NCSS Position Statement

Supporting Curricular Promotion and Intersectional Valuing of Women in History and Current Events

A Position Statement of the National Council for the Social Studies

Introduction

Although women represent over half the world's population, the social studies curriculum largely overlooks and underrepresents their stories and perspectives and marginalizes their voices, positions of power, and influence throughout the larger society.¹ By means of this statement, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) offers suggestions for policy and practice that address this situation in the field, acknowledge the ongoing challenges of patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, racism, classism, heteronormativity, and cisgenderism, and put our organization squarely on the record in favor of gender equity.

As Schmeichel comments about the contemporary moment in the United States, "If you think that we are living in a post-sexist world, you are wrong. Gender inequality is not something we have moved beyond. Indeed, these recent conversations about sexism and gender inequality in our country are not pointing to a new phenomenon."² In affirming this point, Crocco highlights the ways in which patriarchy, defined as a structural system of male dominance, continually re-invents itself throughout history, even as women appear to and, indeed, are making "progress" according to certain metrics (for example, the proportion of women among college or graduate/professional school students).³ Further, scholars who have used an intersectionality lens to center their work point out how structural barriers perniciously continue to oppress and marginalize women of color.⁴

Many examples of the slow pace of movement towards greater gender equity, and even retrenchment and backlash against this movement, can be offered. For example, the gendered pay gap in the United States persists, making little improvement over several decades; and women of color continue to be paid significantly less than their white counterparts.⁵ The number of women leaders whether in politics, business, K-12 or higher education—remains low. Widespread gendered violence worldwide is sometimes ignored or even tolerated by those with power, despite growing public attention to sexual harassment and assault. Such reactions stem in large part from cultural norms that define women as lesser and deem these problems trivial at best or acceptable at worst.⁶

NCSS considers it axiomatic that women's importance to society cannot be disputed. Our organization also acknowledges that women's roles and contributions have relegated them "to the margins" of social studies textbooks when compared with the political and economic roles played by men in the development of the United States. The reasons for this are complex and have been addressed at length in other works.⁷

Further, NCSS calls for curricular focus on the issue of intersectionality and accomplishments by women of color. Such attention offers potential to inform about the social contributions by these persons and a need for reflection and action about the personal and institutional biases that discourage their recognition. At the same time, NCSS echoes Crenshaw's caution⁸ against using intersectionality as a blanket idea for avoiding difficult conversations. Rather, NCSS encourages discussions about advocacy and conversations about power and the oppression of women of color. In the sections that follow, this statement provides background on the problem and highlights actions the organization can take to match its commitment to gender equity with action.

Relevance

Women's contributions to societies worldwide, including in the United States, have been essential in building institutions, whether those be schools and colleges, churches, reform movements, or political parties. Because leadership roles in these organizations were typically denied to women, their contributions have often been viewed by history books as marginal, serving only as "helpmeets" or "tenders of the hearth," who work within the private sphere of the home rather than in the public sphere of the marketplace or politics. For women of color, whose labor and bodies were exploited for centuries in building the economic and social order in this country, the lack of attention to their experiences and exploitation has been particularly egregious, even though they, as many other women, have "always worked,"⁹ despite the mid-20th century cultural trope of the "stay-at-home" mother.

Applicability

By means of this statement, the National Council for the Social Studies, as an organization dedicated to the promotion of citizenship education, affirms the importance of women as citizens and to citizenship education and thereby calls for greater attention to women within the social studies through its various educational efforts.

With this in mind, it should be recognized, as Vickery puts it, that "the construct of citizenship is a site of political and social struggle.... It is also a social construct and discursive process that has changed over time to exclude certain bodies from belonging and participating as legitimate members of a nation-state."¹⁰ In the United States, as elsewhere, women have had to fight for their rights and gain recognition as full citizens,¹¹ as well as find their place in the curriculum and in decision-making roles within institutions and organizations focused on education, such as NCSS.¹²

The contours of citizenship and definitions of the concept have changed dramatically since the nation's founding.¹³ Indeed, the struggle for women's suffrage in the United States took nearly 100 years and reached constitutional fruition in 1920, albeit with significant limitations in terms of access to the franchise by all women. The year 2020 marks the 100-year anniversary of women's suffrage and seems a fitting time for NCSS to reaffirm its commitment to gender equity in social studies, education, and society at large.

