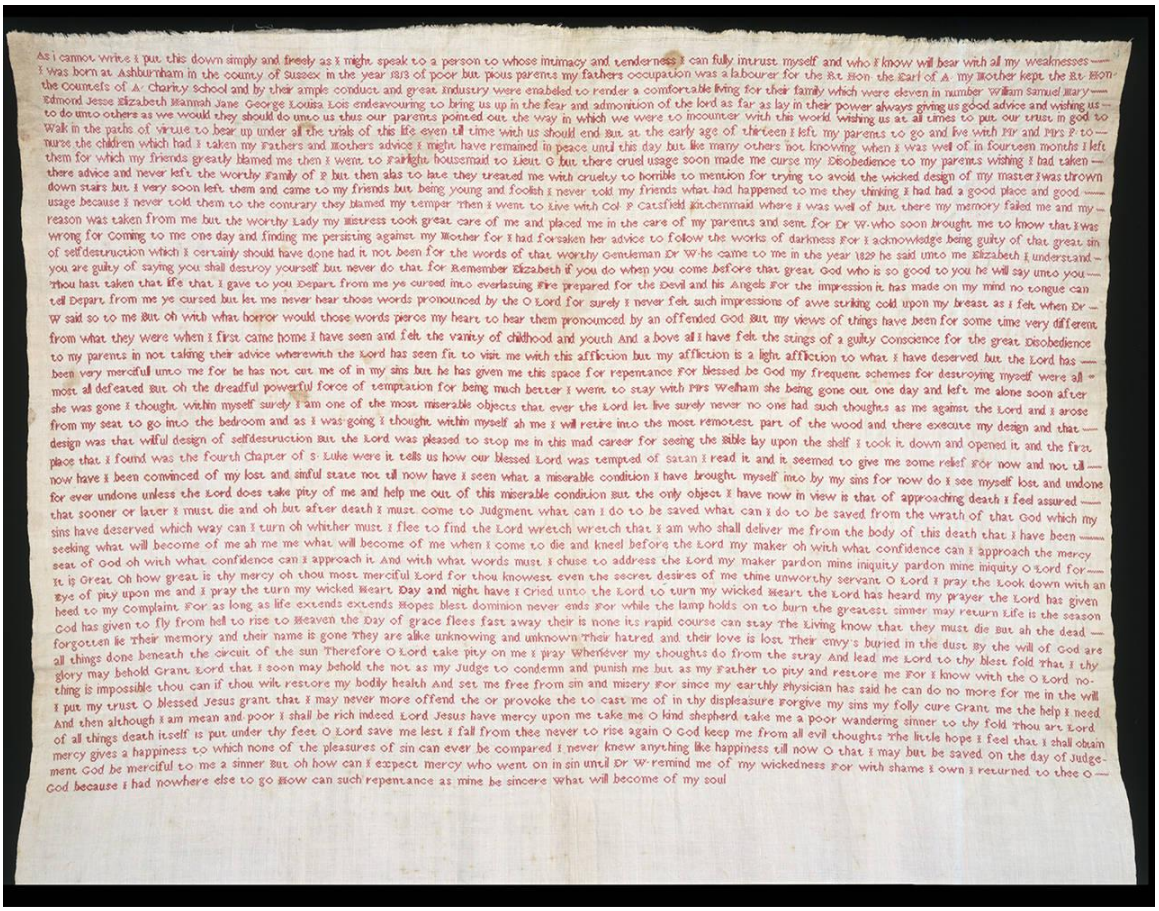
Some women who were denied higher education decided to express themselves through their samplers. Traditionally a sampler consists of two big alphabets, one small alphabet and various decoration embroidery patterns followed by the year of making and one's name. These were meant to 'prepare' a young lady for her later duties in the household. The decorative designs were practice for later decorating of tablecloths and other decorative household ornaments. The alphabets were a kind of practice for later sewing in of initials into your underwear so that you wouldn't lose them on collective washing day. However, some women decided to take

samplers to a whole other level by stitching maps, globes or in one case even a whole solar system.





