Teaching About Women in Social Studies: Empowerment for All

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"For every girl who is tired of acting weak when she is strong, there is a boy tired of appearing strong when he feels vulnerable. For every boy who is burdened with the constant expectations of knowing everything, there is a girl tired of people not trusting her intelligence. For every girl who is tired of being called over-sensitive, there is a boy who fears to be gentle, to weep. For every boy for whom competition is the only way to prove his masculinity, there is a girl who is called unfeminine when she competes. . . . For every girl who takes a step toward her liberation, there is a boy who finds the way to freedom a little easier." (Adapted from a poem by Nancy Smith, http://www.crimethinc.com)

Gender role socialization is one of the predominant influences on identity development in children and adolescents. From the time a baby is born (and in many cases, before s/he is born), gender socialization is apparent in every aspect of a person's life. The toys we choose, the friends we play with, the school subjects we like, and the playground activities we feel comfortable with are all influenced by gender socialization. In American culture, gender norms, often expressed in binary or oppositional terms, are enforced through social expectations, the media, and the education system. Children are required to develop a gender identity and set of behaviors narrowly shaped by rigid views of what their biological sex is understood to prescribe. Unfortunately, such expectations have resulted in discrimination of many forms, ranging from sexism in the workplace to hate crimes against trans-gendered people. The education system, as one of the factors enforcing gender socialization, is among the most powerful institutions available for either reinforcing or deconstructing harmful gender norms.

To understand how gender norms can be deconstructed through education, we must reflect on how education traditionally has enforced and constructed gendered norms. As noted by researchers, "As agents of society, schools necessarily reinforce gender social definitions, whereas as socializing agents, they are also primary locations for the development of new standards, roles and attitudes toward gender" (Lee, Marks and Byrd, 1994). Preschool and elementary school classrooms by design encourage children to segregate by gender: girls know their place in dress-up (where most of the clothes are dresses and other items girls are expected to wear) while boys dominate the block building area. Picturebooks show male protagonists saving secondary female characters, girls in dresses and boys in pants, females as princesses and males as firefighters. Expectations of young children preclude boys from having nice handwriting and girls from being "natural" engineers. The Sadkers' research has shown that teachers unconsciously support gender norms and gender inequity through their everyday classroom behaviors and interactions with students (even when they consider themselves aware of these issues!). Girls are more likely to be praised for their appearances while boys receive more attention from teachers, both qualitatively and quantitatively (Sadker and Sadker, 1994). The AAUW (1999) reports that institutionalized sexism in schools lead young women to perpetuate gender stereotypes. For example, schools reinforce the belief that girls are not as good at math as boys are, and therefore girls should not take higher level math courses. Later in college, young women do not qualify for enrollment into the science courses or pre-med degree programs (AAUW).

Reviewing and Revising the Curriculum

In response to this research, some educators have begun to review the curriculum - both the overt curriculum that consists of standards and materials, and the hidden curriculum, or the ways that boys and girls are treated in schools. Reducing sex-role stereotyping (as noted by researchers in the U.S. and in Canada) has focused on increasing the range of opportunities for girls, encouraging them to seek careers in non-traditional fields such as engineering. Such educational reforms, while important, do not inherently challenge the idea that women's work is inferior to men's; in fact, the way to help improve girls was to "make [them] 'less defective men'" (Coulter, 1996). Therefore, integrating notable women in the history curriculum (for example, highlighting a female scientist or a female political leader) is aimed at "empowering each girl to overcome the obstacles rather than to challenge the obstacles themselves" (Coulter, 1996). Another approach to reducing sexism and addressing sex-role stereotyping in schools has been to acknowledge differences between boys and girls, and then educate them differently. Coulter notes that in response to the work by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues, many schools have developed single-sex

classes (usually in math or science) and sex-segregated schools. While this approach has been shown to have some positive effects on the self-esteem of young women, it further reinforces the notion of differences between men and women.

Non-Sexist Education

Out of this dissatisfaction and disagreement over how to make education better for girls has come the idea of gender equity or non-sexist education. This framework encourages educators to consider the effects that sexism has on both males and females, and empowers young men and women to actively challenge sexism in all its forms. In this approach, Jane Gaskell suggests that "Children should be helped to see the world as it is, while being encouraged to develop a critical consciousness, a sense of active and co-operative participation that equips them to engage in the struggle for social change" (quoted in Coulter, 1996). True gender equity education explores the relationships between men and women, the social construction of gender norms and expectations, and the ways in which our society as a whole is harmed by rigid gender stereotyping and sexism. As a result of this critical exploration, students learn that, as a member of society, they have the power to deconstruct harmful norms and thus improve society for all its members.