Background

Traditional K-12 school history, with its emphasis on political and economic events and leaders, often marginalizes women's social contributions. The problem of women's lack of representation in school curriculum is at least two-fold: first, the norms concerning women's roles in many societies limited their access to positions of power in political and economic spheres; second, traditional historical representations, which grew from nationalistic histories, focused on the creation of the nation-state and civic polities, and undervalued women's contributions to families and the social fabric. Additional marginalization occurs when narratives treat race and gender as separate and distinct categories of experience and analysis, thus rendering invisible existing structures that continue to oppress women of color.¹⁴

In the case of white middle-class women, restrictive social norms and socialization processes relegated their contributions to be seen only in terms of what Peggy McIntosh once called "the making and mending of the social fabric."¹⁵ When a few women rose to prominence by assuming men's roles in history (e.g., Queen Elizabeth, Joan of Arc) or challenging social norms (e.g., Abigail Adams, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks), public recognition of their accomplishments gained traction. In other words, history recognizes women who exercised aggressive leadership traits or roles traditionally exhibited by males, rather than valuing them for accomplishments of passivity, care, and compassion. Still, enormous work remains to be done in excavating the record of these contributions, especially women's many contributions to social movements, and rebalancing the social studies curriculum to provide a more equitable, accurate, and inclusive portrayal of the building of this nation through consideration of the multiple—and often hidden—roles that all women have played.

The experiences and histories of women of color deserve pointed attention and must be presented as part of the social narrative. Unfortunately, the stories of Eurocentric history conceal the histories and social accomplishments of African American, Asian American, and Latinx peoples or shape them to fit the dominant narrative.¹⁶ Recent scholarship that concerns intersectionality observes the narratives of underrepresented women, color, and class groups as being distorted, omitted, or concealed. Illumination of these stories potentially challenges power structures that pass for the status quo.¹⁷ For example, introducing these concepts to students through documentaries such as Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry's *Dark Girls* can heighten awareness of these societal patterns of oppression. These writings call for social studies teaching that contests the dominant narrative by affirming the accomplishments of underrepresented cultures and illuminating the resistance stories hidden from conventional perspectives. Such social/historical critiques that examine the experiences of justice advocates, offer potential to inform members of the future citizenry to think critically about the dominant narrative and to appreciate the effort of those who oppose it.

Curricula need to recount how Black women were excluded from voting in some states during the struggle for women's suffrage. Even after passage of the 19th Amendment, barriers such as the poll tax and literacy tests and targeted racial terror infringed upon Black women's voting efforts. The marginalization of Latinx women during the Civil Rights era merits a culturally sensitive analysis that deepens students' understanding of social and political processes. Indigenous women deserve a full and rich inclusion in World and U.S. history courses, where their presence is often omitted. The experiences of Asian American women are virtually non-existent throughout K-12 U.S. history courses, even during critical periods, such as 19th-and 20th-century immigration and World War II internment.

The histories of LGBTQ+ women need to be part of the mandated course of study in grades K-12, wherein students explore the impact of social, cultural, historical, and political factors on LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. Some of these impacts are devastating. The Human Rights Campaign reported that, in 2018, in the U.S., there were at least 26 deaths attributed to fatal violence against transgender or gender non-conforming people, the majority of whom were Black transgender women.¹⁸

