Women students and student associations in Bordeaux

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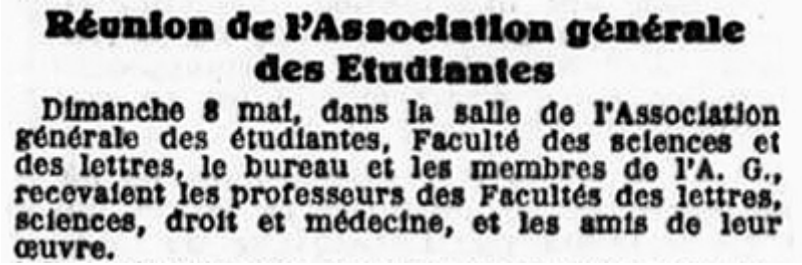


Réunion de l'Association générale des Etudiantes

Dimanche 8 mai, dans la salle de l'Association générale des étudiantes, Faculté des sciences et des lettres, le bureau et les membres de l'A. G., recevaient les professeurs des Facultés des lettres, sciences, droit et médecine, et les amis de leur œuvre.

French universities remained hardly accessible to women. The faculty of Bordeaux, created in 1441, then (re)created in 1870 after its abolition in 1793, illustrated this lack of diversity. The study of the University of Bordeaux in the Great War is a good example to portray the entrance of women – these pioneers – in French higher education, and their commitments as active members of student associations.

In France, Emma Chenu and Julie-Victoire Daubié were the first two female students. Respectively enrolled for the former in science and mathematics in 1867, for the latter in Humanities in 1871 (first Frenchwoman to be granted a bachelor's degree at the faculty of Lyon in 1861). In law studies, it was not until 1884 that two women (one Russian and the other Romanian) enrolled.

The rejection of the female student can be observed through the refusal to feminize the vocabulary. While the male version of the term student (*étudiant*) was clearly defined in the lexical writings of Émile Littré (1883), the female version (*étudiante*) was not. An *étudiant* was thus defined as "celui qui étudie […] particulièrement celui qui étudie dans une université en France dans une faculté […] Au féminin, étudiante, dans un espèce d'argot, grisette du quartier latin [one who studies, […] specifically one who studies at a university, in France in a faculty. […] The feminine, *étudiante*, is slang for a working girl

of the Latin Quarter.]" Female students were isolated in the statistics from the academic year 1889-1890, referred to as "*étudiants-filles*" ("girl students") instead of the simple "*étudiantes*".

In addition to this terminological resistance, female students suffered from a negative image. They were called "*Cervelines*", or "brain girls". In 1903 in *Les Cervelines*, Colette Yver drew up a portrait of these new female scholars: "des âmes sèches[…] des fantômes de femmes, des erreurs de la nature, des monstres au double visage, mi-femmes mi-hommes, jolies et viriles en même temps. D'autant plus dangereuses que, loin de présenter un aspect repoussant comme les bas-bleus, elles sont d'apparence agréable, mais défigurées[…] intimement et moralement [dry souls […], ghosts of women, errors of nature, two-faced monsters, half-women and half-men, pretty and manly at the same time. All the more dangerous because, far from presenting a repulsive aspect like Bluestockings, they are fair to look upon, but disfigured […] on intimate and moral levels.]" The woman student was a woman with a "man's brain", not quite a woman, not quite a man, a freak of nature. They were also constantly referred to the image of the women of the Latin Quarter. The female students carried within them a perfume of eroticism that represented a distraction for the studious male students. The professors, moreover, did not fail to remind the female students of their duty of courtesy. In order to limit dishonor and "gossip" of wantonness, young women who wished to educate themselves had to be accompanied by a chaperone (mother, brother, third party). The chaperone eventually fell into disuse by the time of the First World War.

