

Why We Don't Learn Women's History in School

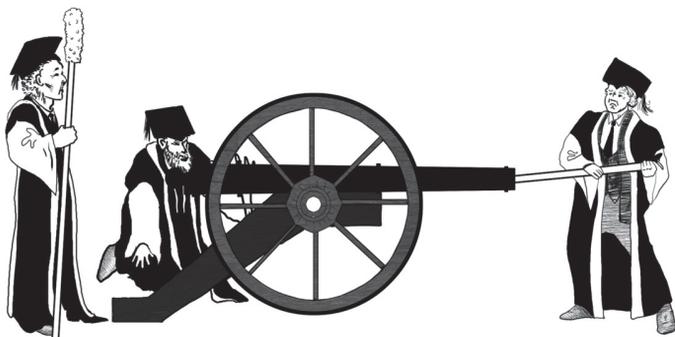


Updating the way that world history is taught presents a real challenge for educational institutions. Despite what you may have heard about colleges being havens for radical faculty, sexism still pervades the halls of academia. A strong ratio of female to male *students* is one kind of statistic; it is not reflected in faculty appointments, where most tenured, full professors are male. This is especially true in history departments, which grant more degrees to men than to women. At the high school/prep school level, it's more common to find men teaching history, and male teachers outnumber females at the annual College Board AP Reading in U.S. History. The AP exam itself primarily asks students to write responsively about men's history and leadership, though this is changing.

Until quite recently, women weren't welcome in higher education, even as students. Their very bodies were restricted to certain schools (women's colleges, religious seminaries, "finishing" schools, teacher-training institutions), certain spaces (women had separate campuses, had to live in specific dormitories with cur-

fews and chaperones), certain majors (nursing, education, English). This meant that women were *not present in the classroom* to advocate for their own inclusion and representation. We can see that this was also true in terms of women's visibility in government and politics, the media, sports, and so forth.

From the late eighteenth century all the way to the late 1970s, the issue of allowing women in higher education created an uproar.³ Women (and their male allies) fought to allow female students into medical school, law school, and graduate programs. The story of women in American history—and elsewhere—is largely about female *exclusion* from basic institutions like schools. To examine this past is more than just a subject of academic inquiry, or an approach to understanding social change. Women's history is also a cause: an ongoing effort to assure half the world of fair representation in the human record, and to preserve women's memories as truthfully/authentically as possible. For example, girls aspiring to Ivy League colleges today should learn that up until 1969, the smartest women in the world could not apply to Princeton, Harvard, or Yale. And for several years after that, women were only allowed in through a fixed quota system requiring three or four males to be accepted for every female student grudgingly enrolled. (Harvard did not adopt sex-blind admissions until 1976.)



Some critics oppose altering the *academic canon* (traditionally assigned class readings, essential documents penned by men) to include additional coursework, arguing that women's history—

³ Good sources include *College Girls*, by Lynn Peril; *Women of the Republic*, by Linda Kerber; *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, by Gerda Lerner; *The Chosen*, by Jerome Karabel; and *To Believe in Women*, by Lillian Faderman.



like black history, Native American studies, etc.—is mere political correctness masquerading as a humanities discipline. Conservative women, too, have contended that more inclusive historical perspectives will just replace the “timeless truths” of Western heritage with a radical agenda. (More on this later.)

Historians, students, archivists, and others in the women’s history field believe that a rational and balanced inquiry into the past must include what women were doing at the time, not just men. However, at most institutions of higher learning, women’s history is a separate specialty. These courses are not always available to interested students—even at top private schools and colleges. Regrettably, where women’s history courses and majors do exist, some faculty advisors discourage bright students from enrolling, scoffing at the value of such coursework.

One may get the sense that the study of women is not just neglected, but downright forbidden. Here are some reasons why women’s history is left out of what we learn:

Women’s roles stem from religious teachings. To examine women’s history is to deconstruct, or take apart, the scriptural teachings on women’s status that led to long-lasting attitudes and state laws. Critical reviews of holy religious texts are offensive to many people of faith: Isn’t it blasphemy to second-guess what God/Allah/Saint Paul/Confucius intended? Should public schools risk alienating the parents of many different faiths?



Threats to male status. Women’s history makes men look bad, and undermines male authority. Powerful male leaders in history, the very men who symbolize human rights and democratic progress, turn out to be wife-beaters, adulterers, or hypocrites who consistently voted down women’s rights. (As I write, former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has just revealed that he fathered a child with one of his domestic employees—a woman hired to assist his own wife.)



What happens when the female experience of history reveals too much about men? It's a nightmare for history teachers, charged with instilling patriotism.

Sexuality and the body.

Today's teachers are still urged to avoid discussions of sex and sexuality in the K–12 classroom; such curricula, if al-

lowed at all, are tightly controlled. Alas, much of women's history is about the nitty-gritty of virginity, chastity, reproduction, and sexual reputation. Would students have to have parental permission to learn women's history? (It may seem funny that parents nonetheless accept their kids being exposed to violence in the movies, videogames, or cartoons, as well as standard history lessons about heroic battles. But plenty of people prefer fictional or glorified violence to material about girls' rights.)

