

## Gender Balance in K-12 American History Textbooks



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### *Abstract*

*This research study evaluated K-12 American history textbooks for gender balance. Elementary, middle school, and high school texts were assessed for the number of male and female historical figures in text content and illustrations. Significantly more males than females were found at all levels in both content and illustrations, and all differences were significant at the .001 level. However, American history textbooks do include more women than in previous editions and since the publication of the National History Standards. The challenges of defining gender balance are discussed, and recommendations for teachers and textbook adoption committees are presented.*

Teachers of history often use the metaphor of a journey through time. Students travel by train through each time period, and teachers help students gain basic historical knowledge as they travel toward the present (Frederickson, 2004). Using this metaphor, students have encountered very few women on their journeys, and the historical record has been narrated by a man. The metaphor highlights the debate over the integration of women's history into current American history textbooks. This article describes the issues related to teaching women's history by reviewing controversies related to the National Standards for History and early American history textbooks. A research study designed to assess gender balance in current K-12 American history textbooks is discussed. Conclusions and recommendations for teachers and textbook adoption committees are presented with emphasis on the importance of high-quality history instruction.

The National Standards for History (K-grade 4) and the National Standards for U.S. History (grades 5-12) were first published in 1994 (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994). The controversy that ensued, often termed the "history wars," focused on an incomplete historical record, bias in standards, negative events in American history, and an anti-European

slant (Woo, 1995). In addition, scholars such as Harriman (1997) contended the standards did not adequately address women's history and their position throughout time. For example, women were not included in standards and teaching examples on both world wars. The controversy related to women in history is present not only in the National Standards but also extends into the arena of textbook adoption.

The American Historical Association (2004) has created guidelines for the evaluation and selection of history textbooks which can be applied from elementary school through higher education. The central criterion for evaluating history textbooks is its ability to foster high-quality history instruction. Satisfactory history texts must be reviewed by teachers and research historians. Publishers utilize cognitive research findings, defining how students learn historical concepts, and texts are evaluated by teachers for textual evidence to promote learning. Second, history texts are assessed for emphasis on historical habits of mind, which take students beyond memorization of names, dates, and places. Text content should encourage critical thinking, identification of bias, and discussion of issues related to change. Finally, textbook adoption committees assess books for factual coverage. Because of the wealth of historical knowledge, any history text must be selected with respect to topics and historical figures, while at the same time, omitting unnecessary gaps in time period or content. Factual coverage must also be balanced for race, class, and gender. These diverse perspectives should be integrated into narrative content, rather than treated as sidebars.

However, the integration of diversity is not without controversy. Gilbert Sewall (2005), director of the American Textbook Council, believes that "diversity-based content decisions" bring conflict to publishers and confuse the historical record. He asserts, "Pandering to the sensitivities of representatives of Native Americans, blacks, Hispanics, feminists, Christians, Jews, Islamists, *et alia ad infinitum* has necessarily become a number-one editorial priority" (p. 500). In response to such groups, Sewall feels that many publishers pretend that a modified historical record is simply "balance." His analysis suggests that publishing companies seek to avoid content disputes and are not concerned about giving students a stilted view of the past. Sewall's opinions are in opposition to the current view with respect to the invisibility of women in history textbooks. It has been said that, "To ignore women in history is to misunderstand the entire organization of any society" (Baker, 2004, p. 66).

Early studies, beginning in the 1960s, began to evaluate history textbooks for gender balance. In studies completed in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, women were essentially invisible in American history textbooks. Textbooks omitted topics focused on women's issues and contributions and excluded women from subject matter that was discussed (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Tetreault, 1986; Trecker, 1971). Myra and David Sadker evaluated a 1992 edition of *A History of the United States* (Boorstin & Kelley, 1992) and found only 3% of the book's coverage was dedicated to women. In that study, only 8 women had as much as a paragraph written about them (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

Also in 1992, the K-12 Education Committee of the Western Association of Women Historians evaluated 22 middle school and high school American history texts. This informal assessment revealed publishers' efforts to integrate women's history and include non-sexist language and illustrations of women in non-traditional roles. However, they also found that information about women was not fully integrated within the text but rather was added as sidebar notes. They reported that women's history was not contained within the main narrative, and the historical record continued to be voiced from a male perspective (Reese, 1994).

In a more recent study of 18 popular high school American history textbooks, 1,335 females were included throughout those texts, in comparison to 12,382 males. In illustrations, there were 616 pictures of named women and 3,505 images of identified men. However, the authors of that study do report the ratio of women-to-men increased from the 1960s texts to the 1990s texts. In addition, the number of women who were given at least a paragraph of text and the number of women in illustrations increased over this three decade period (Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004).

This study was designed to evaluate current K-12 American history textbooks for gender balance. No other studies have assessed texts across the K-12 grade span to compare gender representation in elementary, middle school, and high school texts. In addition, no other studies have looked at 2005 editions of American history textbooks to evaluate the impact of the National History Standards on the inclusion of women in textbooks that have been published since the release of those standards.

