

Is This the End of the Crusade for Gender-Equal Curricula?

For decades, the push to acknowledge women's contributions gained traction, but progress may have flatlined.

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A line of women rally for women's suffrage in Washington D.C. in 1915.AP

The book came in the mail without a jacket, its yellowed, crackling pages enveloped in stiff brown paper.

For Patricia Bell-Scott, it told a story that both eased her loneliness and changed the course of her life. This was the late 1960s, and Bell-Scott was among a handful of African American women

undergraduate science majors on the recently desegregated University of Tennessee campus.

When she walked into her science classes, professors would swivel around to remind her of the course being taught in that room—“this is organic chemistry, this is microbiology.” None of the mostly white, male students wanted to be her lab partner—until they discovered that she could, in fact, do the work as well as or better than they could.

She spent most of her time learning about the ideas and contributions of people who didn't look like her. Books about black women were hard to come by, but Bell-Scott, a student assistant in the library, knew where she might be able to find them. She began scouring catalogues of rare and out-of-print books and ordered *Proud Shoes* by the African American lawyer, priest, activist, and author Pauli Murray.

Which brings us back to those yellowing pages. Bell-Scott devoured Murray's words, relishing the connections between them: They both came from working class, African American families. They were both bookworms who had at one point lived with grandparents. Suddenly, Bell-Scott saw her place not as a solitary woman on a college campus, but as next in a long line of historic black, female intellectuals. “I saw Pauli as a role model, and her work as an example of the kind of work I thought I could do,” says Bell-Scott, now an award-winning author and professor emerita of women's studies and human development and family science at the University of Georgia. “I felt my whole sense of myself and my purpose took shape as a result of that experience.”

Part of that purpose: devoting her career to fighting for educational curricula that include the stories of people who look like her—a fight that in recent decades has struggled to gain traction.

At the time she discovered Murray, she was in good company: Pushing for the inclusion of women and gender in educational curricula was gaining serious traction—and not just among second-wave feminists. In 1971, groundbreaking research quantified just how underrepresented and misrepresented women were in U.S. high-school history textbooks, finding, for instance, that there was more textbook space devoted to the length of women's skirts than to the suffrage movement.

Big textbook publishers like McGraw-Hill, Macmillan Publishers, and the American Psychological Association printed guidelines about how to publish less sexist material. Universities funneled money into new women's-studies courses; San Diego State University launched the first department of women's studies in 1970. Congress passed the Women's Education Equity Act in 1974, which funded more research and the creation of national resource centers to help school districts that wanted to deliver bias-free educations.

Even the Texas State Board of Education, which has long had a disproportionate and conservative influence on what information gets included in national textbooks, hopped on the gender-equality

train, issuing a proclamation that textbooks should include “women in leadership and other positive roles with which they are not traditionally identified” and offer “goal choices and lifestyles for girls and women in addition to marriage and homemaking.”

For a while, textbooks and teaching at the secondary and university levels improved. Sexism became more subtle, and women’s stories more common. Scholars pushed not only for gender analysis, but for intersectional analysis along lines of race, class, ability, and sexual orientation, and called women’s-studies pioneers out for “the white-middle class, heterosexual bias of academic feminism [that] pervades research and teaching about women.” In 1982, Bell-Scott, Akasha Hull, and Barbara Smith published *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, which they hoped would transform the popular notion of what an education should be: “When I was in school, there was something about the curriculum that seemed to educate you—if you weren’t male or white—away from yourself,” Bell-Scott says. “We wanted to see a curriculum structured in such a way that that you would get some grounding in history that affirmed who you were.” (After that book was published, Murray wrote to Bell-Scott, congratulating her on the work and telling her, “You need to know some of the veterans of the battle whose shoulders you now stand on.”)

But then, in the mid-90s, the movement stalled—particularly in the K-12 setting. Since then, says David Sadker, a pioneering researcher in the field, “things have been frozen in time ... in two decades, there’s been very little progress, and some retrenchment.” Though

some research shows that the omission of women is not as great as it once was—and that textbooks have significantly improved when it comes to the inclusion and treatment of women and gender since the 1960s—the subject is still underrepresented.

The story of how this happened, and why it matters, is about more than social justice, experts say—it’s about perpetuating incomplete and sometimes false narratives across every level of education. And it’s about an extension of the historic silencing of women that hurts both women and men.

“If women have had half the world’s experience, there’s a truth value associated with [teaching and writing] history in a way that reflects those experiences, even acknowledging the fact that [putting together a historical narrative] is a selective process,” says Margaret Crocco, a professor and chairperson at Michigan State University’s Department of Teacher Education who has devoted her career to this movement. “If you aren’t telling the broader story about all human beings, then what you are representing is partial and flawed.”

