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Lifelong Education for Women: General and Liberal Studies for Women Fulfilling Traditional Social Roles

"From Their Point of View"

By GLADYS S. KASHDIN
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General and liberal education has been a major interest in my own life and career. My classroom and social contacts with women in college and adult education reinforced my own conviction that it enhances the quality and style of a woman's life in ways which defy statistical analysis.

This past summer I asked 75 women if they would help me in formulating this idea. Some were former students, acquaintances, colleagues, others were suggested by interested women. Therefore, I was not acquainted with many of the respondents. The form which these women were asked to complete elicited information about age, educational background, and occupation. The two most important questions were (1) What social roles do you think you fill? and (2) In what ways have your general and liberal studies affected the quality and style of your life?
Because this last question required testimonial answers, the chairperson of my department was frankly skeptical that I’d receive many responses. Well, 45 women answered, at great length and in detail. Their ages range from 14 years to 80; two-thirds of the women are between 30 and 60. Most of them live in Florida, but answers came from Maine, Canada, Michigan, Georgia and New York. They are white, black and red, most religions, most educational levels. They are unmarried, married, divorced, and widowed.

Seven of my respondents attended high school and adult education classes only. Twenty attended undergraduate classes, some for one year; most received a degree. Eighteen attended graduate school, about half received a degree. Seventeen women wrote that they are attending classes now, twenty-six were not. Thirty-four in all planned to attend classes in the future. Only nine do not plan to attend and they were generally the older, retired woman.

The answers to the question concerning social roles revealed a very interesting pattern. While the married women generally listed themselves as mother, wife, widow, volunteer community and church worker (our traditional roles), almost all the women added social roles which are more descriptive of functions and occupations. For example: 13 teachers, 13 students, 12 workers, 7 (only 7) homemakers, 7 friends, 4 artists, 3 lovers and 2 companions to husbands. They also see themselves as consumers, taxpayers, and chauffeurs, voters, etc. The more education a woman had attained, the more roles she listed. Two women described their social roles as a process. One young woman, 26, who is or was married, listed the roles she considered primary: feminist, humanist, counselor, lover, friend, confidante, citizen, artist and student. This is what she wrote: “I want to be quite clear in my own definition of social role. For myself, I do not conceptualize a social role as a ‘mask’ that I don at appropriate times. Such a definition suggests a rather static idea of roles. Instead, I view my roles as integrated parts of myself which I expose at different times. Filling my varied roles becomes a dynamic process and not a change from one static frame to another. My roles are manifold and involve relationships I have with other people. I am not defined by any one of those relationships and I am more than the sum of my social roles.”

The second woman, older, divorced, mother of 3 wrote: “We fulfill (or fill) roles as circumstances demand. To ascribe ‘traditional’ to any role other than ‘motherhood’—and that is rather divinely planned as a function, at least—seems to ignore the very emergence of varied lifestyles. And ‘fulfilling’ the role of motherhood has been rather successfully accomplished by non-female surrogates. I like to feel that ‘fulfilling’ the role of friend—albeit resulting in relationships of varying intensities—moves away from the hidebound traditionalism and
allows one to ‘fill’ more definite roles, while adapting to the particular needs of the moment."

She listed her social roles as (1) lifelong friend, and lover of life, and (2) of varying degrees of duration: child, pupil, daughter, wife, ex-wife, mother, student, colleague, employee, supervisor.

One writer put it this way: “I question the concept of ‘traditional’ roles of women on the one hand yet on the other hand feel that women are performing ‘traditional’ roles but in a ‘new way.’ What has emerged is not so much a change in traditional roles of women, rather it is a change in the life-style and life-quality of contemporary women.”

Their answers are testimonials, rather than scientific treatises; but they are quite objective, considering that we are dealing with subjective material. And they are very thoughtful, revealing, or rather, corroborating a social phenomenon of long standing, that is, social change and education go hand in hand. If you want to maintain a particular cultural and economic status quo, then you must control the amount and type of education of the people. It will be much easier to maintain the idea that there are traditional roles for women if their education is limited to the work and social skills necessary for wife, mother, homemaker and low-paid labor. The more general and liberal education a woman obtains, sooner or later, the more aware she will be that old “traditions” limit her development as an individual; and the more aware she is, the more ways she will find to change the pattern.

Our younger women, for whom educational opportunities have been more available, are making these changes in their life-style earlier in their life-cycle.

And this brings me to the major part of my study—and the ways in which general and liberal studies affect the quality and life-style of women, and by extension, their families. Curiously, or maybe not, husbands were rarely mentioned, children often.