Nevertheless, the number of female students in faculties increased. Very few at first, their number increased between 1880 and 1914, and never decreased again. A professor of the Paris Faculty of Humanities made the following observation in 1930, in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*: "si on me demandait quelle est la plus grande révolution à laquelle nous avons assistée de nos jours, depuis la guerre, je ne dirais pas que c'est la mode des cheveux coupés et les jupes courtes, mais l'invasion de l'Université par les femmes, où rarissime au temps de ma jeunesse, il y a trente ans, elles ont été d'abord tiers, puis moitié, puis les deux tiers, au point qu'on se demande avec inquiétude si, après avoir été jadis, nos maitresses, elles ne vont pas devenir nos maîtres [If I were asked to name the greatest revolution we have witnessed in our days, since the war, I would not say that it is the fashion of short hair and short skirts, but the invasion of

universities by women, where they were very rare in the time of my youth, thirty years ago. They were first a third, then half, then two thirds, to the point that one must wonder with concern if, having once been our mistresses, they will not become our masters]". In a few figures, the female students enrolled (in all faculties) were 942 for the year 1900-1901. On the eve of the Great War (1913-1914) there were 4,254 (10% of the student population). However, the distribution of female enrollment varies greatly among the faculties of law, humanities and science. Indeed, the faculties of humanities concentrated the majority of female students, as the disciplines taught were deemed more in line with the female nature. France was no exception, the presence of women on university benches was also rare among its neighbors. At the dawn of the First World War, only Switzerland was ahead of France in the number of female students. This resulted from the proclamation of university diversity in 1872. Before 1914, France ranked second among European countries in terms of academic diversity, although the female numbers remained marginal within the associative spheres.

The Bordeaux Faculty of Law (see table below) was part of this feminization movement; it was no longer an impregnable citadel for women. The first woman in its student body enrolled in 1898. This late entrance may be justified by the choice of women to enroll in faculties of humanities, where the prejudice against them was not as strong. In this time of conflict, men of fighting age were sent to the front, which had the consequence of emptying the administrations and universities of their young graduates or those in the process of becoming. The arrival of women in higher education was favored by the absence of men, their vacancies needing to be filled by civilians competent in law. Legal studies became attractive for young girls, particularly for women's access to the bar in 1900 and to the notarial function in 1948.

In Bordeaux, the first woman lawyer registered at the bar was Mme Vogée-Davasse. She began her career in Toulouse in 1915. Her beginnings in professional life, were dotted with pitfalls; as she was separated from her husband, the bar of Toulouse still wondered if his agreement for her to register for the bar was necessary or not. She decided to do without, and came to settle in Bordeaux where she became a lawyer within the Court of Appeal. The trials she took part in were relayed by the newspapers of the time, in *L'Humanité* for example for a trial in criminal court. Her life was not limited to her profession. Having experienced difficulties in reaching her position, divorced and remarried, Mme Vogée-Davasse was openly committed, from the period of war, to

women’s rights, using her talents as an orator and advocate to attract crowds and convince her audience at conferences concerned with the situation of women, especially at the end of the Great War. The story of this woman clearly demonstrates the discrepancy between theory, where legal professions were democratized for women, and practice, where prejudices and male autocracy persisted.

Table of female students enrolled at the Bordeaux Faculty of Law between 1898 and 1942

