



## The Role of Freethinkers in Enhancing the Education of Girls in Britain in the Pre-1840s

دور المفكرين الأحرار في تعزيز تعليم الفتيات في بريطانيا في فترة ما قبل أربعينيات القرن التاسع عشر

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### Abstract:

This article proposes that the Freethinkers in Britain were the original promoters of girls' education in the pre-1840s. The study adopts the descriptive and analytical approach to address the proposed claim. Also, it rests on two central arguments to demonstrate the Freethinkers' heritage on the education and empowerment of girls. The first argument is the Freethinkers' advocacy for a more inclusive education, which we refer to as secular education. The second one is their support for science-based curriculum in girls' education. The analysis showed that the Freethinkers advanced strong opinions, not only about religious issues, but also about the education of women. More importantly, they were direct points of reference for the feminist advocates of girls' education who came later.

**Key words:** Education of girls; Empowerment; Freethinkers; Science; Secular education

### ملخص :

يقترح هذا المقال أن المفكرين الأحرار في بريطانيا كانوا المروجين الأصليين لتعليم الفتيات في فترة ما قبل أربعينيات القرن التاسع عشر. وتعتمد الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي والتحليلي لمعالجة الادعاء المقترح. كما تستند إلى فرضيتين أساسيتين لإثبات إرث المفكرين الأحرار فيما يتعلق بتعليم وتمكين الفتيات. الحجة الأولى هي دعوة المفكرين الأحرار إلى تعليم أكثر شمولاً، والذي نشير إليه بالتعليم العلماني. الحجة الثانية هي دعمهم للمناهج القائمة على العلوم في تعليم الفتيات. وقد أظهر التحليل أن المفكرين الأحرار طرحوا آراء قوية، ليس فقط بما يتعلق بالقضايا الدينية، ولكن أيضاً حول تعليم المرأة. والأهم من ذلك، هو أنهم كانوا بمثابة نقاط مرجعية مباشرة للنسويات اللاحقات اللائي دافعن عن حق المرأة في التعليم.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** تعليم الفتيات ; التمكين ; المفكرون الأحرار ; علوم ; التعليم العلماني

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## Introduction

The study of the development of girls' education in nineteenth-century Britain is both complex and open to different interpretations. Interestingly, historians of the post-1840s feminist movement were powerfully influenced by the Christian rhetoric, which reflected their emphasis on more conservative and acceptable feminist views. Following this line of thought, they refused to recognise the powerful link that existed between the radical social movements of the pre-1840s and feminism. Instead, they tended to link the advancement of the education of girls to the respectable feminists of the women's rights movement. Researchers Susan Hamilton and Janice Schroeder (2007) have provided in their book a precise account about the women activists who were part of the campaign to improve the educational opportunities for girls in Victorian England. In their opinion, support for girls' education was spearheaded by several respectable feminist figures like Emily Davies, Barbara Bodichon, Jessie Boucherett, Josephine Butler, Frances Power Cobbe, who dedicated themselves to the success of the cause (p. 10).

Nevertheless, the assertion that the advancement of girls' education was only attributed to the 'respectable' feminists of the post-1840s feminist movement gives insufficient weight to the writings, ideologies, and social experiments of Freethinkers on this matter. As early as 1810s, prominent Freethinkers like Robert Owen, George Jacob Holyoake, Richard Carlile, Eliza Sharples, Annie Besant, and Harriet Martineau, often associated with progressive and secular ideologies, challenged traditional societal norms and religious dogma that restricted women's access to a formal education. They called for women to be educated on the basis of reason and science, often opposing the influence of the Church in public life. These intellectual radicals believed in the importance of education for both men and women, regardless of gender and social background. One of the key features in organised Freethought was the promotion of secular education and science-based curricula for girls. It could be said that Freethinkers' advocacy for secularism and scientific subjects was part of a wider wave of educational reform that eventually led to more widespread acceptance of women's education and greater opportunities for women in various professional fields. Their influence helped lay the foundation for the gradual transformation of societal attitudes towards gender and education during the Victorian period and even beyond.

