

## **Where Are All the Women? Gender Bias Persists in Social Studies Texts**

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### *Introduction*

Creating an inclusive and a more equitable classroom is a goal that all educators should continually strive for. One area of concern is that many girls and young women do not see themselves in curriculum materials--especially in the social studies. In the social studies methods class I teach, my students are exposed to several forms of bias often found in social studies textbooks. The students are also shown some of the bias I found in two 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies texts in a study I did in the early 1990s. Then as part of a textbook analysis assignment, my students examine another social studies textbook for gender bias. One former student of mine and co-researcher of this article greatly expanded the project and examined several social studies texts currently in use in the local area schools. What she found in her study was that “women are still grossly underrepresented in our schools’ social studies textbooks, and misrepresentation of women’s contributions in history and stereotypical gender-roles in today’s educational materials is still a problematic issue (Hofelt, 2012).” Combining my student’s research with the project I did in the early 1990s created a longevity study of gender bias in social studies textbooks. Below we will provide some literature reviews on textbook bias, highlight some of the various forms of bias often found in textbooks and then provide data in table format derived from the examination of several social studies books used in local school districts. We will also briefly explore some possible reasons for the persistence of gender bias in social studies textbooks.

### *Literature Review*

A review of the literature on textbook bias turned up numerous studies dating back to the 1960s that showed there was gender bias in social studies textbooks (Blakenship, 1984, Sadker, et al 1995). Research analyzing gender bias in social studies textbooks was further developed with the 1970s feminist movement in what many consider the “second wave” of the women’s rights movement--the first wave happening in the mid-1800s. However, Blumberg (2007) notes that 1970s research showed women’s contributions in textbooks to be nearly non-existent. Black (2006) noted that throughout the 1970’s that there were efforts by “publishing companies to adopt gender fair guidelines” and that by the 1980s, research showed that equity in gender representation had “increased slightly” though it was not yet fully equitable.

By the 1990s, textbook studies reveal “modest improvements,” that perhaps may be attributed to the early feminist movement in the 70s (Blumberg, 2007). Black (2006) notes that even though significant improvements were visible in incorporating women into textbooks, evidence verified that they “still lacked gender equity.” Delaney (1996) noted “marginalized” contributions of women in history texts and described the changes as “superficial” and only “cosmetic.” In the last few decades, textbook publishers have made changes to make the content more equitable, the fact remains that gender bias “is decreasing very slowly” (Blumberg, 2009). Hickey & Kolterman (2006) noted that social studies textbooks “largely portray woman as passive bystanders in the world’s events, with fewer than 11 percent of textbook images and references devoted to specific women.” Thompson (2003) sums it up by noting, “We have century’s worth of sexist socialization to overcome.”

An important rationale for looking at textbooks is that studies have shown that textbooks are the main instructional tools used in schools and therefore largely determine curriculum (Blumberg, 2007). More succinctly, Blumberg reports that students spend on average 85% of their time in the classroom using textbooks. Blumberg also notes that research indicates that teachers not only use textbooks as instructional tools, but that the content in the text largely guides their teaching intentions.

In light of this importance, texts should be examined because any forms of bias by race or sex might result in “psychological, social, educational, and economic harm” to students (O’Donnell, 1973). Students receive so many cues about gender role behavior that they psychologically limit themselves to traditional roles that can result in a lowered sense of dignity and self-worth. Sociologically, biased texts can show young women that they are at inferior status to males. Educationally and economically, young women are steered away from prestigious and highly paid lines of work (Schenk, 1976).

### *Forms of Bias in Texts*

A review of the literature also turned up some articles with suggestions for selecting equitable textbooks (O’Donnell, 1973; Blakenship, 1984; Bally & Smith, 1987). According to these articles, photographs should be examined because of their ability to spark interest and because they tend to leave lasting impressions. Pictures play a huge role in early sex-role socialization by providing children with role models of what they want to be when they grow up. Pictures then, have a large influence on the goals and aspirations of students and social studies books should present images that help students reach their potential (O’Donnell, 1973). When checking pictures, see how many women are the main or dominant characters in illustrations or photographs. Lack of women results in a form of bias that Sadker and Sadker (1982) have classified as “invisibility” and that omitting half of the world’s population cheats young women as “women have had among them many wise and brave leaders....”

