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Women in the new disciplines of radioactivity and genetics: Comparative remarks

THE RELATIVELY SIZABLE PARTICIPATION of women in the creation of the disciplines of radioactivity and genetics in the first decades of the twentieth century is recently subject of attention. In my paper I will explore local and global factors that can make this phenomenon understandable. A global factor is the moment the disciplines came into existence. Both fields emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century, the period that women gained access to universities. The new category of scientists filled the empty spaces of the not yet established disciplines.

It is tempting also to try to explain the participation of women by factors that are characteristic for the discipline concerned. The differences between both fields are however more striking than the similarities. In the case of genetics, experiments could originally be executed with limited means and interpreted with statistical reasoning. On the contrary, radioactivity research needed a laboratory from the beginning. In the course of time expensive instruments became necessary. Marie Curie was influential in radioactivity, both as role model and as head of a laboratory. Genetics did not have such a prominent female scientist.

When trying to explain why in some places women got foothold in one of these disciplines in sizable numbers and at other places not, and why in some places the women remained in the assistant position whereas at other places they had a successful career and became professors local factors, like university politics, national feminist movement a.o., must be taken into account. In my talk I will go into these questions, relying mainly on secondary sources of others and myself.

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