The use of the descriptive and analytical approach for conducting this study is appropriate for two important reasons. It offers a historical description of prominent Freethinkers, such as Robert Owen, George Holyoake, Harriet Martineau, and others, who played a crucial role in advancing girls' education, and their contributions were part of complex and multifaceted process of early educational reform. In addition, it analyses how the ideas of Freethinkers directly formed the intellectual foundation for the push for broader access to education for girls. This combination of description and analysis would provide a comprehensive understanding of the Freethinkers' influence on educational landscape of the pre-1840s.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first offers a historical overview about the Freethinking feminist heritage in nineteenth-century Britain, and the key part played by Freethinkers in the women's rights movement. The second moves on to analyse how did the prominent figures in organised Freethought champion girls' education through their advocacy for secular education. The third sheds light on the important role that the Freethinkers played in enhancing science-based curriculum in girls' education.

### 1. Exploring the Contributions of Freethinkers to Women's Rights Issues in Nineteenth-Century Britain



Organised Freethought was a radical social movement that advocated for broader social, educational and political reforms. Freethinkers were best-known for their rational critique of religious dogma and social dictates. They viewed religion, Christianity in particular, as system of social control, and called for its replacement by Secularism, reason, and scientific knowledge. Further, they believed that the Christian Scripture was the founding text of human misery and social disparity, and they refused to accept that any aspect of it could be interpreted in rational terms.

Sources documenting the genesis of Freethought in Britain are the most difficult to find, for the history of 'irreligion' was less developed than that of Christianity. Nevertheless, historians Joel H. Wiener and Dr. Laura Schwartz offered a set of more or less historical assumptions: that in the late seventeenth century some intellectual radicals stood in opposition to the institution of the Church; that in 1697 there was an exchange of letters between the Irish writer William Molyneux (1656-1698) and the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), in which they revealed their indifference to religion; and that in the 1820s Freethought in England rose significantly to become such a distinguishing feature of radical political life (Weiner, 1983, p. 46; Schwartz, 2013, p. 27). So, it could be inferred that the Freethinking ideas began to surface in the seventeenth century, but developed at a rapid pace in the early nineteenth century.

Historically speaking, the Freethinkers were marginalised in historiography due to their unconventional religious and sexual views, while the untold truth is that they powerfully contributed to marriage reform, education, female suffrage, and the repeal of the laws on prostitution. Recently, Olive Banks, a trustee feminist scholar, has offered a thoroughgoing account of the feminists who were part of the struggle for women's rights in Victorian England, particularly in the campaigns for female suffrage and education. She argued that organised Freethought constituted the platform on which the feminist demands emerged and gained momentum in society at large. Banks made it clear that organised Freethought in nineteenth-century Britain was one of the early flourishing phases of First Wave Feminism (Gleadle and Richardson, 2000, pp. 134-152).

Likewise, Laura Schwartz was amongst the very few feminist scholars who traced so carefully the history of organised Freethought in nineteenth-century Britain and the impact it had on enhancing women's collective and political identities. Schwartz documented the presence of Freethinkers around women's campaigns such as female suffrage, marriage reform, and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The author was of the opinion that organised Freethought did not only develop in opposition to religious doctrines and patriarchal hierarchies, but also in support of women's rights issues (Schwartz, 2013).

The Freethinkers had never used petitions or political parties to advocate for women's rights, but their role as public speakers had reverberated across the United Kingdom. The public venues were crucial sites for bold and serious debates between the Freethinkers and their Christian opponents (Royle, 1980). On many occasions, the Freethinkers engaged in public debates with the clergymen to weaken the moral authority of the Church and reduce its influence on people. For example, in 1840, James Clarke, a Freethinking advocate, had a debate with his Christian opponent, Reverend Bromley in Macclesfield, North West of London. It revolved around the oppression of women in marriage. More than 600 persons, including men and women, attended this intellectual manifestation, causing overcrowding. Those who could not get in had to leave disappointed, while others crowded outside the windows and even broke them to hear, showing their eagerness (Taylor, 1983, p. 185). These public debates provided openings for some Freethinkers like Annie Besant, Harriet Martineau, and Emma Martin to gain public recognition and acceptance for their feminist perspectives.

In spite their vocal opposition to religious doctrines, the Freethinkers had also championed female suffrage, both publicly and in theory. When leading suffragette John Stewart Mill introduced the first petition to enfranchise women in the British Parliament in 1866, Freethinkers like Emily Wolstenholme, Annie Besant, and Harriet Martineau played a key role in rallying support for the cause.



They collected signatures and used publication as form of political activism to emphasise that women should be entitled the right to vote on an equal basis as men (Schwartz, 2010, p.780).