If we look at the testimonies, in age groups of teens and twenties, thirties, forties, etc., another interesting pattern appears. It is actually possible to trace the effect of liberal studies on the lives of American women. Taken by decades then, these are some of the highlights, some of their insights.

The 2 fourteen year olds and the women in their early twenties seem to be taking their liberal education as a right. They are the beneficiaries of the changes that have come about in the last few years and it is a source of amazement to them to learn that educational choices were not always available to women. Right now, this group is gobbling up new experiences and insights as fast as they can and loving it. Their full-time occupation is that of student, they are aware
of themselves as individuals and view their liberal studies as a means
to develop their talents and potentials.

This is a fast-moving age. Changes have been coming so swiftly,
five or ten years will show a difference in attitude. For instance, an­
other student, in her late 20's is not only aware of herself, but of her
first-hand, bitter experiences with sexism in university education.
“Sexism is no longer an abstract concept for me . . . it is a blatant
practice by the university system to systematically undermine the po­
tential of women—the potential which is mine. I am more determined
than ever to invest my energy in doing something about it.” This young
woman, who is now a graduate student in rehabilitative counseling,
is ready to accept responsibility for the choices she makes, knowing
full well that her choices may be subjective, but they are hers.

For the women in their 30’s and 40’s, the anger isn’t so bitter, but
it is there, underlying the words as a substratum. All of these women
are wives, mothers, and homemakers and all but 4 have professional
careers, too. Their answers all contain phrases like: most exciting, great
fun, great enrichment, a feeling of satisfaction, of independence, of
accomplishment, expanding the mind, more awareness, sharing with
others, but several writers expressed insights which deserve further
consideration.

“It is so easy for a wife and mother to totally subjugate herself to
her husband and children, that it is very important to me, as a per­
son, to have an identity that is solely mine. As a student working
toward a goal, or taking a class just for fun, I am able to achieve this
separate identity. To be a total person, without appendages, is not
only good for me, but I feel it makes me a more interesting and excit­
ing person to live with. Nothing is more boring than a group of
women who can talk of nothing but their children and/or husbands.
My grandmother, at age 85, is still reading and learning, and can
converse extremely well on a wide variety of subjects. This is what I
want for myself and my life—I abhor the thought of stagnating and
spending a dull, boring old age. I strongly feel that most women allow
themselves to be herded into a certain niche in life and there they
remain until they die, wasting their talent and abilities and time!”

This young woman, age 31, has accepted the traditional roles of
wife, mother and housewife, and will probably continue in them, but
she is not going to lose her identity, her “self” in them.

Significantly, most of this group began their college studies after
marriage, and all are continuing to study.

“Before I started taking courses, I had been home taking care of
my children for 8 years; before that worked full-time in an insurance
office. Until I branched out from this existence I felt practically
tongue-tied to express myself in a group of any size.” She is now PTA
President and a Substitute Teacher.
One woman stated it was an advantage to pursue her general education later; since she already knew who she was, she could “select or refuse to add to the total.” “Now joy comes in knowing I have a good background, the ability to express and share it, the stamina to pursue it and the sense to forget the unwanted and cherish that which means something to me.” She is Community Relations Librarian, active in AAUW and Soroptomist, etc., and keeps house for 3 children and a mother.

Another quote: “My high school education meant that I could be gainfully employed; after one year of working I got married and started a family . . . Both my husband and I started our college education after we were married.” They took turns working while the other studied. “With both of us holding college degrees, we felt more secure financially and socially. Not only more secure, but more aware. Education removes many blinds.” She is an instructor at a Community College in art and humanities, has a real estate license, and is President of an AAUW branch. “I am hoping that thru AAUW, I will be able to do something constructive for the community and for all humanity.”

And an administrative assistant, divorced, mother of 3 wrote: “To me, general education is the key to broader horizons; education can be a means to an end or a life-long companion.”

The group of women in their 50’s are pretty special. This is the “age group that was caught financially by a depression and emotionally by a world-wide war.” Most of the women in this group mention being poor or middle class; they can be distinguished, however, by family expectations. Very few families considered an education beyond high school necessary for a girl. Those rare parents who wanted more for their daughters, couldn’t afford it. And so we find in this group, more women who attended high school only, and some interesting insights into the effects of general education, or the lack of it, on the life-style of women. These women listed their social roles as worker, housewife, mother and wife. Their education was mainly directed toward attaining work skills. Here are some direct quotes:

“It has been the means of earning a good salary during my working years which has made it possible to lead a better life than I was accustomed to during my childhood; I was raised in a poor household.”

A secretary wrote: “I have taken courses to help me in work duties.”