The goal of the movement was not to simply hold women leaders up as heroines or societal anomalies, to paraphrase the 18th-century feminist author and activist Mary Wollstonecraft; its advocates wanted women and gender to be treated as more than “sidebar history.” Though showcasing women’s stories on their own is important, women’s-history pioneers also saw unearthing and integrating women’s stories as a gateway to better understand the laws, institutions, systems, and movements that are most familiar

to Americans—and to correct and complicate them.

Why does violence against women endure? Why are women still paid less than their male counterparts? Why does the United States continue to battle over reproductive rights? The answer partially lies in the practices of coverture, embedded in the old law of domestic relations that American colonists inherited from the British and didn't change after the Revolution. It's a story that's largely missing from conventional American history narratives, says the University of Iowa professor and historian Linda K. Kerber. Coverture meant that a woman was covered by the civil identity of her husband, justified by the claim that he was protecting a vulnerable person who could not be trusted to make financial and political decisions. It meant that women couldn't be trusted to vote because their husbands could easily force their hand. It meant that a man gained control over the property that his wife brought into the marriage or earned during it, often enabling him to vote. (During the period of the founding, when there were widespread property requirements for voting, historians estimate that perhaps as many as 15 percent of men acquired the property that enabled them to vote from their wives—it didn't occur to them that their wives should be able to vote, too.)

Coverture also meant that a man had largely unrestrained access to his wife's body. Even until the late 20th century, according to the law of most states, violent sex imposed on a wife by a husband did not count as rape. Fathers had custody for children born within marriage—mothers responsibility for children outside of it. If a woman married a foreign-born man, she surrendered her U.S. citizenship. If a man married a foreign-born woman, she was

granted citizenship automatically. If a wife committed a crime in the presence of and to the knowledge of her husband, he was the one responsible—except if that crime involved a brothel. The Founders debated the extent to which slavery would infuse the newly independent America, but did not discuss whether controlling and coercing their wives undermined the country's new claims of freedom and independence.

Kerber argues that the ideas behind coverture still linger in politics and policy today. “The tightening of abortion regulations and demand that pre-abortion sonograms be shown to persuade the pregnant woman not to terminate a pregnancy—I would say that’s engineered by a deeply rooted basic distrust of women’s ability to make moral and ethical judgments,” she says.

The consequence of the omission of the history of coverture from teaching materials is that many American citizens aren’t aware of these early and foundational attitudes toward women, and how they’ve guided policymaking since then. The less students learn about this history, the easier it is to argue that the ideas that women are fragile, vulnerable, and in need male protection are irrefutable facts rather than social constructions based on bias and desire for power and control. Just like feminist movement itself, the push to include women and gender analysis in history curricula is not about castigating men or about prioritizing one gender over another. Instead, the exploration of gender and its role throughout history illuminates the dynamics between women and men, historians say, and the way power is distributed in a society.

Policymakers started ramping up efforts to improve the educational

performance of American children after the Reagan administration sounded the alarm on anemic student achievement in the early 1980s. Those concerns fueled the K-12 education-standards movement, which is among several factors that some experts say played a role in stalling the inclusive education momentum of the 70s and 80s. Barbara Winslow, a professor emerita at Brooklyn College and women's-history historian, argues that standards and accountability movement, which paved the way for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and more recently the Common Core State Standards Initiative, “resulted in closing down spaces for women’s history in high-school curriculum,” in part because of an “emphasis on reading and math ... Given the ‘back to basics’ movement of the last 20 years, women’s history has seen its opportunities for greater inclusion in school curriculum halted, if not eroded entirely.”

To Morgan Polikoff, an associate professor of education at the University of Southern California, the stalling of the movement in some states likely had more to do with politics than anything else. “Though there’s been some progress in some states ... standards and curriculum are state issues,” he said. “Today we’ve got more than 30 states controlled by Republicans in both the legislature and governor’s mansion.”

Politics aside, when states and districts do make decisions on standards or curricula, women can be automatically excluded because traditional history education has prioritized stories about institutions, industries, and systems where women haven’t historically held power—such as governance and economics, explains Joan Wallach Scott, a historian selected by the Council for Basic Education to review the National Standards for History in the

late '90s. Indeed, says Michigan State's Crocco, women "had little access to the kinds of pathways—elected office, law, business—that would have provided them access to this kind of achievement and attainment of historical significance."