Furthermore, the study of Victorian sexuality and the organised feminist campaigns stemming from it cannot be viewed in isolation from the contributions of Freethinkers on this matter. They were powerfully involved in the campaign to support fallen women's liberties and argued for equal treatment under the law. In addition, they maintained that society should focus on addressing the fundamental causes leading to prostitution, rather than placing blame and imposing punishment on the women involved. Overall, Freethinkers support for the rights of prostitutes or 'fallen women' reflected their broader commitment to gender equality, social justice, and the empowerment of all women, regardless of their social or economic circumstances.

As the previous arguments clearly demonstrate, organised Freethought in nineteenth-century Britain represented a significant milestone in the fight for gender equality and women's rights. In what follows, we shall explore the mechanisms and means by which the Freethinkers enhanced girls' education in their branch radical culture.

## 2. The Promotion of Secular Education

It is widely accepted that the education of girls and women in nineteenth-century Britain was inextricably attached to religious doctrines. It included moral lessons on submission and passive obedience (Ursula, 1987, p. 35). The education offered to women by the clergymen was a false consciousness, for it contributed to their marginalisation in the social and political contexts. For example, William Stewart Ross contended that women were intellectually fragile because they were taught in the Churches and Sunday Schools. This priesthood education was full of superstitions and the underlying object of it was to prevent women from holding leadership positions in society (Schwartz, 2013, p. 146).

It is important to stress upon the fact that the dominant religious institutions in Victorian England, the Evangelical sect in particular, had played a key role to disqualify women from their natural rights, particularly the right to education. In this light, they considered boys' schooling more important, while they made it impossible for women or girls to receive a rational education and functional skills and the main emphasis of the curriculum was on feminine accomplishments.

The Freethinkers had advocated for a secular education system to supersede religious orthodoxy. The Freethinking approach to education was highly progressive and unique in that it allowed both male and female students to study together. Moreover, it called for the complete separation of the education of the children, regardless of gender, from the influence of the Established Church.

The Freethinking feminist support for secular education was motivated by several interconnected factors. The first is that Freethinkers were striving to weaken the moral authority of the Church by fostering a rational-based education. The second is they encouraged scientific inquiry to challenge contradictions stemming from the Christian Scripture. The third and most important factor was their endeavor to refute the prevailing stereotypic view in Victorian popular culture that education was exclusively reserved to boys or males.

Robert Owen, a Freethinking activist and the founder of the Owenite socialist movement, was the original promoter of secular education in the United Kingdom. As a committed Freethinker, Owen emphasised that both sexes should be educated equally, based on the grounds that education was a standard for humanity's progress. Hence, he advocated for secular education while stressing that both girls and boys should manage to acquire critical thinking and practical skills (Woodin, 2003).

Robert Owen and his supporters did, in fact, form independent cooperative societies, such as the New Lanark and the Social Harmony, which placed an emphasis on secular education in achieving equality between the sexes. Owen drew inspiration for his plan to reform education for all children—



girls and boys alike—from his father-in-law David Dale's time at New Lanark. Owen did notice that the children, whose ages ranged from six to sixteen, worked for almost eleven hours. Besides, their evening courses were to begin immediately after dinner. Sewing, music, and writing were the main subjects covered in class. Owen was convinced that the young children who worked for long hours had not the physical and mental ability to fully concentrate on their studies (Stewart & McCann, 1967). Later, he had introduced some social measures to improve the living conditions of the children, including health care, limited working hours, and a qualitative education.

In effect, the early practical initiatives to establish co-educational schools free from the influence of the Church did actually emerge from the Owenite cooperative societies. In 1816, Owen founded the Institution for the Formation of Character, which included an infant school that admitted children as young as two years old (Arthur, 2003, p. 11). In the opening of the Institute, Robert Owen delivered a speech to an audience consisting of more than 10,000 residents, in which he elucidated the avowed objectives of his schooling establishment. In a clear context, Owen stressed the need of providing the adults with practical knowledge that would enable them to actively contribute to the advancement of the entire nation, rather than receiving an education only influenced by societal or religious norms (Donnachie, 2003).

In contrast to traditional education, which segregated boys and girls by teaching boys in schools and females at home, both genders received an equal treatment at the Institute. From a critical point of view, Owen enhanced the mixed gathering policy to remove sex and gender bias. The striking thing in Owen's educational philosophy was his insistence on the educational attainment rather than gender differences.