Preserving traditional family roles. The annoyance factor of adding women's history material to a school year already jammed with standardized tests is one thing. But for many conservative parents and educators, it's also an ideological imposition. Beginning in the early 1980s, America's powerful right-wing evangelical lobby began mounting campaigns to preserve *traditional family values* in government, law, and education. Many parents upset with values discussions in the classroom (including open debate on the intended role of women) began home schooling their children. To this day, in Texas, conservative school boards make sure that the textbooks ordered for public schools uphold roles consistent with conservative teachings on the American family. School-board approval wields enormous economic clout in a place like Texas, which places more schoolbook orders than any other state system.

All four of these rationalizations for excluding women's history are interconnected, as we'll see. Basically, looking at and admiring women [the female body] has been forbidden by most religions, so that looking at and admiring *women's history*, too, takes men into

problematic terrain. Much of Scripture suggests that women are temptresses, unclean, and dangerous to men. Just consider the problem of Eve. The very first woman—according to the Bible, which informs so much of Western heritage—ruined everything.⁴

Religious Teachings on Women

For Jews and Christians, women’s history begins with the appearance of Eve, the first woman, in Genesis. However, sharp-eyed Bible scholars know there are two different creation stories. The earliest passage, Genesis 1:27, suggests that God made male and female at the same time: “male and female he created them.” This seems to put both sexes on an equal and even holy basis; both made at the same time, and in the image of God.

Later, Genesis 2:21–23 offers a very different story, telling us that man—or Adam—was created first, formed out of dust. While Adam slept, God took one of Adam’s ribs to create a female companion for him, Eve. This version establishes woman as the “second sex,” and, importantly, as being created both *from* and *for* man. “She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”⁵

Many of the negative qualities ascribed to women throughout Western history stem from Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Eve, lured by the snake (women are easily led astray by the devil: guard them!), decides to taste the forbidden fruit on the Tree of



⁴ Jewish tradition has an even scarier first wife for Adam: the willful Lilith.

⁵ It’s for this reason that some feminists in the 1970s and 80s adopted the spelling *womyn*.

Knowledge. (Women are willful and disobedient: punish them! Knowledge will corrupt good women: keep them ignorant!) By disobeying God's command to resist the apple, Eve tempts Adam to sin as well. (Women are the cause of man's downfall; men must not trust women; women should not lead men.)

My student Taylor, raised as a churchgoing Christian, clearly remembers being introduced to this material. "I learned that God was so angry at Eve because she had brought sin into the world. Hearing this for the first time, I remember being excited that there was a girl in the story because Bible stories were mostly about men... But one thing I walked away with was that women were more naïve back then. I knew that *I* would have been able to stick to the rules." Taylor's mixed response, as a child, is understandable: She longed to identify with the female in the story, but refused to accept the premise that all women are naturally naïve or inclined toward disobedience.

In relating God's punishments for Adam and Eve, the Bible establishes clearly different sex roles for men and women. In Genesis 3:17, God tells Adam "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife ... cursed is the ground." Adam will "earn his bread by the sweat of his face" (male = breadwinner); Genesis 3:16 commands Eve to suffer what we still call "the curse" of menstruation and labor pains. "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth: In pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." Having demonstrated her need for a tight leash, Eve will forever be controlled by her uterus and her husband. These basic story lines effectively limited women for centuries thereafter; even a desire for education could be seen as a willful girl's quest for that forbidden Tree of Knowledge. As soon as girls were able to menstruate, they were married to husbands who gained complete legal control over their lives.

Both Judaism and Christianity reinforce additional restrictions on women's bodies and minds. Many of these are found in Leviticus, in the Hebrew Bible; for instance, Leviticus chapters 12 and 15 tell us that women are unclean during their menstrual periods, and that this uncleanliness is "catching"; so men, beware! Leviticus 15:19: "When a woman has a discharge of blood which is her regular dis-

charge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean ... and everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean." These blood impurities also applied after childbirth. Significantly, we learn in Leviticus that Moses is to instruct the people of Israel "If a woman conceives, and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days, as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean." On the eighth day, when she is clean and may reemerge in mixed company, her newborn son is circumcised, a ceremony welcoming him into tribal membership. "Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying; she shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation, and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days." In other words, the birth of a girl results in double uncleanliness, and is not celebrated with a tribal ritual after the mother completes her seclusion. Eventually, some variations of these customs were incorporated into Christian and Catholic practices; in some eras Catholic women could not receive communion during their periods, and mothers recovering from childbirth were not allowed to be present at a child's baptism.

But consider the math: A woman is kept apart from men and from the sanctuary for two weeks of menstrual impurity. Since Judaism's *tacharos mishpocha* (laws of family purity) allow a wife to have marital relations with her husband only during the two other weeks of the month, when she was most likely to conceive, this guaranteed a high rate of pregnancy—with weeks and months of impurity time after each birth, and each period. On how many days of the year would a Hebrew wife be able to appear in public at all, among men, or touch holy objects? Constant impurity meant she would certainly be unable to fulfill the responsibilities of a rabbi or community leader.