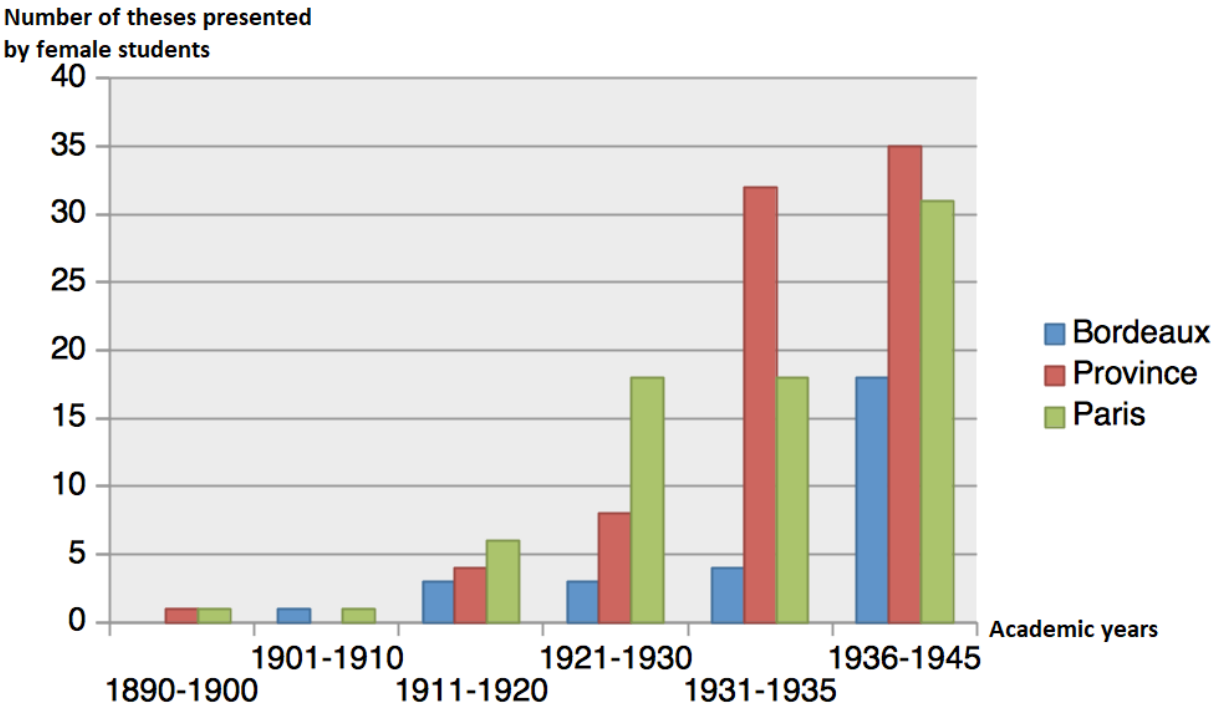
Year	Numbers	Year
1896-1897	0	1919-1920
1897-1898	0	**1920-1921**
1989-1899	1 (0.12%)	1921-1922
1899-1900	1 (0.12%)	1922-1923
1900-1901	1 (0.12%)	1923-1924
1901-1902	0	1924-1925
1902-1903	0	**1925-1926**
1903-1904	0	1926-1927
1904-1905	0	1927-1928
1905-1906	1(0.11%)	1928-1929
1906-1907	1 (0.10%)	1929-1930
1907-1908	2 (0.20%)	**1930-1931**
1908-1909	2 (0.19%)	1931-1932
1909-1910	1 (0.10%)	1932-1933
1910-1911	1(0.11%)(étrangère)	**1933-1934**
1911-1912	2 (0.20%)	1934-1935
1912-1913	2 (0.20%)	1935-1936
1913-1914	3 (0.30%)	1936-1937
1914-1915	**6 (0.78%)**	1937-1938
1915-1916	12 (2.07%)	1938-1939
1916-1917	14 (2.77%)	**1939-1940**
1917-1918	28 (4.6%)	1940-1941

1918-1919	23 (3,72%)	1941-1942

The Great War acted as a catalyst for academic diversity. Female students came to fill the hemicycles, but few obtained the highest degree of French higher education, the doctorate. This is evidenced by the low number of doctoral theses supported by female students (see graph below). Manon Cormier, licensed in 1917, was the first woman in

Bordeaux to register her thesis (*Les actions à vote plural en France et à l'étranger* [*Plural vote actions in France and abroad*]), which she defended on June 9, 1932.

Graph of the number of theses defended by female students in law schools in France between 1890 and 1945



The graph shows the increase in the number of women with doctorates. Between 1890 and 1910, women doctors were rare, and fewer than five theses were defended in this period in all of the French law schools put together. It was between 1911 and 1930 that women truly settled in the academic landscape. The Paris Faculty of Law was a leader. Between 1911 and 1920, of the thirteen theses defended, six were presented in the capital; the other seven were in all the provincial law faculties. The following period, from 1921 to 1930, provided a comparable pattern. The Paris Faculty of Law was in the lead, with no less than eighteen theses defended against only three for the Bordeaux Faculty of Law.