Another woman wrote that her education by necessity was always work-oriented: secretarial skills, a medical terminology course, etc.; she now works for a mortgage company as a foreclosure clerk. “There is still a restless feeling of not having attained a college education.”

Far more important than what was said, is what is left unsaid. These are the women who grew up in the great depression when
economic and social restrictions shaped one’s life to a great extent. Material survival was more important than anything else. Special interests had to wait. There is no mention of courses taken for their own personal development or enjoyment. There is only the awareness of something missing in their lives, not the awareness of something gained.

Compare this to another statement by a woman who graduated from high school in 1912, and studied some music and painting afterwards—this oldest correspondent, now 80, said, “My ‘general education’ has served me very well. I have ‘made it do’ quite successfully by being a ‘most of the time’ housewife. My musical education of long ago still lingers on at times. My attempts at art were greatly enjoyed. Occasionally, even at this late date, the urge to try it all again gets strong.” The depression and its pressures cannot be fingered as the sole cause of this limited development. Several women who attended college but concentrated on career-oriented studies only made much the same statements and omissions.

All the other respondents in the 50-year age group had some college education beyond high school. The general attitude is that they were making up for lost time; and they were grateful for the opportunity to do something for themselves, while not neglecting their family or occupational responsibilities. They are keenly aware of the financial benefits of college education, yet most expressed the greater importance of the intangible profits; one woman wrote: “My parents taught us very early that education was the one thing which no one could take away; education was never a functional thing, but was to be regarded always as intellectual currency—a source, or base for judgments based on reasoning and knowledge and, incidentally, a shaper of taste regarding excellence in humanistic achievements. It also became part of one’s moral fiber in terms of judgments bearing on, say, social and economic questions.”

In one way or another, this idea was repeated again and again—their general education enabled them to participate in the activities of life with more knowledge, more assurance, more enjoyment, less frustration and less boredom, “I chose education as my exodus from a segregated vacuum, . . . I am happy to be able to identify and compare the changes that have occurred in my life time to other poignant and dramatic eras. This extra dimension has been available to me through wide reading in history, psychology and philosophy.” Another wrote, “My liberal educational background is excellent to draw upon for writing now, and, in the future, when I shall grow old, I expect my interest in continuing education to keep ‘restoring my soul.’ ” And another, “They have improved the quality and style of my life. One cycle has seemed to move into the other more smoothly because of my studies.” This writer also sees it as a preparation for retirement. And another: “At age 54 I feel this is only the beginning and I antici-
pate an even richer future.” All of these women regard their liberal education as helpful in raising their families and establishing the quality of the family environment.

This was also expressed by one woman who, after only one year of college, then raised her family in an increasingly affluent and social environment. Her busy life revolves around family and business activities; but she ended her statement with the question, “So why am I bored?”

Among the group in their sixties, and seventies there were some at the height of their professional careers, and others retired, from work or from raising families. They spoke strongly about the benefits of on-going general education for women in their later years, when retirement, widowhood, the children grown and gone, have left them to their own resources. They express a certain serenity and satisfaction about their choice to study, and a refreshing stubbornness in pursuing their own interests. Neither the criticism of their peers or the younger generation can deter them.

“My family grown and out on their own, I made the remark, ‘I think I’ll take a few courses, in fact, work for a degree.’ ‘What? You return to school, whatever for at your age?’ ‘What could you possibly do?’

Perturbed, not at the questions but the tone, the grinding undertone that bore so deeply within me, the tone of a put-down, slowly my skin crawled away, my mind groped for words only to find they disappeared within my skin and I was standing, passive and not responding, unable to do so. This incident coupled with others similar confirmed my will to fulfill my desire and once active within my studies, I found them to be a rewarding experience and wondered why I delayed and waited so long. The most meaningful realization is an insight and understanding of myself. (2) A deeper appreciation of myself as a person within my own might. (3) Importantly, it is a joy, new exposure/new knowledge changes an individual and one is not where she/he was before, this in turn has changed my attitude towards others I come in contact with. (4) Besides what is life for but to be more. (5) It beats living in a vacuum.” She concluded with the statement “God is where man’s knowledge is of himself.”

I have attempted to show, by using the actual words of the women who participated in this study, and by reading between the lines, the effect of general and liberal studies, or the lack of them, on the lives of women during their life-cycle, from the second decade to the ninth. Depending on economic circumstances, liberal education has been a luxury, a privilege, an opportunity, and a right. The intangible benefits count for more than any financial ones. I believe it is important that we listen to these voices, for once again, as the trend in education becomes increasingly career-oriented, we, who are in the business of
improving the quality of life through liberal studies, are under pressure to justify our work. Their words are our justification.