And these customs are far from dead. Jewish law is followed to the letter in today's ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic communities, where contemporary rabbis urge followers to respect *minhag* (religious practices and customs) like these: "Women are permitted to

daven in *shul* [pray in synagogue] during their menstrual periods. However, they should not look at the *Sefer Torah* [the scroll containing the Five Books of Moses] while it is being raised.... It is also customary not to visit a cemetery during that time.... There is a difference of opinion, though, whether this applies until she has purified herself, or only during the actual period.”⁶ This author, who published his third edition of *A Guide for the Jewish Woman and Girl* in 1981, adds that the very sight and sound of a woman prevents devout family men from praying: “A man is not permitted to *daven* [pray], recite a *Brocho* [a blessing] or even study Torah [the Hebrew Bible] when facing a woman (including his own wife or daughter) who is not properly covered. It is even questionable if averting his eyes helps.... A girl or a woman should not sing in the presence of men. Even her husband, father, son, or brother may not *daven* or recite a *Brocho* while hearing her singing.”⁷

Thus women’s spiritual purity is directly connected to physical purity, itself linked to life stages and relationships with men. Since giving birth creates impurity, we read in Job 14: 1–4 that: “Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble.... Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?” This verse has also been translated more starkly as: “How can he be clean that is born of woman?”

The idea that women are *unclean* became a standard justification for their exclusion—from public events to community sites and, even, fields and vineyards. This is by no means limited to Judaism. We also find it in Islam, which tells men: “Let women alone at such times and go not unto them till they are cleansed” (verse 2:222 of the Koran). Many, many cultures from Africa to Indonesia expect women to remain separate from men, from cooking, or from sacred spaces during their periods, sometimes even isolating them in *menstrual huts*. Prohibited activities might include handling money (Bali) or entering temples, cemeteries, or mosques (Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, the Greek Orthodox, and Zoroastrian faiths) during one’s period. Even food preparation—a tradi-

⁶ Dov Eisenberg, *A Guide for the Jewish Woman and Girl*. Brooklyn: Z. Berman, 1981; p. 152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.



Dogon Menstrual Hut

tionally female activity—or remaining in the kitchen area of a home may be temporarily forbidden, as in India (for Parsi and Hindu women). And Pliny the Elder, a Roman writing in the first century A.D., declared in his volume *Natural History* that in the presence of a menstruating woman, wine will become sour, seeds will grow sterile, the milk of a pregnant mare will turn sour, knives will grow blunt, grass will wither and die, and much more.⁸

The idea that a menstruating woman is dangerous and unfit for normal domestic tasks shows up in some unexpected places. For instance, a popular folk cookbook published in the U.S. in 1961, the year I was born, contains this information under “How to Make Mayonnaise”: “If you are a woman do not attempt to make mayonnaise during menstruating time as the mayonnaise simply will not blend together at all.... This is not superstition but a well-established fact known to all women.”⁹

After stressing woman’s natural uncleanness and impurity, the Old Testament turns to community themes of virginity, harlotry, and rape. Women appear over and over in violent, X-rated Bible stories, making today’s more progressive Hebrew school students

⁸ For an interesting source on global menstruation taboos throughout history, check out the online “Museum of Menstruation and Women’s Health,” a website maintained by one dedicated American man.

⁹ George Leonard Herter, *Bull Cook and Authentic Historical Recipes and Practices*. Waseca, Minn: Herter’s, Inc., 1963; p. 148.

cringe. In Deuteronomy 22:13, we learn that a bride's virginity may be challenged by a suspicious groom, must then be verified before an entire community (in the ancient custom of displaying the wedding night's bloodied sheets), and if the poor bride did not appear to bleed enough, the entire male population is invited to stone her to death.

If any man takes a wife, and goes in to her, and then spurns her, and charges her with shameful conduct ... saying, "I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her the tokens of virginity," then the father of the young woman and her mother shall take and bring out the tokens of her virginity to the elders of the city in the gate.... And they shall spread the garment before the elders of the city.... But if the thing is true, that the tokens of virginity were not found in the young woman, then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has wrought folly in Israel by playing the harlot in her father's house.

What about a young virgin girl who is seized and raped? The Bible declares that the rapist has to pay a virgin's father fifty shekels—but then "She shall be his wife, because he has violated her" (Deuteronomy 22:29). This was to prevent a "ruined" girl from being unmarriageable, a form of disgrace as well as an economic liability to her family, but it does set a precedent for permanently handing over the victim to her assailant without her consent. We assume the Bible discusses this situation because it was common, rather than unknown; to this day, young girls in developing countries are most often "seized" when they are sent off alone to do the chores that are considered women's work—collecting water and firewood.

The rape of a virgin girl exacts a penalty, but it's not nearly as horrific as the hint of male rape—male homosexuality is specifically forbidden in Leviticus 20:13. Today, much is made of this religious prohibition against homosexuality, although Leviticus 20 is just as harsh on adulterers, for whom the penalty is also death.