Research demonstrates that the conscious integration of women into the social studies curriculum, the use of sex-equitable materials, and offering of women's studies and women's history courses can all have positive effects on students' attitude towards gender roles, equity and personal empowerment (Klein, 1985; Stake, 1994). Integrating women's studies into the curriculum through the study of women in history or women's issues in social sciences is an obvious first step in creating a gender equitable curriculum. The natural progression of this integration leads to the critical evaluation of gender norms and a new consciousness of gender equity in society. The following curriculum units have all been developed with the purpose of integrating women into the existing curriculum. As the units have developed over time, they have expanded to include the broader gender equity consciousness as described earlier.

Although I have not collected formal data on all of the outcomes of such units, I believe that every unit that integrates women and raises questions about gender norms has several effects on the students. First, as noted by other research, girls become more aware of the possibilities for their own lives. (Three years ago a colleague of mine literally had to show a female student that the U.S. Constitution allowed women to be President.) Second, boys become more aware of their possibilities. Breaking gender norms for boys is still more difficult than it is for girls, but as boys learn to deconstruct norms for girls, we hope that the reverse will eventually become more prevalent. Third, students become more sensitive to people who do not fit into society's rigid gender norms. While a discussion of transgender identity has not yet become a part of my formal curriculum, it is an idea that can only be introduced once students are able to break free from the traditional male-female norms. Overall, students learn to develop a personal identity with a consciousness about and resistance to social expectations.

Another lesson inherent in studying women in history and women around the world, is that positive contributions to society do not always take place in a government building or on a battle field. They learn that there are many ways of fighting oppression and that "average" people with little power can affect large-scale changes. Finally, they learn to have empathy for other, because we are not all so different. We all benefit from improving women's lives; we have a hand in making those improvements. We are all limited by social constructions of gender (race, class and other categories), but we are all also capable of deconstructing those norms.

Women's Rights around the World: This unit was developed to help teachers (who were not either knowledgeable about women's issues, or who did not know how) to integrate women into their curriculum. In our high school, the Comparative World Studies curriculum guide requires us to teach about human rights in a global context, and evaluate the effectiveness of international laws and covenants, national governments, and non-governmental organizations in addressing human rights violations. In this unit, I have focused on many different geographical regions, sometimes covering every continent and sometimes taking a more focused approach. The unit begins with an introduction to women's rights issues around the world to get students thinking about the variety of ways in which women are denied rights, including education, politics, marriage, and health care, and the ways in which women's basic human rights are violated by practices such as spousal abuse, honor killings, female genital mutilation and sexual assault. Next, students analyze the difference between sex (biological traits) and gender

(social norms). We reflect on how gender is defined in American culture, and which human rights violations can result from our own gender norms. This discussion almost always leads the students to consider the history of women's rights in the United States, and whether women are truly "equal" in contemporary American society.

Women and Islam: This year the case study we explored was Women and Islam since many students in the post 9/11 world have become aware of these issues (but are often mis-educated). We analyzed the difference between religious values, cultural norms, and government laws, and tried to discern what the underlying cause of the human rights violations were. We also examined how, over time, the status of women in various societies has changed. Iran provides an interesting example of a nation where women were afforded certain rights at one period of time, but those rights were later restricted due to a change in government after the Revolution. Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Laureate, is an interesting case study of the changing status of women in Iran. Prior to the Revolution, Ebadi was a professor, lawyer and judge. After the Revolution, her rights were dramatically restricted, and yet, she has continued to use her experience in the court system and university to continue fighting for women's rights. Another example of a nation that was previously more liberal toward women, and then experienced a dramatic change in the status of women is Afghanistan. In the 1950s and 60s, women had the right to vote and participate in most aspects of public life. Invasion, occupation, and eventually civil war resulted in the rule of the Taliban who is notorious for their strict enforcement of rules that violate women's rights. After watching the movie Osama, we discussed how the rules imposed by the Taliban reflected neither the Muslim religion nor Afghan culture as a whole.