These complex issues need to be systematically included to ensure that the histories of all women are not erased within the curriculum and society. Educators need to teach history, civics, economics, geography, and other social studies by examining the intersectional oppressions faced by women, past and present, through critical lenses that put responsibility for these interactions upon the aggressive insensitivity of the oppressors. The same can be said of the ways in which the history of social studies has been written. NCSS's 2018 Position Statement concerning curricular coverage of indigenous peoples, which included a call to "challenge Eurocentrism," offers a basis for rethinking the white, patriarchal vision of social studies. Resisting discussions about alternative examples of women who served as domestic complements to the economic and political male experience only continues the patriarchal approach to content. Early renditions of this history left out the roles played by influential women in shaping the history of the field of social studies. Again, the reasons are complex. Happily, several corrective works have re-balanced the portrayals of the field's history, but more work needs to be done to address ongoing issues of inequity and fuller curricular representation of the lives, perspectives, and voices of all women, especially women of color in the history of social studies.¹⁹

Part of representing the lives of women includes attending to the role of gender in social, economic, and political life and, in particular, the exploration of gender inequity in the past and the present. This requires engagement with the notion of gender as a "category of analysis" in the social sciences and the acknowledgement that gender shapes life opportunities and options in ways that have contributed to the exclusion of most women from the types of roles and responsibilities that receive attention in the canon.²⁰ Social studies education can also benefit from using an intersectional framework to reveal past and present-day omissions, histories, and issues and discourage their future recurrence. These considerations add important nuance to understanding women's presence and absence in history narratives while also drawing attention to the gender, race, and class constraints that continue to circumscribe people's choices as well as school curriculum.

History is, again, a constructed discipline. It consists of a story driven by attention to certain types of categories of analysis (e.g., power, change, leadership, and conflict) but one that has largely overlooked, until recently, certain categories such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Likewise, certain values undergird the shaping of this narrative. Historical accounts of women in pre-colonial indigenous cultures manufacture dispositions of sexual openness as an aspect of economic productivity²¹ and accounts of early colonial perspectives emphasize women's reproductive ability as their basis for social value. A justice-oriented perspective would reframe these stories from the perspectives of those who are exploited.

The public sphere is prioritized over the private sphere; power, wealth, and influence are emphasized over everyday life. Given the social structures that confine most women's lives to the private sphere, and (mostly) prohibit or undermine their assumption of public roles in government and the economy, for example, women have largely been left out of the narrative of traditional school history. Although change in the historical profession has brought race, class, gender, and sexuality into academic history over the last half century, traditional school history and textbooks have remained focused on the nation-state narrative. Even if a few women (e.g., Eleanor Roosevelt and Harriet Tubman) have entered the story, the focus remains on politics and economics—narrowly conceived. For example, women's roles as consumers and voters generally get very little coverage in school history, even though these roles have been important to the economy for centuries and to election politics since at least 1920.

For students who study U.S. or World History, the approach to covering women in the curriculum that emphasizes their "contributions" (notwithstanding their presence in history) sends a message that women are supporting "actors" in the important events in the nation or the world.²² Engebretson's study found that NCSS curriculum standards disproportionately represented women. It concluded that social studies involves "figured" worlds that underrepresent women's social accomplishments.²³ Colley noted unchanging textbook coverage of women of color in standard history textbooks, yet an African American history textbook contained numerous and diverse images of African American women to offer a more comprehensive account of the past.²⁴ One message that young women-and young men-might take from this coverage is that "women have never done anything important in history." When this "lesson" is compounded for young people by media portrayals that represent women only as objects to be admired (or not) for their beauty, then both young women and men may come to believe that their role in society is merely ornamental rather than as contributing citizens whose input and action are important to shaping civic, political, and economic life. Given how few role models exist for women in politics, even well into the 21st century, young women may limit their hopes and dreams in ways that are inequitable as compared to those of young men. As a result, these forms of objectification and restriction of women's life expectations are grossly inconsistent with a democratic ideal in which all individuals, whatever their race, class, gender, or sexuality, have equal opportunity to pursue full participation in society.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The very nature of how history gets periodized in textbooks tends to push social and health history to the side, even though these topics have had powerful effects on society and individual lives over many centuries, both in the United States and worldwide.

