

Women Underrepresented in History Textbooks

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There's a prevailing social phenomenon that most people seem to easily recall men's contributions in society over women's contributions. According to Joyce Delaney, "There is a noticeable imbalance in the importance given to women as opposed to men's roles" (*Voices Not Heard: Women in a History Textbook*). Throughout my research on this topic, I found that people do not know about women in history because textbooks are too brief and reflect dated attitudes that are male-oriented.

Textbooks continually fail to teach us about important women because textbook writers apparently do not want to do the work of reconstructing and reconfiguring our textbooks. Sherrow Pinder said, "We believe that by highlighting female teachers' perceptions on gender bias present in textbooks, educators might begin to see the inherent need for reconstruction of women's issues in social studies textbooks used in the United States" ([*American Multicultural Studies: Diversity of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality*](#)). Clearly, nobody notices the lack of representation at first because we are so encultured to accept male-centric attitudes in our curricula. Statements about women's achievements are often brief, and women are portrayed as more of the supportive caretakers. The most celebrated accomplishments in history textbooks are usually achievements in war, in which women's contributions are dramatically underrepresented. A study by M.K Tetrealt said that "textbooks placed an emphasis on political, diplomatic and military history instead of social history and, as a result, women's achievements in the private sphere were left out" ([*Integrating Women's History: The Case of United States History High School Textbooks*](#)). I found this to be interesting. I was surprised publishers would cut out women when they should be included as influential people in history, particularly due to

the women's rights movement. Tetrealt further elaborated that a "study of history textbooks revealed that in one that contains 819 pages, the text allotted to references to women added up to less than one page. A closer look at another publisher's offering showed that in more than 1,000 pages, there were four illustrations of men for every one of women, and that less than three percent of the text was about women (130)."

Tetrealt's study also looked into the ways women were described and how their roles were defined in academic textbooks, in particular highlighting Eleanor Roosevelt's representation in textbooks. "Although these textbooks often 'present her as a person in her own right' (Tetreault, 1984, p. 546), the roles most often depicted consisted of Roosevelt caring for her husband, concerned for the unfortunate; most did not emphasize her "female centered activities" (Tetreault, 1984, p. 546). This is a huge mistake—schoolchildren do not learn about Eleanor's Roosevelt's contributions to society and are not informed about her advocacy efforts. This gender bias blocks knowledge and creates ignorance in school curricula, centering learning around male contributions and neglecting to recognize women for fighting for voting rights and the opportunity for women to actively participate in democracy.

Ways in which publishers continue to promote a male-centered curriculum in textbooks is by denying the problem even exists. Teachers have to stick to outdated guidelines because administrators continue to purchase textbooks that are lacking in a complete and inclusive version of history. "Textbook editors and authors (many of whom are historians from colleges and research universities) bemoan the fact that they must curb their desire for change because conservative state or local boards of education control the choice of textbooks..." says Judith Zinsler ([*History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full*](#)). Parents, students and faculty have little to no control over what is bought and used in their schools because boards of education make these curriculum decisions. Most local boards of education or state boards are conservative with their academic choices. Concerned consumers should join these organizations, go to their meetings to voice their concerns, and not be

apathetic about the situational status quo regarding women's representation in textbooks. Things will never change without reaction and action around these books. Teachers should be encouraged to share a diverse view of history that is not more slanted to male leaders, and also focuses on influential women leaders.

All things considered, unless consumers and educators campaign for more inclusive textbooks, male-oriented history textbooks will continue to cause misconceptions around the roles and contributions of women. Women, parents and educators must be willing to stand up to the dated and gendered ideas printed in today's textbooks. Women have brought about fundamental changes in society and their contributions should not be ignored.



Eleanor Roosevelt

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