Another problem with pictures is that they commonly only show women in the traditional role of housewife, nurse, secretary and waitress while men are shown in prestigious positions like general, explorer or athlete. This form of bias is known as stereotyping. It is also stereotyping when women are shown with character traits like passiveness and weakness while men are characterized by traits of strength and competitiveness (Bally and Smith, 1987).

Another suggestion in examining gender bias in social studies texts is to look at the index. The fact that many indexes of social studies books have a category entitled “women” but no social studies books have an index that contains a category entitled “men” points out a form of bias that the Sadkers (1982) have labeled as “imbalance”. Texts tend to be written from a one-sided male perspective, which give students a limited point of view on the contributions and participation of women throughout history. Frequency tabulations can be totaled on the number of men and women cited in the index.

The main text should be examined by looking at the page numbers given under the index entry “women” to see if it deals with any issues sensitive to women like division of labor, suffrage or discrimination. If there are issues sensitive to women, check to see if the issue is developed or glossed over in what the Sadkers (1982) have called “unreality”. The main text can also be examined for sexist language in what the Sadker’s have labeled “linguistic bias”. Masculine terms like caveman, forefathers and mankind deny any major contributions of women. Occupational titles like mailman and policeman deny participation by women in those fields (Sacker, et al., 1993). The main written text should also be examined for omission of individual contributions of women. This would be considered a form of invisibility because individual women are not noted and without any important contributions (Bally & Smith, 1987).

Special highlighted sections can be checked for the inclusion of women but these sections can sometimes be compensatory insertions and are obvious attempts to make the text seem more equitable. This type of bias is what the Sadkers have referred to as “fragmentation” and tends to communicate to readers that women are “interesting diversions” but not important enough to be included in the main part of the text (Sadker, et al., 1993).

### *Textbooks Analyzed*

To examine the textbooks, an instrument was developed to tabulate some of the above mentioned forms of bias and the results of that tabulation can be found in the tables below. Eight texts were examined in all covering grade levels of 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Two of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade texts were from the earlier study from the 1990s and had copyrights of 1978 and 1990. The remaining six are more recent and several are still in use in local school districts. Photos, illustrations, art images of men and women were documented and we specifically looked for the dominant figure in each image. If no gender was apparent, the image was not counted. Equal representation of both men and women in an image was counted as neutral. We also looked specifically at the index, and noted the

number of contributions of women compared to those noted for men. Each textbook was analyzed from the first page of the first chapter, to the last page of the last chapter.

It was surprising to see how little improvement there was in both photographs and index citations over a thirty-year span. The problem of visibility for women in all of the texts was easily evident. In the newer texts, modern or contemporary photos tended to show more females doing more active types of things. However, anytime the newer texts dealt with an illustration or picture from a historical section, it often reverted back to that old tradition of exclusion and stereotyping. It was also interesting to note that the disparity in the amount of written text on the two genders is even greater than the disparity in the number of photos. Numbers from the textbook analysis also indicate that the higher the grade level and more advanced the content was, the female to male representation ratio gap got wider.

Textbook: 3rd Grade – Houghton Mifflin, Social Studies: Communities (2005)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	no	no	
Individual Contributions	11	25	
Fragmented Text	4	8	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	46	63	70

Textbook: 4th Grade – Harcourt Horizons, States and Regions (2005)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	Yes/5	no	
Individual Contributions	10	40	
Fragmented Text	4	19	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	32	66	45

Textbook: 5th Grade, Houghton Mifflin, Social Studies: United States History (2005)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	Yes/15	no	
Individual Contributions	48	195	
Fragmented Text	22	14	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	74	193	52

Textbook: 6th Grade, Scott Foresman, Social Studies: The World (2005)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	Yes/20	no	
Individual Contributions	34	85	
Fragmented Text	11	17	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	48	167	35

Textbook: 7th Grade, Harcourt Horizons, Ancient Civilizations (2003)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	Yes/16	no	
Individual Contributions	17	111	
Fragmented Text	4	10	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	29	68	34

Textbook: 7th Grade, Silver, Burdett and Ginn Inc., The World Yesterday and Today (1990)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	Yes/12	no	
Individual Contributions	12	109	
Fragmented Text	4	8	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	36	105	79

