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Women in High School U.S. History Texts: Where Are the Changes?

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In December 1978, a spokesman for the action had been brought against the person responsible. The spokesman also said, however, that legal proceedings were in abeyance since the person had left Michigan and gone to California.

Name Withheld

READERS’ SPEAKOUT

and addresses frequently, and to make refunds only under pressure of legal action.”

New Women Press and Publishing Center, Inc., plus eleven other versions of the Detroit firm, also appear on a similar list circulated at the Summer 1978 meetings of the American Library Association.

In the 1974 survey, the texts were evaluated for the listing of women in the index and table of contents, the choice of famous women included, the selection and number of illustrations portraying women, and the use of language. In addition, the authors assessed the inclusion of women in four areas: the colonial period, rights and reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women’s work, and American society since 1920. Our new evaluation sheet was more complex, reflecting recent scholarship in women’s history. Within four chronological periods we looked for material on housework and paid work, on child care, on birth control and the birth control movement, on women’s education, on women in political and social change movements, on women and religion, and on women and the family. We devoted a special section of our evaluation to slavery, since we wondered if recent attention to Afro-American history within the high school curriculum included a focus on Black women. What we had looked for in the original survey was compensatory history; this time we expected more.

In the texts surveyed in 1974, typically one out of 500 to 800 pages was devoted to women. Although women are given greater coverage in the new texts, the change is not impressive: now, on the average, fourteen pages are exclusively devoted to women. The fact that women, unlike men, are still given a separate listing in the indexes suggests their supplemental relationship to history. One text that was conscientious, if not successful, in its inclusion of women’s history relegated most of the important material on women to sections called “Side-notes to History.” These also included material on minority women and men.

Although there were far more listings on women in the indexes than before, the listings proved to be deceptive. We found that most of the information on women fell under the discussion of nineteenth-century rights and reform movements, suffrage, or settlement houses, and a new section on the present women’s movement.

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Women in High School U.S. History Texts: Where Are the Changes?

By Sandy Weinbaum

In 1974, The Feminist Press conducted a survey of U.S. high school history texts to find out how women were portrayed. The authors’ findings corroborated those of similar studies of high school and college texts: history was the history of men—primarily white and middle class—as reported and interpreted by men; women were invisible, or, if visible, were the objects of stereotyping or the occasion for comic relief.

In 1978 ten members of the Feminist Press staff formed a research group to update that study. We wanted to know if publishers had been affected by the women’s movement and, in particular, by the new feminist scholarship in women’s history. Were women being included in high school texts which had been published since the original survey was completed? If changes had been made, were they substantial, a serious effort to integrate women into history, or merely cosmetic, a few women grafted onto the history of male activities and achievements? Would we find women speaking in their own voices, and would their lives and actions be interpreted from women’s perspective?

For the purpose of conducting this survey we wrote letters to the publishers of the fourteen texts that had formed the basis of the 1974 study. We told them of our intentions and asked them to send us the latest editions of the texts we had originally reviewed, or, if they were out of print, the newest high school texts in U.S. history. The publishers included several of the major textbook publishers for the high school market. Most of them complied with our request for books. Since they knew the purpose of our study, we assumed that they had sent us their best and latest texts. Of the texts that were sent to us, four were revised editions of the original texts; eight were new. Two of these had been commended by the Research Department of Scott Foresman for their excellent coverage of women’s history, and one had been awarded a prize as the outstanding publication of the year by Chicago Women in Publishing. We were beginning to expect significant change.

In the 1974 survey, the texts were evaluated for the listing of women in the index and table of contents, the choice of famous women included, the selection and number of illustrations portraying women, and the use of language. In addition, the authors assessed the inclusion of women in four areas: the colonial period, rights and reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women’s work, and American society since 1920. Our new evaluation sheet was more complex, reflecting recent scholarship in women’s history. Within four chronological periods we looked for material on housework and paid work, on child care, on birth control and the birth control movement, on women’s education, on women in political and social change movements, on women and religion, and on women and the family. We devoted a special section of our evaluation to slavery, since we wondered if recent attention to Afro-American history within the high school curriculum included a focus on Black women. What we had looked for in the original survey was compensatory history; this time we expected more.

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jectives to describe women and of feminized occupations

In the original survey, the overwhelming number of women or pictured women conspicuously. However, the quality of these illustrations varied enormously. Women might be shown working in factories or on plantations, participating in demonstrations, or simply being members of family groupings. Some texts used drawn art successfully to raise questions about women's history. For example, the caption under the engraving of an idealized frontier cabin with a well-dressed woman in the doorway asks students whether this is a realistic portrayal of frontier life. The notes to the teacher call attention to the unrealistic dress of the woman, to the absence of children, and to the neatness of the scene.