For example, the introduction of antibiotics considerably lowered overall death rates, including in childbirth,²⁵ although the intersection of race and gender complicates these data (given that pregnancy-related mortality rates for Non-Hispanic Black women and American Indian/Alaska Native women remain 3.3 and 2.5 times as high, respectively, as those for non-Hispanic white women).²⁶ In addition, the birth control pill had a profound effect on sexual relations, family size, and the rates at which women work outside the home.²⁷ Such advances have contributed to longer life spans for both women and men, radically reshaping women's (and men's) expectations for their lives.

The C3 Framework for social studies teaching provides a basis for civics learning that encourages students' deep and critical thinking. It is worth noting that understandings of citizenship represent social and political struggles; citizenship represents a social wrestling for cultural identity. Existing approaches to citizenship education tend to privilege the United States' nationstate perspective, at the expense of the sovereignty of indigenous American nations, representing one aspect of indigenous cultural erasure.²⁸ Recognition of and advocacy for these nations represents an essential element of developing holistic citizenship ideologies. Feminist theories consistently hold that the social perspectives of those who are marginalized contribute to the basis for social truth.²⁹ The pursuit of social truth that challenges structures of heteropatriarchy and Eurocentrism necessitates curricular attention to women of color and of LGBTQ orientations. A curricular valuing of their voices affirms that the lives of all women matter, past, present, and future.

Examining the four content areas (civics, geography, history, and economics) through a broad lens affords the opportunity to re-examine traditional views of women and their societal contributions, raising questions about how and why views of women (and men) have been defined in certain ways; how and why change has occurred over time in these gendered views, roles, and relative opportunities for men and women; and where the tensions lie today in these matters. Such patterns of inquiry remain incomplete without critical examination of the patriarchal structures that systemically oppress women as well as of the concealed resistance stories involving women of color. Lee Ann Bell's activities, which examine the American Dream and analyze Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise," offer an opportunity for such inquiry.³⁰ bell hooks's description of contrived stereotypes designed to preserve a class system provides an opportunity to explore competitive relationships between white and black women that debunk the myth of a historically united nation.³¹

As the field takes up this challenge, it will be important to emphasize that both women and men are gendered beings, whose socialization and roles often unfold within the context of a set of "scripts" and norms about what women and men do (or don't do) that can be mutually confining and harmful. Likewise, it would be important to acknowledge as part of this instruction that other societies posit more than two genders and that the Western framework of gender is not one found universally throughout place and time. Such an orientation would be critical in emphasizing the social/cultural construction of these roles rather than a viewpoint emphasizing biological determinism.

In particular, NCSS encourages engaging, inquiry-oriented pedagogies that confront and challenge misogynistic and deficit perspectives and discourage additive approaches that implicitly present women as social outliers. Active learning experiences, such as case studies, court cases, problem-based learning, role-playing and simulations, and issues-based discussions and deliberations about gender-related topics will engage students in problem-solving activities. Such learning experiences offer opportunities for contemplation of the struggles faced by women and other marginalized groups within the historic, economic, and geographic contexts that continue to shape contemporary social contexts. Wherever possible, an intersectional framework should be used to help deepen and extend students' understanding of the complex issues that have faced all women, in the United States and around the world. Such learning may empower young women to embrace the plurality of potential social roles to which they aspire and encourage young men to serve as allies in this work.