Between 1931 and 1935, the number of doctoral students increased in all faculties of law; no less than fifty-four theses were presented in all faculties of law. But the period from 1936 to 1945 is the most remarkable: in just ten years, eighty-three theses were defended in all faculties of law, almost as much as in the previous forty-five years

(1890-1935), which total ninety-seven.

The thesis subjects defended by the female students were diverse and varied. There was no relationship between the area of research invested and the gender of the researcher. The study of the doctoral thesis subjects made it possible to identify some major research themes: business law, family law, labor law, inheritance law.

The student landscape changed with the arrival of female students. In order not to be isolated, they came together and created student associations, not without great difficulties.

The movement of student organizations, composed only of students and dealing exclusively with student issues, did not really begin to develop until the Third Republic. Only the young University of Nancy shows initiative. Indeed, in 1869, a student club was created at the five-year-old faculty of law, receiving approval from the prefecture in 1878. Student organizations – a new social phenomenon – were born in a few cities at the beginning of the Third Republic. Their development was the result of the non-renewal by the Minister of Public Instruction of the order of July 5, 1820, which prohibited students from creating any student union, associations included. The decree of July 30, 1883, on the regime of higher education institutions, elaborated a more flexible regime, favorable to the development of student associations.

Students seized this new freedom that was offered to them, anxious to make their voice heard, they regrouped in general student associations. The student movement, supported by the authorities and academics, developed throughout France, so that in 1891, all cities with a faculty were provided with a general association of students. In Bordeaux, the student circle takes the form of a student association, the Association générale des étudiants de Bordeaux (AGE; AG or AGB) born in 1886. It obtained authorization from the prefecture on March 24, 1888 and was declared of public utility on January 26, 1907. The same year, in Lille, the first national congress of general student associations was held. The associations federated – not without difficulty – to give birth to the Union nationale des associations générales d’étudiants de France (UNAGEF). Note that in this student assembly, women shone by their absence.

The assistance of the authorities also manifested in the form of financial aid. As early as 1890, the Bordeaux association obtained subsidies from the municipality, the general council and the Society of Friends of the University. Its headquarters were located first

on the Cours Victor Hugo, then the rue du Maréchal Joffre and finally at 14, rue Pasteur. The AGE, to thank its financial supporters, organized the fifth international congress of students to make the city visible to the entire academic and student world.

The idealized image of the Association générale des étudiants, that is to say a place promoting meetings (between students, students and professors), sharing, solidarity, mutual assistance in study, the dissemination of information and the protection of students' interests, inspired the Bordeaux AGE. The AGB followed these objectives, explained in its first article of its statute: "établir des liens de solidarités entre ses membres par la création d'un centre de réunion, d'une bibliothèque (qui compte en 1897 près de 2.500 volumes, sans compter les revues), d'un service de secours mutuel, de conférences propres à favoriser les études […] et par une communauté de distraction [to establish links of solidarity between its members through the creation of a meeting center, a library (which in 1897 holds nearly 2,500 books, not counting journals), a mutual relief service, conferences to promote studies […] and by a community of distraction.]" The AGE felt invested with a mission to assist students on a material, economic or social level.

However, AGEs did not arouse the enthusiasm of all students; accused of apoliticism (as they often claimed in their statutes) by other political movements formed in parallel (1880-1914), they were also considered not very dynamic, although there were disparities among them. The commitment of the AGEs against the Law of August 7, 1913, known as the "Three Year Law" shows the opposite. The 1913 law, anticipating a probable conflict with Germany, provided for an increase in the length of military service from two to three years. Associations fought in favor of accommodation for students.

Another criticism was the lack of representation of the student population. On the one hand, the AGEs only have a small number of active members (less than 20% of the total student population) compared to the growing number of students enrolled. On the other hand, while women were entering higher education, they had little to no representation in the AGEs (some AGEs, in their statutes, even prohibited the presence of women).