Another unique example includes a huge confessional text written by a nurse in the late 19th century and though it is not in this timeline I still wanted to include this sampler to show the sheer commitment of some women.



Conclusion

By the end of the 20th century, embroidery samplers were no longer just tools for teaching or symbols of domesticity. They became a medium for personal expression, feminist exploration, and artistic experimentation. This shift mirrored the broader transformations in society, including the changing roles of women, the influence of the feminist movement, and the rise of craft as an art form in its own right.

My own Attempt at a Sampler

For my sampler I wanted to go for something very simple and classic because I would find much more to work with, but I did decide to make it slightly more colourful than a traditional sampler as these would often be restricted to one or two colours as, depending from what societal class you came from, colours where a lot less accessible to the wider public than now. After having chosen the cloth that I would work with from my mother's supply I started by stitching a very plain, loose black marking of the estimated middle (I say estimated as I counted it by hand and considering how small the squares are it is highly likely that I miscounted). I started the real cross stitch with a simple green framing as you can see in the first picture which I left like that for the moment as I didn't know if I would have enough time to fill it in (this turned out to be a very good decision indeed). Then I began the actual design (not my own, the link to it you can find under 'Books' in my Sources) with an old-fashioned, light purple, capital letter alphabet as you can see in the second picture. For this alphabet I chose a pretty simple design because it was the first and I wanted to get back in to practice having not done this in several years.

Between every alphabet there should – traditionally – be a decorative separation which varies each time. For the first separation I did what I thought would be a very easy and plain separation, but which turned out to be a quite a complex one as it used up a lot of time and thread. In future I decided to stick to simpler separations so that it wouldn't take up too much time. You can see the size difference between the first and second separation in the two following pictures. I wanted to do a kind of rainbow with the colours of my alphabets which turned out to be less of a good idea as the separation between the first and second alphabet and the second alphabets colours turned out to look so similar that you could think they are the same. I didn't think about how much math this project involved so a few miscalculations later my second alphabet was finished but had two decidedly visible gaps which I later decided to fill in with butterfly and bird motifs I found on the internet.

Between my second alphabet, my third alphabet, my numbers and my first decoration I am afraid I forgot to take pictures of the step-by-step progress, but I can assure you that I did do it. Decorations can vary from normal floral decorations to complex and personalised patterns,

and I wanted to try and combine both to make this not only a fun project but also a personal pride. So after having finished with my alphabets and numbers, my mother bought me a few patterns on Etsy to start with. The first pattern we bought was that of a Lily. I thought this would be a pretty addition to the sampler and – since my name is Lily – I thought it to be quite fitting.

After having finished that I filled in the bigger gap by the second bigger alphabet which is the only design on this sampler I created myself (even though I did have inspiration). I really like how it turned out, from the colours to cute heart, it's my second favourite design.

For the final – and my favourite – part, comes the fox. Foxes are my favourite animals, and we found a wonderful pattern of a fox with a beautiful background. Even if there wasn't enough space to put it on my sampler, we made it work and I don't think that this detail matters that much, I think it turned out very good.

After this I added some finishing touches to fill in the gaps as we4ll as adding my initials and the year as that is also done in a classic sampler.

Closing words

This was a very interesting and challenging project for me. I liked researching and writing it as well as creating my own sampler. I admit I thought it was going to turn out slightly different, but I learned a lot of interesting facts about women's education on the way, and I am happy about how it turned out. The part I found probably the most interesting was researching about the suffrage movements and the difference between during and after WWI for the women who had to replace the men in the workforce and how they were just expected to literally go back to the kitchen and 'give the men back their jobs'. I am also very happy with my sampler and, even though it was a lot of work I genuinely enjoyed making it. My mother and I were very lucky to – during me making this project – we were offered some old samplers from a lady whose grandmother had a sewing shop in Mersch. The samplers were made between 1890 – 1915 so not completely in my timeline but still an interesting addition to my presentation. I would like to thank my mother and my tutrice for helping me find resources and help me with my sampler.

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