The study of the modern history of women in countries like Iran and Afghanistan encourages students to consider why women's rights might be violated, and why women's rights must be recognized as a critical part of developing a healthy society. A spontaneous group discussion between three male students elicited comments about the role men play in violating or upholding women's rights. One male student commented, "I guess we don't study men's rights because they pretty much have them" and another suggested that "men are the ones in charge of deciding who got rights." We investigated how women's rights have improved in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban and discussed why women's rights were important to the overall security and stability of the nation. We ended the unit with a look at the magazine, Marie Claire's "Women of the World Award" recipients (women who have fought for human rights in a variety of areas). In response to this unit, students reflected on the importance of studying women's rights.

Students have an awareness of women's rights beyond that of many teachers; they commented that women's rights should be a part of the curriculum for all students, since, "Women are a part of the world, just like men, so why shouldn't a student learn about them?" Another student said it is important "because without learning about half of the population, the world would be ignorant and sexist without even realizing it." One student also considered the importance of women's rights in his own life: "Our unit has taught me about how women's rights can greatly affect everything else; it has also helped me appreciate women more". One female student saw the women's rights unit as important to her understanding of other people and cultures: "I will always stop to wonder how the women really feel about the issue. This unit has given me a different perspective on the approach to women's rights." Another student used her new knowledge to reflect on our own culture: "Learning about the Taliban and inequality in the Islamic world really opened my eyes to the women's rights problems. It made me rethink our society and values." Several students recognized that as young adults, their knowledge of women's rights will have an impact in the world. One student said, "I feel that maybe if our generation is taught about it then we can change it in the future." Another, acknowledging the potential for change said that "students' opinions may help make women's rights better than what they are now."

Tradition and Change in Mexico: Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: In a unit on tradition and change in Mexico (also part of Comparative World Studies), we study the art of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera to understand gender norms of twentieth century Mexico. The works of Frida Kahlo, when compared to those of her husband, Diego Rivera, provide the students with another avenue of exploring women's rights and gender norms. Using print and electronic resources, the students explore the lives and art of Rivera and Kahlo, first to answer comprehension questions such as:

- What were their lives like? Which life events that shaped their art?
- What time period (part of Mexican history) were they artists? How did this influence their art?
- What type of art did they create?

- Why did they paint? What were their goals?
- How are these art forms related to the messages they wanted to portray?
- How are these artists important to Mexican national identity?

Based on this information, the students then write a response to the following question: How does identity and gender influence art? In discussing their responses, we look more closely at the artwork: Rivera's murals that were created for the public, about politics and public issues, and Kahlo's paintings which reflect her very personal pain, especially the pain associated with the inability to bear children. The contrast between the public and private is a theme of women's history that can be carried throughout any course on history in almost every culture. Kahlo, however, is also a woman who broke out of traditional gender roles in many aspects. First, she was an artist in a field dominated by men. Second, her relationship with Rivera, and her numerous other relationships challenge the traditional norms of male machismo and female passivity and devotion.

In one course, which is an interdisciplinary class (English and Social Studies combined), this lesson is integrated into a unit on the novel, Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel. The novel encompasses many themes around the topic of gender norms and expectations, and particularly about the self-expression of women. The protagonist, Tita, expresses her forbidden love through her cooking. Cooking thus becomes an art form, similar to the self-expression of Kahlo through her paintings. This concept helps students challenge the traditional definition of "art" which, in many cultures, is a patriarchal definition. Kahlo's work also emphasizes the value of indigenous art in contrast to European-style art, adding another dimension to the discussion.

The lesson on Diego and Kahlo can be done in one 84-minute period (or over two 45-minute periods), and yet provides the teacher and students with ample opportunities to study both important aspects of Mexican history as well as critically evaluate gender norms. Taken another step, the lesson could include a reflection on current gender norms and expectations in Mexican society, or a comparison to gender roles in the U.S. at the time of Kahlo and Rivera.

References

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The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is offering an objective, on-line resource, **Globalization101.org**, to teach high school students about policy aspects of globalization related to civics, economics, geography and history, *without any fees or charges*. **Globalization101.org** provides unbiased, easily understandable information and related lesson plans to teach about cross-disciplinary subjects such as international trade, world - wide health and environmental issues and global technological changes. The site includes 11 in-depth issue briefs, more than 70 news analyses, lesson plans, video interviews and a useful links section. Our site aligns to New York's state standards, as you can see on http://www.globalization101.org/teachers/NYstandards.asp. Since we are constantly updating the site, we have recently created a monthly newsletter to inform constituents about our newest resources and upcoming events. To learn more contact Rebecca Weiner at 202-741-3936 or g101@csis.org.