In Bordeaux, women's involvement in associations was visible with the Association générale des étudiantes, and with the women's section of the AGB.

The Association générale des étudiantes, created in 1911, moved first to the Faculty of Humanities, then to the Faculty of Science and Humanities, and finally to the 20, Cours Pasteur. The birth of this association “by female students, for female students” stemmed from the increase in their number within the various Bordeaux faculties. Its main objective: to make women’s voices heard, that is to say to defend their demands and their interests in a predominantly male academic sphere. The association of women students, supported by the rector, the prefect, the mayor, the deans, and especially Professor Bonnecase (who supported them from the beginning), obtained the Blessed Sacrament in 1927. The decree of July 23, 1927 declared the General Association générale des étudiantes of public utility. This victory rewarded the investments of all these pioneer women committed to the rights of women in academia. The association won the support of the female students. In the span of five years, their number grew by 40% (170 in 1926-1927, 257 in 1931-1932). The association’s primary role was to defend women’s access to and success in higher education. Emphasis was placed on working conditions, which were decisive for the success of female students. The opening of a newly furnished, modern and welcoming library met this demand. Mutual aid and conviviality punctuated this workspace. Another material and economic demand animated the association: access to housing. This wish took shape in 1932 with the Maison des étudiantes, although its statutes had been signed since 1925 by Madeleine Vèzes (née Joubert), then president. The fight for the rights of female students was also organized in parallel in the AGB.

The female presence within the Bordeaux AGE was low, as for other AGEs. Manon Cormier became the first female member on the board in 1918. She was followed by Mlle Bulay, a student in humanities (1926-1927), and Marthe Pointivy (1928-1929) as vice-president. The feminization of the AGB materialized in 1925 by the creation of the women’s section, leading to a change of name: Association générale des étudiantes et étudiants de Bordeaux. The AGE emphasized its desire to involve women in the defense of their common interests. In the yearbook of the University of Bordeaux, 1931-1932, “les étudiantes sont reçues au même titre que les étudiants […] [regroupant] la majorité des étudiantes et des étudiants, sans distinctions de classe, d’opinion ou de croyance [female students are received in the same way as male students […] [gathering] the majority of students, without distinctions of gender, class, opinion or faith]”. However, a gap remained between the change of name and the speeches claiming to be modern and unifying, and the small evolution of conservative morals.

Indeed, the participation of women in the association through the women's section was a source of many clashes with male members.

The cause of the female students was a spearhead of the two student associations, not without causing some bitter opposition and debate. Competition between these parallel entities continued until the 1937 merger, without putting an end to previous conflicts. The Interwar was a prolific period in terms of the creation of associations defending female students.

The experience of the associative and trade union world led the female students to contribute to the war effort by organizing collections of used sheets to prepare bandages, which were sent to military hospitals. In addition to the female students, the female workers organized to defend their interests. Thus born in March 1917, the first women's labor union in Gironde was created by women workers in weapon factories, including the Carde factories. Some of its members also participated in the Gironde Regional Metal Congress in August of the same year, a symbol of recognition and consideration for their organization.

The entrance of women into academia is recent, and even more so in the field of law, a bastion reserved for men. The Great War allowed female students to find their place in universities and student movements. Women's engagement continued well after this conflict. The figurehead of the women's rights movement in Bordeaux was Manon Cormier. In 1921, she became the first woman to obtain the position of secretary of the Bordeaux Internship Conference. In addition to her professional success, Manon Cormier was politically engaged for the condition of women by creating and chairing the Girondist section of the Ligue française pour le droit des femmes [French League for Women's Rights]. She also gave a number of conferences. Another woman who adopted Bordeaux as a hometown, Ms. Vogée-Davasse, hosted meetings, conferences and Girondist demonstrations regarding women's rights, especially within the Girondist sections of the *Ligue française pour le droit des femmes* [French League for Women's Rights] and the *Union française pour le suffrage des femmes* [French Union for Women's Suffrage].

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