


FEMALE PIONEERING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZILIAN MEDICINE: RITA LOBATO VELHO LOPES AND THE DISRUPTION OF A PROFESSIONAL FIELD

PIONEIRISMO FEMININO NA MEDICINA BRASILEIRA DO SÉCULO XIX: RITA LOBATO VELHO LOPES E A RUPTURA DE UM CAMPO PROFISSIONAL

PIONERISMO FEMENINO EN LA MEDICINA BRASILEÑA DEL SIGLO XIX: RITA LOBATO VELHO LOPES Y LA DISRUPCIÓN DE UN CAMPO PROFESIONAL

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/arev8n4-016>

Submitted on: 03/07/2026

Publication date: 04/07/2026

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the insertion of women into Brazilian medicine in the 19th century, focusing on the trajectory of Rita Lobato Velho Lopes, the first woman to graduate in Medicine in Brazil. It addresses the following research question: to what extent did the female presence in medicine represent a structural rupture in a historically male-dominated field? The study adopts a historiographical approach based on documentary and bibliographic sources, highlighting the Leôncio de Carvalho Reform (1879) as a key milestone in opening higher education to women. It also discusses Rita Lobato's educational trajectory across Rio Grande do Sul, Rio de Janeiro, and Bahia, emphasizing the role of the Faculty of Medicine of Bahia as a pioneering institution. The article argues that women's insertion into medicine represented not only an educational advancement but also a reconfiguration of the relationships between gender, knowledge, and power. It concludes that female pioneering was decisive in transforming the medical field and expanding women's professional possibilities in Brazil.

Keywords: Women in Medicine. History of Education. Gender. 19th Century. Rita Lobato.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a inserção das mulheres na medicina brasileira no século XIX, com foco na trajetória de Rita Lobato Velho Lopes, a primeira mulher a se formar em Medicina no Brasil. Aborda a seguinte questão de pesquisa: em que medida a presença feminina na medicina representou uma ruptura estrutural em um campo historicamente dominado por homens? O estudo adota uma abordagem historiográfica baseada em fontes documentais e bibliográficas, destacando a Reforma Leôncio de Carvalho (1879) como um marco fundamental na abertura do ensino superior às mulheres. Também discute a trajetória educacional de Rita Lobato no Rio Grande do Sul, no Rio de Janeiro e na Bahia, enfatizando o papel da Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia como instituição pioneira. O artigo argumenta que a inserção das mulheres na medicina representou não apenas um avanço educacional, mas também uma reconfiguração das relações entre gênero, conhecimento e poder. Conclui que o pioneirismo feminino foi decisivo para a transformação do campo médico e para a ampliação das possibilidades profissionais das mulheres no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres na Medicina. História da Educação. Gênero. Século XIX. Rita Lobato.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la inserción de las mujeres en la medicina brasileña en el siglo XIX, centrándose en la trayectoria de Rita Lobato Velho Lopes, la primera mujer en graduarse en Medicina en Brasil. Aborda la siguiente pregunta de investigación: ¿en qué medida la presencia femenina en la medicina representó una ruptura estructural en un campo históricamente dominado por hombres? El estudio adopta un enfoque historiográfico basado en fuentes documentales y bibliográficas, destacando la Reforma Leôncio de Carvalho (1879) como un hito fundamental en la apertura de la educación superior a las mujeres. También analiza la trayectoria educativa de Rita Lobato en Rio Grande do Sul, Río de Janeiro y Bahía, enfatizando el papel de la Facultad de Medicina de Bahía como institución pionera. El artículo sostiene que la inserción de las mujeres en la medicina representó no solo un avance educativo, sino también una reconfiguración de las relaciones entre género, conocimiento y poder. Concluye que el pionerismo femenino fue decisivo en

la transformación del campo médico y en la ampliación de las posibilidades profesionales de las mujeres en Brasil.

Palabras clave: Mujeres en la Medicina. Historia de la Educación. Género. Siglo XIX. Rita Lobato.

1 INTRODUCTION

The establishment of medicine as a scientific field in nineteenth-century Brazil occurred in close articulation with the formation of intellectual elites and the institutionalization of academic knowledge. In this context, the exclusion of women from higher education was not merely a legal limitation but an expression of a symbolic order that attributed to the masculine domain the monopoly of scientific rationality. Medicine thus consolidated itself as a space of power, wherein female presence was systematically delegitimized.

