

# What Happened to the Women? An Analysis and Discussion of Early Women Adult Educators

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**Abstract:** This analysis of early women contributors in adult education focuses on the period between the founding of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) in 1926 and 1950, when AAAE was replaced by the Adult Education Association of the USA. Initial work presented here reports on the period 1926 to 1941.

In the early years of the field of adult education in the United States, women were prominent contributors to the literature of the field. For example, the first handbooks were edited by women and many women wrote chapters for those handbooks. Mary Ely served as editor of the *Journal of Adult Education* from its inception in 1929 until 1940, and women were represented as authors of journal articles. After 1948, when the handbook was edited by Mary Ely, until 1990, when Sharan Merriam and Phyllis Cunningham edited the handbook, the presence of women in the handbook series was marginalized, with most chapters being written by white males (Cervero & Merriam, 2007). Beyond the handbook, women's presence as contributors to the literature base was nearly invisible during this period as well.

Earlier work by Hugo (1990) and Thompson and Schied (1996) provides some explanation for why women moved from the center to the margins as contributors to the field's literature base after the early period, but no extended analysis of the early women contributors has been conducted. To address this gap, this initial analysis of early women contributors focuses on the period between the founding of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE) in 1926 and 1941, when Carnegie Corporation ceased to fund AAAE. The analysis examines the roles of women in developing the literature base, the types of literature they produced, and the connections or networks that may have fostered their efforts. The initial work has investigated the *Journal of Adult Education*; Mary Ely and Dorothy Rowden, who served as editors of the early handbooks; and women such as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Ruth Kotinsky, Bonita Wilkinson Overstreet, and Jesse Charters, whose names are associated with the early period of the field.

A descriptive analysis of the contents of volumes 1 through 13 (1929 – 1941) of the *Journal of Adult Education* revealed that a total of 585 articles appeared during this period. This number does not include sections of the journal devoted to book reviews or discussions of program practices. Women wrote 115 of the articles, accounting for just under 20 percent of the total. Most of the articles by the women can be classified as descriptive or opinion pieces; the authors represented a wide variety of program settings including libraries, workers education, local and state adult education organizations or associations, arts organizations, and universities.

Some articles were based on international experiences and some reflected the experiences of adult education during the Depression. The most frequent contributors were Bonaro Wilkinson Overstreet (8 articles); Dorothy Canfield Fisher and Eve Chappell (6 articles each); and Lucy Wilcox Adams and Jean Carter (6 articles each).

These women were well educated and actively involved in the new field of adult education. To fully understand their network, it is important to acknowledge that during the 1920s, New York City was the center of activity in the field of adult education, due in large part to the founding of the American Association of Adult Education with funds from the Carnegie Foundation. Another New York institution, Columbia University, also created ties for many of the early pioneers of adult education. Both Kotinsky and Fisher earned their Ph.D.s at Columbia, for example, and Fisher's father had been librarian at Columbia (Cartwright, 1935).

All of the women were tied in some way to the American Association for Adult Education. Beyond their authorship of journal articles, the greatest common factor was their involvement in the AAAE publication, *Adult Education in Action*, published in 1936. Edited by Mary L. Ely, contributors included Dorothy C. Fisher, Lucy W. Adams, Eve Chappell, Ruth Kotinsky, Jean Carter, Bonaro W. Overstreet, and Jessie A. Charters. Dorothy Rowden was secretary to AAAE and edited the 1934 and 1936 *Handbook of Adult Education in the United States*. Several of them, including Mary Ely, Eve Chappell, Ruth Kotinsky, Bonaro Overstreet, Jean Carter, and Dorothy Rowen, authored volumes in the AAAE series, *Studies in the Social Significance of Adult Education in the United States*.

In addition to their links through publications, many worked for AAAE in one way or another. Ruth Kotinsky, Bonaro Overstreet, and Jean Carter were researchers and field representatives for AAAE, Dorothy Rowden was AAAE secretary for many years, and Dorothy C. Fisher served as AAAE president. With the exception of Lucy W. Adams, who lived in California, and Jessie Charters, who lived in Columbus, Ohio, all of the others lived not far from one another in New York City.

Future work on this project will focus on providing additional information on the women and on an analysis of their writings.

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