But critics of the movement for more inclusive curricula say the solution isn't shoehorning women into history materials for the sake of balance. "If your job at the K-12 level is to give kids a chronological understanding of major historical events, you can't end up with equal representation of men and women," because, throughout history, women and men haven't played equal roles in prominent leadership positions, explains Chester Finn, the president emeritus at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. "It would be historically inaccurate to try to do that. That's the dilemma here, and I don't think there's a good solution to it."

The other dilemma—at least for advocates of more gender-inclusive curricula—is that it's tricky to make the case that more gender balanced curricula matters when it comes to student-achievement outcomes. Back in the 1970s, the research documenting gender bias and women's absence in curricula often got linked to girls' lagging academic performance, as compared to boys. By the mid-1990s and continuing on to today, across many academic indicators, girls are faring better than boys: They're graduating from high school in higher numbers, more of them are enrolled in gifted-and-talented programs, and more of them go on to attend and graduate from college and master's programs. This reality has prompted some to question whether inclusion of women and gender is as critical as it once was—what the impact of gender

inclusive curricula really is on both boys and girls.

Few recent studies approach this question directly; in fact, a forthcoming article by Chara Haeussler Bohan, professor in the department of middle and secondary education in the College of Education and Human Development at Georgia State University, notes the paucity of research that measures “the impact of a gender inclusive social-studies curriculum on student learning or student-affective outcomes.” There is, however, some recent research that suggests that students that see examples of people who look like them in curricula tend to perform better academically. “If we don’t require or strongly encourage states and districts to be more inclusive, we’ll end up with a history curriculum that doesn’t reflect the diversity of today’s students, and I suspect that will be a harmful thing given the evidence we have,” says USC’s Polikoff, who suggests that gender inclusion may be less of a priority than other goals when it comes to equity.

A few years before Bell-Scott first turned the pages of *Proud Shoes*, Gina Walker was beginning a Ph.D. in English literature at New York University. As a woman navigating a male-dominated field and institution in the late 1960s, Walker, like Bell-Scott, felt like an intellectual interloper. But then, fate intervened: An adviser encouraged her to take a look at the 18th-century writer and historian Mary Hays as a potential thesis topic. Walker plucked a few dusty books of the shelves of the NYU library and feasted on Hays’ words.

“I was a different person when I walked out of the library that day,”

Walker, now a professor of women's studies at The New School, recalls. "It was because I saw a chance to learn about a woman about whom very little was known."

In 1803, Hays published *Female Biography*—six volumes of nearly 300 women's stories. In 2009, Walker spearheaded an international collaboration to restore Hays's work .

But it wasn't enough. Walker craved a project that would bring to life even more women's stories, and the contexts and constraints that filled out the contours of their lives. In late April 2017, her team formally launched The New Historia, which aims to be an ever-evolving digital repository of women's stories for scholars, students, and the general public. Unlike other archives, Walker plans to develop algorithms that will allow users to better understand the connections between women across historical eras, nationalities, and religions. Her vision: a database that highlights trends, themes, and commonalities, encouraging a less linear and more web-like view of women's triumphs, failures, challenges, and innovations across time.

She hopes, too, that the cataloguing of long-ago shattered glass ceilings will help counter those who argue that they're still in tact—that a woman can't do that because it's never been done before. In the words of the Native American activist and writer Paula Gunn Allen, "the root of oppression is the loss of memory." The feminist historian Gerda Lerner put it another way, likening the negation and erasure of female stories and experiences from history to the "rape of our minds"—a way of "terrorizing us and keeping us in

subjugation.”

It is memory—and these stories—that remind readers that their challenges are not just individual, but systemic, evolving, and sustained through centuries.

Women’s stories also serve as a reminder of the importance and legitimacy of personal narrative with regards to history. “Personal writings associated with women and people of color, people who often didn’t have public platforms from which to espouse their ideas, have long been marginalized,” Bell-Scott explains.

Bell-Scott’s newest book, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, tells one such narrative—the story of the boundary-crossing friendship between Murray and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Pauli wrote her first protest letter to the White House in 1938, beginning a decades-long correspondence—charged, confrontational, intimate—and eventually, a friendship with the first lady. Murray pushed Roosevelt to take a public stand against lynching, against segregation. Roosevelt told Murray about her limitations as first lady. “Policy issues became personal for Eleanor,” Bell-Scott explains. “When issues around segregated housing come up [later in her life], the First Lady had some understanding of how devastating that experience could be because she had heard Pauli’s stories of homelessness.”

Bell-Scott is optimistic that Americans may once again take a few steps forward, as the current generation of students discovers that this movement is unfinished. After all, one reason that it stalled was

because many no longer believed inequality was a problem. There was, Bell-Scott describes, a “false sense that the barriers to educational and employment were no longer there—so the need for advocacy was less urgent.”

We want to hear what you think. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

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