Historically, women's involvement in the health sector was confined to empirical practices, such as midwifery performed by midwives, whose social importance contrasted sharply with their devaluation within the scientific domain (TRINDADE; TRINDADE, 2011). This process underscores the social construction of medical knowledge as an exclusionary space, in which institutional recognition was conditioned by gender criteria.

The promulgation of the Leôncio de Carvalho Reform in 1879 constitutes a decisive milestone in this process, by enabling women's entry into Brazilian higher education (LOBO, s.d.). However, formal opening did not imply full acceptance, as the symbolic structures of exclusion remained operative.

2 RITA LOBATO VELHO LOPES: TRAJECTORY AND PIONEERING ROLE

It is within this context that the trajectory of Rita Lobato Velho Lopes (**Figure 1**) emerges, whose biography encapsulates the tensions and possibilities of that historical moment. Born on June 9, 1866, in the city of Rio Grande, southern Brazil, Rita was the daughter of Francisco Lobato Lopes, a rancher and merchant, and Rita Carolina Velho Lopes, hailing from an economically privileged family. This familial background was pivotal for her access to education, during an era when female schooling was exceedingly limited.

Figure 1

Photograph of the First Woman to Graduate in Medicine in Brazil



From childhood, she demonstrated an inclination toward studies and interest in medicine, largely motivated by the death of her mother during childbirth—an event that profoundly marked her trajectory and directed her professional choice toward obstetrics (Lima, 2025). This aspect underscores the relationship between personal experience and the construction of a professional project, particularly relevant in the case of pioneering women.

Her education did not proceed linearly, being marked by geographical displacements that reflect both institutional limitations and family strategies. Initially, she moved to Rio de Janeiro, then the capital of the Empire, where she began her medical training. Subsequently, she transferred to the Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia, where she completed her course in 1887, becoming the first woman to graduate in Medicine in Brazil (LOBO, s.d.; LIMA, 2010).

The Faculdade de Medicina da Bahia played a central role in this process, positioning itself as a pioneering space in the training of female physicians. Its location in northeastern Brazil confers regional relevance to the analysis, demonstrating that transformations in the educational field were not restricted to the major centers of the Southeast but also occurred in other regions of the country.

During her academic trajectory, Rita Lobato distinguished herself through her performance and dedication, completing the course in less time than anticipated

(BANDEIRA, 2013). This observation evidences that the barriers faced by women were not related to intellectual capacity but to social structures that limited their access to knowledge.

3 STRUCTURAL RUPTURE AND TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT

The insertion of women into medicine, in this context, can be understood as a process of structural rupture. As Juliska Rago (2015) asserts, nineteenth-century female physicians were able to confront resistances and “create conditions for the rupture of the male world of medicine.” This statement synthesizes the transformative character of female presence in the medical field.

Begliomini (2021) reinforces this perspective by highlighting that the nineteenth century was marked by the emergence of notable women in the health sector, whose trajectories contributed to the redefinition of the boundaries of the scientific field. These pioneers not only occupied spaces but also expanded the meanings of medical practice.

The educational impact of this process was equally profound. The presence of women in higher education contributed to the legitimization of women's education and the expansion of their access to scientific knowledge. In this sense, Beltrão and Alves (2009) state: “The reversal of the gender gap in education was the greatest achievement of Brazilian women in the last century.”

However, historical analysis reveals that the expansion of access to education did not completely eliminate gender inequalities, which persist across various social spheres. In this regard, Rita Lobato's trajectory should be understood as part of a broader historical process that remains ongoing.

The recovery of these trajectories fits within a historiographical revision movement that seeks to bring visibility to female participation. As Oriá emphasizes, it is necessary to rescue these experiences to more fully comprehend the social construction of Brazil.

Contemporary studies reinforce that female pioneering in medicine constitutes a central element for understanding social transformations in Brazil (BRASIL. CÂMARA DOS DEPUTADOS, 2016). Thus, the trajectory of Rita Lobato Velho Lopes should not be interpreted merely as an individual milestone, but as an expression of a profound reconfiguration of the relations between gender, science, and power.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The insertion of women into Brazilian medicine in the nineteenth century represented a structural rupture in a historically male-dominated field. The trajectory of Rita Lobato Velho Lopes demonstrates that this process was marked by resistances, geographical displacements, and insertion strategies that enabled the overcoming of institutional and symbolic barriers.

Her legacy extends beyond the medical field, contributing to the expansion of female access to education and the redefinition of women's role in Brazilian society. Thus, understanding her trajectory is fundamental for analyzing the relations between gender, science, and power in Brazil

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