Such efforts should emphasize the importance of women's full participation in and contributions to democratic society. A number of resources, both print and film, might be used in bringing women's issues more fully into the social studies curriculum. For example, Jennifer Newsom's documentary, Miss Representation (or Jackson Katz's Tough Guise on men and boys) describes how media giants profit through the exploitation of girls and women who seek attention and fame, while marginalizing efforts of women producers who seek to counter the trend. The Black feminist scholar and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has written about women, race, and democratic education in her book Another Kind of Public Education, in which she focuses on the role of media as educator and on her own experiences in school.³² The book offers examples that might serve as inspiration for inquiry-oriented lessons on contemporary music, film, TV, and social media portrayals of women and men. Another excellent resource is the book Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality, which has dozens of lesson ideas for bringing issues of gender into K-12 classrooms.³³ As for professional development, educators who want to develop a more holistic and inclusive approach to teaching social studies could consider Wellesley College's Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity program, now in its fourth decade of operation (or an equivalent type of professional development experience), or consult myriad resources in print on this topic, such as a book focused on "intersectional pedagogy" that "complicat[es] identity and social justice,"34 or articles in social studies journals and chapters that address social studies and gender inclusion.³⁵

Conclusion

The work to be done in making social studies more equitable does not involve only curriculum change, although that is very important. As in other school subjects, teachers and educational leaders need to examine their own biases and consider how best to promote equitable learning conditions that encourage the achievement of girls and boys, young women and young men, particularly attending to the needs experienced by those of color. This would include examination of instructional strategies, learning environments, and content perspectives in every classroom while reflecting upon and recognizing the gendered and other forms of diversity found there. Similarly, the way in which teachers interact with students who are girls and young women implicitly informs all students about patterns of social behaviors, language use, expectations for classroom performance, and respectful nurturing of the potential of all students in social studies classrooms. Teachers need to be especially vigilant in guarding against bullying or aggression in their classrooms, whomever the targets of these behaviors might be.

NCSS is committed to the location, development, and promotion of curricular materials that demonstrate inclusive perspectives concerning all women as foundational contributors to society, neither essentializing them nor treating them as a monolithic entity. The organization is also committed to ensuring that its practitioners respect all of their students, encouraging their academic achievement and full participation as citizens, whatever their gender, race, social class, or other identity marker. Finally, NCSS is committed to nurturing students who will critically examine society and its systemic sexism, racism, classism, heteronormativity, and cisgenderism, past and present, and then work toward a more just world.

Notes

- See, for example, Roger Clark, J. Allard and T. Mahoney, "How Much of the Sky? Women in American History Textbooks from the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s," *Social Education* 68, no. 1 (2004), 57; Clark, Roger, et al. "Women of the World, Re-write! Women in American World History High School Textbooks from the 1960s, 1980s, and 1990s," *Social Education* 69, no. 1, 2005, pp. 41+.
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- 4. See, for example: Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (1991), 1241-1299; Amanda E. Vickery, "'Women Know How to Get Things Done': Narrative of an Intersectional Movement," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 12, no. 1 (2017), 31–41.
- Ariane Hegewisch and Heidi Hartmann "The Gender Wage Gap: 2018 Earnings Differences by Race and Ethnicity" (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2019). https://iwpr.org/publications/gender-wage-gap-2018/
- For example: Kate Manne, Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Rebecca Traister, Good and Mad (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2018).
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- 11. Linda Kerber, No Constitutional Right to be Ladies (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1999).
- 12. Among the historical works in social studies that address the gendered nature of the field's history are: Margaret Smith Crocco and O.L. Davis, Jr., eds., "Bending the Future to Their Will": Civic Women, Social Education, and Democracy (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) and Margaret Smith Crocco and O.L. Davis, Jr., eds., Building a Legacy: Women in Social Education, 1784–1984 (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS Bulletin 100, 2002).
- Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning (N.Y.: Nation Books, 2016); Jill Lepore, These Truths (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2018); and many other recent works on U.S. history, women's history, citizenship, and voting.
- 14. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum1*, no 8 (1989), 139–167.
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- 16. Sohyun An, "Asian Americans in American History: An AsianCrit perspective on Asian American inclusion in State U.S. History Curriculum Standards," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44, no.2 (2016), 244-276; Erika Davis, "(Mis)representation of Latinxs in Florida Social Studies Standards," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 14, no. 1 (2019), 1–13.
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- 18. (www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2019, p 1)
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