One notable characteristic of Owen's education system was the use of lecture, discussion, and debate as innovative methods of teaching. Unsurprisingly, the Owenites were the first to introduce the practice of holding open discussion classes in their schools. This practice aimed to instill values such as openness to debate and critical thinking in both girls and boys. They would have the opportunity to sit together and take part in the sharing of thoughts and views on many subjects (Alison, 2021). Girls were welcomed to participate in daily discussion courses where they could freely share their opinions, emotions, uncertainties, and confidence concerning the Owenite educational system (Taylor, 1983, p. 291). By allowing girls to exchange their views and opinions with boys, Owen sought to empower them to contribute positively and challenge the existing gender norms.

Reading and writing on the basis of scientific knowledge and rationality were the fundamental components to improve the education of girls in the Institute. The Owenite educators actively promoted critical thinking as a means for the young children to develop their awareness. In the process of reading, the young adults were instructed to differentiate between progressive scientific facts and established religious dictates. For example, Owen urged the adults to utilise Scripture as a means of recognizing superstitious beliefs and practices deeply rooted in orthodox religion. In writing, the students were motivated to use their own style to be more innovative (Donnachie, 2003).

Long before the emergence of the feminist campaign to reform girls' education in Britain, Robert Owen and his associates did introduce a modern curriculum in the Institute, which was an audacious move towards educational change in his days. This included basic grammar rules, literacy and numeracy alongside subjects like geography, history, science, and nature study (Gordon, 1994, p. 284). The astonishing fact is that some subsequent feminist activists like Emily Davies did call for the inclusion of these subjects in the University program for girls' education in the 1870s. This is a clear index that Owen's views on education were authentic and of strong influence to the feminists who came later.

Although Owen's educational views did not attain an immediate historical recognition, his Institute gained an international fame as a successful example of a modern secular school. It attracted visitors from around the world who came to study its innovative practices. The extant historical sources



have documented the following: from 1816 to 1825, around 20,000 individuals were recorded as visitors to the institution (Jeffreys, 1952).

Recently published materials revealed Robert Owen's importance to the advocacy project of secular education in his days, particularly in the years from 1810 to 1820. In his article, scholar Leopold David (2011) contended that the utopian socialist Robert Owen had a tangible impact on the progress of educational methods during that era. The author argued that Owen prioritized human nature in his educational perspectives, and he saw secular education as crucial to his broader aim of achieving gender equality, social and political change (p. 619). Similarly, Gerald Gutek (2011) asserted that Robert Owen was the first educational reformist both in England and the United States, believing that Owen's idealistic ideas brought to positive transformations in society and education. Owen's utopian communities in Britain and Indiana were founded on the fundamental belief that a person's character is shaped by his environment rather than being solely determined by his own actions (p.151).

It is noticeable that throughout the nineteenth century, several secular schools and institutions were established, marking a shift away from the prevailing influence of religious education. These establishments aimed to provide a rational education and were often associated with the secularist and radical social movements of the time. Founded in 1787, the Blackfriars Rotunda was a crucial site for learning and the widening of access to knowledge. One of its managers was the Freethinking activist Eliza Sharples. As early as the 1830s, the lady of Rotunda developed a rational thinking against Christianity, arguing that it denied the development of useful knowledge and reason. Throughout her professional career as a public speaker, Eliza Sharples encouraged the rational interpretation of Scripture and urged her female audience to read themselves into awareness (Schwartz, 2013).

Arguably, Sharples entirely rejected the education offered to women by the clergymen because it was the major obstacle to women's entry into the public realm and political life. Sharples used her publishing business to spread basic ideas about secular education and gender equality. In a letter "To The Young Women of England" in 1832, Sharples argued that secular education was important to advance girls' education. In addition, she advised the young girls to adopt a rational thinking to be more productive in society (Rogers, 1994, 71).

Following the departure of Eliza Sharples, this institute was managed by Eliza Macauley in 1832. Macauley paid an increasing attention to the advancement of girls' education, in which she offered lectures every Sunday and Wednesday evenings. These lectures revolved around various topics such as gender equality, education, financial reform, and the critique of Scripture. Attendance to girls was free. Macauley had plans to found a school of education and science open to girls in the Rotunda, but she failed in her pursuit due to financial crises (Parolin, 2010, p. 268).