Textbook: 7th Grade, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., The Old World (1978)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	Yes/4	no	
Individual Contributions	4	70	
Fragmented Text	0	0	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	21	89	71

Text: 8th Grade, McDougal Littell, Creating America: A History of the United States (2005)

	Women/Girls	Men/Boys	Neutral
Index category/number listed	Yes/24	no	
Individual Contributions	111	577	
Fragmented Text	12	20	
Photos, Illustrations, and Art Images	77	299	123

### ***Women in History***

Women have always been a part of our pre-history and written histories, but Hickey and Kolterman (2006) state that “our society has not always recognized their contributions.” Women of the past and present have not played passive roles in the hidden shadows of half-truths. “Women have contributed and continue to contribute to the nation, through important economic, cultural and social roles, and are leaders on the forefront of social change movements” (Hickey & Kolterman, 2006).

The following are three examples of women who have all made significant contributions during their time, though not a single one was mentioned in any of the analyzed textbooks. These are only three extraordinary women out of millions who have contributed to society and the world.

Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919): American Civil War surgeon for the Union Army. Walker is the only woman ever to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. (<http://www.northnet.org/stlawrenceaaaw/walker.htm>)

Sarah Winnemucca (1844-1891): Born a member of the Paiute tribe, she was a prominent Native American activist and writer. Winnemucca was the first Native American woman known to have a published book. (<http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/nsh/winnemucca.cfm>)

Hedy Lamarr (1913-2000): Austrian-American accomplished actress and co-inventor of a radio transmission system used in WWII, which would later be the foundation for wireless communication. (<http://www.inventions.org/culture/female/lamarr.html>)

The point is that these women have all contributed to our histories in the United States and the world, yet they are not included in any of these social studies texts!

### ***Persistence of Gender Bias in Textbooks***

Textbooks are costly to create and also to purchase, thus publishers will only make additions or minor changes to consecutive series. According to Blumberg (2009), carrying out a complete overhaul of textbooks “to eliminate this bias is quite unlikely, partly because it is very costly.” Unfortunately, cost and lack of funding have shown to play a large role in the slow pace of revisions in educational materials. Due to a decline in federal funding, research in developing equity in curricula has dropped off the radar and resources have been allocated elsewhere (Blumberg, 2007). Blumberg also notes the focus of high-stakes testing--focus on meeting AYP and teaching students to pass state assessments, is the overriding force in today’s classroom. There may also be a general belief that equity in schools is not an issue, and as research has found, there is a “commonly held belief that gender equity has been realized” (Blumberg, 2007). If the general public feels that there is no longer a problem of equity in the classroom, then there will no longer be a push for change. Recent studies also show that men are filling social studies teaching positions, now more than ever (Blumberg, 2007). It may be hard for a male educator to address said bias if he hasn’t experienced it before. If gender bias

in social studies textbooks and educational materials is to ever be fully be acknowledged and resolved, gender equity needs to be a topic of discussion in teacher education.

### ***Putting Equality into the Social Studies***

History and social studies are important. Addressing inequality of gender in social studies is important. Making a connection of history to students' experiences makes for a genuine source of awareness and understanding. As students become active participants in the "history-gathering process, their thinking and reasoning skills improve, their academic achievement increases, their sense of self-worth is enhanced, and their curiosity is piqued (Hickey & Kolterman, 2006). Students are more apt to find importance in social studies materials when they can see themselves in the curriculum. According to Chapman (2012), "Using texts that omit contributions of women, that tokenize the experiences of women, or those that stereotype gender roles, further compounds gender bias in a schools' curriculum." Inequality of gender in social studies teaching materials is almost like teaching students only half of the histories of the world. Women are real, their histories are real, and they have made contributions to the social studies.

Educators need to be aware of gender bias in educational materials so that it may be eliminated (Chapman, 2012). When gender bias does occur, "Teachers can help students identify gender bias in texts and facilitate critical discussions as to why that bias exists" (Chapman, 2012). Being conscious of said bias is the first step not only in schools to create equality, but also in society. Knowing bias is out there, and then addressing the inequality is the key to change in our future. Thompson (2003) discusses feminist's theories which state that the focus should be on bringing gender bias out of the dark so then it can be addressed and prevented from further occurring. "If there is a place to start to change how we think of ourselves in relation to one another, the public schools – however hostile to change themselves – may yet be that place" (Thompson, 2003).

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