A particularly visible change in the texts can be seen in the illustrations. In the original survey, the overwhelming number of illustrations were of male politicians and male activities; in the current survey, about one-quarter of the illustrations were of women or pictured women conspicuously. However, the quality of these illustrations varied enormously. Women might be shown working in factories or on plantations, participating in demonstrations, or simply being members of family groupings. Some texts used drawn art successfully to raise questions about women's history. For example, the caption under the engraving of an idealized frontier cabin with a well-dressed woman in the doorway asks students whether this is a realistic portrayal of frontier life. The notes to the teacher call attention to the unrealistic dress of the woman, to the absence of children, and to the neatness of the scene.

Many of the texts include illustrations of contemporary women in traditional male jobs and professions—illustrations which, when not accompanied by charts or photographs which document the occupations most women hold today, perpetuate the myth that women have already overcome most of the obstacles to their advancement. In most texts, women's participation in political demonstrations and strikes is consistently underrepresented or distorted. The revised (1977) Commager and Morison text includes a photograph of a suffragist giving a speech which bears the caption: "... A speaker in a stylish suit, shirtwaist and rakish bonnet addresses the predominantly male crowd." In another text, a photograph of women strikers from the early twentieth century bears the caption: "Do you think that housewives and mothers ought to take part in such activities? Why or why not?"

Perhaps the single greatest change and improvement in the texts is in the area of language: the elimination of the male generic; the inclusion of women in such terms as "farmers" or "workers"—sometimes in admirable ways, such as: "One farmer recalled how members of her family stored food when she was a child."

The historical experiences of slave women, both in the colonial and in the antebellum period, are usually not distinguished from those of slave men. Some texts note that slave women worked in the fields; a few texts comment on the sexual abuse of slave women; no texts discuss women's participation in slave rebellions or acts of sabotage.

Women's participation in rights and reform movements, while no longer trivialized by comic allusions to bloomers, is not grounded in an examination of the lives of women in the nineteenth century. In most texts the only causes given for the nineteenth-century women's movement are the lack of political and property rights and the discrimination faced by women within the abolitionist movement. Rarely is the ideology of "true womanhood" discussed, or the devaluation of women's work and the subordination of women within the family. Not only are the socioeconomic realities of women's lives ignored, but the difficulties that they faced as women organizing and campaigning for women's rights are never mentioned. It is quite remarkable that not one text notes that Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the mother of seven children and that she carried on her political work while fulfilling her commitments to her family.

The twentieth-century suffrage movement is given less extensive treatment in most of the texts than the nineteenth-century movement. Few texts indicate the continuity in the suffrage movement to the end of the nineteenth century; the massive opposition which suffragists encountered; the political strategies and divisions among suffragists. It is also true, however, that women's rights and reform movements are not used for comic relief as they were in earlier texts. Only one text was openly hostile to feminism and treated it as an aberration in American politics.

A significant departure from the earlier texts is the visibility of women's work in the colonial period, in the early phase of industrialization, on the frontier, and during wars. Women's work on the frontier offers textbook writers opportunities to present women in nontraditional roles; unfortunately, the emphasis on strong frontier women is not sufficiently balanced with portraits of reluctant pioneers, the women...
who had to follow husbands West, who found only back-breaking work, and who were cut off from a network of female friends and relatives.

The work of Black women after the Civil War is never mentioned except in one text which perpetuates the myth of the "Black matriarch," suggesting to students that Black women and not poverty and racism are the cause of social dislocations in the Black community: "Many Black women became the major, if not the only breadwinners of their families, a situation which further undermined male morale and multiplied broken homes."15

The work of women during wars is another favored topic, although the tone is often patronizing, as if these were the only occasions on which American women did "a man's job." None of the texts discusses women's function as a cheap reservoir of labor in the earlier stages of American economic development or today; only one text mentions the sexual segregation of the labor force. Several texts mention the discrimination against women in labor unions; none mentions the importance of women in the labor movement in spite of this discrimination, nor their militancy.

A serious omission is the failure to discuss housework, including child care. In 1974, Arlow and Frosch noted that the texts stressed the virtual disappearance of housework in the twentieth century with the development of technological improvements for the home. According to this interpretation, women were thus released for participation in the paid labor force. This myth is alive and well in the textbooks that we surveyed. Only one reflects the recent scholarship on housework and points out that the hours devoted to housework have increased since the 1920s.16 In all the other texts, women's work in the home is invisible, indeed is claimed to have vanished as of the 1920s; thus women's participation in the paid labor force is presented as a personal choice made for self-fulfillment. For example, one text says of women in the 1920s:

The cities vastly increased opportunities for women. Living quarters in the city were smaller and required less care. The development of cheap, ready-made clothing and the appearance of commercial laundries eased or eliminated two of the tasks that had occupied women for centuries. Other chores for which women had been responsible on the farm—milking, butter churning, raising chickens, and canning—were replaced in the city by a quick trip to the grocery. Women went to work in the factories and also found some new opportunities in business.17

Given this myth of the disappearance of housework, it is hardly surprising that most texts view women's path in the twentieth century as an upward spiral of increasing educational and employment opportunities.