In 1866, Charles Bradlaugh and others founded the National Secular Society (NSS), which advocated for secularism and rational thought, and challenged the dominant religious institutions and their influence on various aspects of society, including politics and education. Historically, the NSS had played a pivotal role in championing the feminist issues, including women's right to vote, the repressive laws on prostitution, and girls' education. One of its founders, George Jacob Holyoake believed that education should be free from religious influence, and that rational education was essential for the advancement of knowledge and reason. Furthermore, he argued that both sexes should be educated equally to rid society of gender discrimination (Meacham, 2015, p. 118). It must be said that traditional education often perpetuated gender stereotypes and limited the educational content for girls. By advocating for an education free from religious influence, Freethinkers sought to create an environment where all children, including girls, could receive a rational and comprehensive education.

The promotion of secular education by the Freethinkers aimed to challenge the oppressive attitudes towards womanhood which argued that woman's role in society was to be the pious, subdued, subordinate homemaker, influenced of course by very traditional religious ideas of hierarchy - with man as the head of the family. Freethinkers through their advocacy of secular education contributed to



a cultural shift towards greater gender equality, where girls and boys would have the same educational opportunities and equal access to knowledge.

### 3. Support of Science-Based Curriculum in Girls' Education

For radical Freethinkers and Secularists of the nineteenth century, scientific knowledge was a social necessity in its own right. As a matter of fact, they were striking to replace religious services with scientific discussions, lectures, and demonstrations as a means of grasping the ultimate nature of the universe. Recent studies have revealed that in the nineteenth century, the study of science and support of it witnessed a significant progress within the Freethinking and Secularist networks. For example, Susan Sheets-Pyenson noted that the Freethinkers played a crucial role in facilitating the printing of journals and books, and had the authority to choose which types of scientific literature would be successful in the market (Rectenwald, 2016, p. 49).

The Freethinking activist Richard Carlile advocated for scientific inquiry in his writings and public speeches, and he emphasised that both sexes should have access to a useful knowledge. In 1820 Carlile founded the anti-Christian Zetetic movement which developed in opposition to religious doctrines and social dictates, and he believed that the Christian Scripture should be rejected in full and be replaced by science and rationality. In fact, Carlile devoted his professional career to the struggle for popular freedom of thought and publication. Also, Carlile was an active supporter of women's right to education and empowerment. For Carlile, scientific education was the key to overcome the intellectual servitude suffered by the oppressed classes, including girls and women. As he put it, "the progress of knowledge affords to every woman the genius to educate herself, and it is by education alone that the majority can be brought out of a state of servitude to the minority" (Rectenwald, 2016, p. 40).

Some contemporary historians tended to link the claim to scientific curriculum in girls' education to Emily Davies and her followers in the late 1860s. For example, scholar Gould Paula (1997) suggested in her article that Emily Davies incorporated subjects such as Logic, science, and chemistry to the university curriculum, resulting in a greater inclination among girls to select their own lines of study (p. 130). This shift not only challenged the conventional, limited education offered to girls but also encouraged them to pursue a wider range of intellectual disciplines.

Nevertheless, before the rise of the women's movement to improve girls' education in the late 1840s, Richard Carlile had strongly advocated for the notion that girls should be educated in science-related fields. In 1820, Carlile adopted the motto "Educate, reform yourselves" to be addressed to his female readers. But what kind of education Carlile was referring to? Certainly, the Freethinking principle of "scientific inquiry" was meant to signify the acquisition of scientific knowledge to be used in favour of female emancipation. In fact, Carlile sought scientific knowledge and championed research for its own sake. He encouraged women to read and write; because education was key to emancipate them from the bonds of religious superstitions. In *An Address to Men of Science: Calling Upon Them to Stand Forward and Vindicate the Truth from the Foul Grasp and Persecution of Superstition*, Carlile suggested implementing a curriculum in schools rooted in the fundamentals of science. Carlile advocated for the substitution of classical literature and mythology with the study of chemistry, astronomy, geography, geometry, and mathematics. Additionally, the study of languages would be conducted using the scientific approach (Carlile, 1821/2017, p. 39).

Richard Carlile's emphasis on science-based curriculum in girls' education found a great deal of support in the writings and educational views of Freethinker Annie Besant. This activist spent her early life in India, where she published books and pamphlets and lectured publicly on the importance of scientific education to the development of women's mental abilities. For example, in *Education as a*



National Duty, Annie Besant (1903) drew attention to the fact that scientific education was key for the intellectual development of the girls and for the advancement of the entire English society (pp. 16-17).

Supposedly, Annie Besant had put forward a very narrow scientific curriculum that could be of interest to the English girls, and Indian females in particular, consisting of lessons to how a girl could manage her future life as a housewife. As she put it,

Nothing is more necessary to the Indian wife and mother, than a knowledge of sanitary laws, of the value of foodstuffs, of nursing the sick, of simple medicines, of «first aid», of cookery of the more delicate kind, of household management, and the keeping of accounts (Singh, 2019, p. 268).

Besant's scientific curriculum was in alignment with the concept of 'practical education'. It included specific types of training as appropriate for different types of female employment, all the while emphasising the importance of scientific attainment.

In addition to Richard Carlile and Annie Besant, the Freethinking activist Harriet Martineau played a crucial role in defending women's right to education. Interestingly, Martineau was a vocal proponent of scientific education, and she made a basic assumption that knowledge should be grounded in facts, scientific inquiry, and reason. Published in 1823, Martineau's article "On Female Education" which discussed the fundamental problems of girls' education in Britain. In the beginning, Martineau complained bitterly about the classical curriculum offered to the girls, suggesting that it was not compatible with scientific technological progress (p. 77).

Martineau encouraged rational thought and critical thinking. She believed that women and girls, like men, should develop them to participate more fully in the advancement of the nation. As she pointed out, "Let woman then be taught that her powers of mind were given her to be improved..." (Martineau, 1823, p. 81). This quote reflects Martineau's broader feminist views on gender equality and the importance of empowering women to reach their full potential in society.

In addition, Martineau strongly advocated for the inclusion of a scientific curriculum in public schools. For her, incorporating scientific subjects into girls' education was of particular importance to achieve gender equality in terms of cognitive development and professional prospects. Martineau's educational curriculum included basic lessons on science, geology, and mathematics (Dorothy, 1999, p. 188). By advocating for scientific education in schools, Martineau aimed to dismantle traditional preconceptions that confined women to certain roles or implied their inability to comprehend intricate issues. This was an important part of a wider endeavor to transform societal standards and establish a more advanced and rational community.

Martineau went on to argue that women who received a scientific education were to contribute positively to the prosperity of the labour market. In her opinion, women who have had a qualitative education would pursue careers in a wider range of skilled positions in the market, driving innovation and economic development.

Women above twenty years of age, in Great Britain, exclusive of Ireland, and of course of the Colonies, no less than half are industrial in their mode of life. More than a third, more than two millions, are independent in their industry, are self-supporting, like men (Sheffield, 2004, p. 319).

Long before the emergence of the feminist campaign to reform girls' education, Martineau was the first feminist advocated to associate the education of girls and women with the labour market. By refuting the classic argument of the 'separate spheres'; private and domestic for women, public and political for men, Martineau saw the involvement of educated women in the labour market as essential for the growth of a complete, independent and self-directed identity for women.

## Conclusion





Organised Freethought in nineteenth-century Britain developed not only in opposition to religious dogma, but also in support of girls' education. The Freethinkers were both political and intellectual radicals, and most of their views were highly supportive to gender equality. They had a crucial impact on girls' empowerment and education at a time when many of the other scholarly-over-exaggerated feminist movements did not already exist. Radical Freethinkers were more practical in advancing the education of girls in the nineteenth century. They established independent secular schools and institutions and advocated for a co-educational system with which to challenge the prevailing Victorian belief that education was only reserved to boys.

The early organised efforts that some leading Freethinkers put into girls' education paved the way for further educational reforms, particularly from the 1860s onwards. They advocated for an expanded curriculum that incorporated scientific topics into the education of girls and lobbied for equal educational opportunities for both sexes, thereby surpassing the traditional emphasis on handicrafts and fundamental literacy skills. Undoubtedly, their claim to rationality and a curriculum based on science in girls' education had motivated several later feminists to endorse scientific knowledge. One of these individuals was Emily Davies, who intended to substitute conventional topics with scientific ones in order to empower the ladies to achieve the maximum of their abilities. So, it could be inferred that the question of girls' education was first raised within the Freethinking networks in the 1810s, and that the ideologies and policies adopted by the subsequent feminist activists in the campaign to reform girls' schools and higher education were just an extension to the Freethinking feminist heritage on this matter.

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