The view that obstacles to individual advancement come primarily from the individual—not from poverty, discriminatory institutions, or present family structures—underpins the texts reviewed. For this reason the texts emphasize women in nontraditional roles and occupations rather than explain why women have been and continue to be discriminated against in these roles and occupations. The recently developed "nonracist and nonsexist" guidelines from one publisher recommend that an equal number of women and men be shown in illustrations of professions, "especially those that command high incomes."18 Students can then assume that women have overcome the difficulties that once existed in entering those professions and that the burden of responsibility for success in the job market now lies with the individual woman. The texts thus raise student expectations without allowing them to understand the socioeconomic forces that channel women into low-paying, dead-end jobs.

After a fleeting mention of the socioeconomic inequities that still confront women, the view of women in contemporary America is cheerily optimistic. One author concludes happily: "Despite some active resistance and the inertia of tradition, by the mid-1970s the women's rights movement was moving towards the achievement of most, if not all, of its goals."19

The same texts which communicate such an optimistic view of women's rights are far more realistic in assessing the continuing impact of racism. For example, the author just cited says of the Black civil rights movement:

In summary, by the mid-1970s Roy Wilkins of the NAACP reported that Black Americans had made gains on all fronts, but that the longest and hardest road still lay ahead. Martin Luther King, Jr., had dreamed of a nation in which men and women and children of every race and creed would be united in peace and justice. Whether and when this dream would be realized remained an open question.... 20

Similarly, although a number of texts comment on the continuing existence of poverty in the 1970s and the increasing disparity between the incomes of Blacks and whites, not one mentions the increasing gap between the incomes of women and men, between the incomes of Black women and Black men, the growing number of women who head households and live in poverty, and the higher rate of unemployment for women than for men.

To reinforce the notion that women work for luxuries, not because of need, one text notes:

... With both halves of the family employed there will probably also be a greater demand for a shorter work week and longer vacations. Families will want to spend more leisure time together, and they will be able to afford it. The demand for leisure may even become more important than high wages.21

The author neatly obscures the fact that most married women work because they have to; that research indicates that the "leisure" time of these women is filled with child care and housework; and that there is mounting pressure for decent wages and child-care arrangements, rather than for family holidays.
The current women's movement does receive passing mention in the texts: "As they watched Blacks, Chicanos, Indians, and Asians push for their civil rights, many women began to wonder why their sex should not state its case also."22

As in the interpretation of the nineteenth-century women's movement, the emphasis is on women's imitative powers, not on their needs. Women's "case" is usually described as equal pay for equal work, and eliminating legal liabilities in marriage, divorce, and employment; a few texts mention abortion and child care; most stress the need to have more women in public office. NOW is the only feminist organization mentioned, although its broad feminist goals are not discussed.

The contention that the goals of the women's movement have largely been achieved means that important feminist demands such as inexpensive, community-controlled child care facilities; sharing of housework between women and men; satisfying work for all people; women's control of their bodies; and freedom of sexual preference are excluded. This exclusion serves to reinforce the notion that such demands are the expression of an extremist fringe of the population and unrelated to the needs of most women.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these textbook evaluations. The first concerns the changes which we did find, particularly in language and illustrations. The elimination of sexist usage in language and the inclusion of women in illustrations are to be applauded and are indeed a measure of the impact that feminists have had thus far on the publishing industry. However, language change and changes in illustrations that are not anchored in major substantive revisions can lead to historical distortions, as we have already noted.

Since the texts which we surveyed continue to be organized around political and military events, the history of all oppressed groups—not only that of women—is underrepresented. The objective has been to include these groups within the "mainstream of history," rather than to raise questions about what the "mainstream of history" is. In order to include women's history in texts, a number of questions need to be asked concerning such issues as periodization, definitions of progress, definitions of power. What are the major turning points in history for women? Are they different from those for men? How do these turning points differ for women from different social, racial, and ethnic groups? Are periods traditionally labeled "progressive" progressive for women as well as for men?

Once such questions are asked, then texts will be reconceptualized. As long as such reconceptualization of history does not take place and as long as the basic topics needed to explore women's lives remain taboo in high school history texts, then women's past and present will remain inaccessible to students.

Sandy Weinbaum is teaching guide editor for the Women's Lives/Women's Work project of The Feminist Press. An historian, she has taught history and women's studies at Brooklyn College.

Notes


3. The group consisted of Phyllis Arlow, Mickie Fitzmaurice, Jeanne Ford, Shirley Frank, Merle Frosch, flene Hertz, Carol Teta, Sandy Weinbaum, and Sharon Wightoff. We all evaluated and discussed the texts; the conclusions in this article represent the thinking of the group. Mary Mulrooney and Barbara Sussman served as the note takers. (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1978), p. 6.

4. A complete list of texts reviewed is available. See box below.


12. Ibid., p. 68.

13. Buggley et al., America! America!, p. 139.


17. Risjord and Haywood, People and Our Country, p. 466.


20. Ibid., p. 717.


To obtain a reprint of this article, plus an annotated guide to current high school U.S. history texts, send a business-sized, self-addressed, stamped envelope to The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, NY 11568.