### Method

Three K-12 2005 editions of American history textbooks from different publishing companies were evaluated for gender balance. The first text, *Growth of a Nation* (Scott Foresman, 2005), was written for grade two. The second text, *Creating America: A History of the United States* (McDougal Littell, 2005), was designed for middle school, grades 7-9. The third text, *America: Pathways to the Present* (Prentice Hall, 2005), was written for students in grades 9-12. All three texts were chosen because they are 2005 editions and are in current adoption by public schools. While fifth grade is traditionally the grade level when American history is taught, a fifth-grade book was not evaluated in this study. In some school districts, grade-five students attend middle school. Since a middle school textbook was already included, the researcher felt it appropriate to select a book that was specifically designed for the elementary grades; thus, a second grade book was selected.

Content analysis procedures were performed on each of the three textbooks (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1985). The number of males and females in each text was calculated. The index of each text was used for data collection purposes. Each historical figure's name was recorded as either male or female. If the gender of a name was uncertain, illustrations, text content, or pronouns were used as gender identifiers. Each person was counted only once, even if they were mentioned multiple times in text content. For each text, the number of males and females was determined. A chi-square analysis was performed to determine if the discrepancy between the number of males and females was significantly different. In addition, the number of pages on which each name appeared in the text was recorded. The range of pages was determined for males and females in each text.

The number of identified males and females in illustrations was also recorded for each of the three texts. Each individual's name was counted only once, even if they were in multiple illustrations. The index of each text was used for data collection purposes. For each person, "i" or "p" was used by publishers to delineate that a particular page included an illustration. A chi-square analysis was used to determine whether the number of males and females in illustrations in each text was significantly different.

Before results are presented, a study weakness should be noted. Generalizability of results should be approached cautiously since only three textbooks were evaluated. Very few

American history textbooks are in print for the elementary grades, making it difficult to assess multiple texts across all grade levels.

### Results and Discussion

All three American history textbooks evaluated in this study contain significantly more males than females in text content. In all texts, the differences were significant at the .001 level. However, the actual number of females included in text content increased from the elementary to the high school text. There were 58 females included in the elementary text with 103 in the middle school text and 113 in the high school text. Therefore, students would be exposed to more women in history, should they study these three texts from elementary school through high school. This increased exposure to women in history in the secondary grades appears to be the result of a greater number of historical figures overall represented in this sample of texts, as the number of males included also increased across texts. Moreover, the number of males increased at a greater rate across grade levels than did the number of females. While there were more than three times as many males than females in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade text, by grades 9-12, that ratio increased to more than six times more males represented than females.

In addition, the range of pages on which males are included is significantly higher than the range on which females are included. For example, in *Growth of a Nation*, Abraham Lincoln was mentioned on 22 pages in the text, while Sandra Day O'Connor was included on 5 pages (Scott Foresman, 2005). Table 1 delineates, for each textbook, the number of males and females in text content, the chi-square results and significance levels, and the range of page numbers for each gender.

**Table 1**

#### *Number of Males and Females in Text Content*

	Growth of a Nation	Creating America: A History of the United States	America: Pathways to the Present
Publisher	Scott Foresman	McDougal Littell	Prentice-Hall
Grade Level(s)	2	7-9	9-12
Number of Males	190	483	726
Number of Females	58	103	113
Chi-Square	70.26, p< .001	246.42, p< .001	447.88, p< .001
df	1	1	1
Range of Pages for Males	1-22	1-27	1-36
Range of Pages for Females	1-5	1-5	1-6

All three texts also included significantly more illustrations of males than females. In all texts, the differences were significant at the .001 level. The actual number of females increased from the elementary text (31) to the middle school text (53) and then dropped slightly in the high school text (46). Table 2 contains the number of males and females in illustrations and the chi-square results and significance levels for each text.

**Table 2*****Number of Males and Females in Illustrations***

	Growth of a Nation	Creating America: A History of the United States	America: Pathways to the Present
Publisher	Scott Foresman	McDougal Littell	Prentice-Hall
Grade Level(s)	2	7-9	9-12
Number of Males	89	185	185
Number of Females	31	53	46
Chi-Square	28.04, $p < .001$	73.22, $p < .001$	83.64, $p < .001$
df	1	1	1

In both text content and illustrations, all three American History textbooks evaluated in this study contained significantly more males than females. All differences were significant at the .001 level. The actual number of females and males in text content increased across the three textbooks; thus, exposure to more women and men in history increases as students progress through the grade levels. A similar pattern was evident in the number of females and males in illustrations. In actual numbers, there were increases in female illustrations from the elementary textbook to the middle school textbook, and then a slight decrease in the high school textbook. In comparison to early textbooks studies, this study indicates current American history textbooks have incorporated a greater number of females in text content and illustrations. Moreover, greater numbers of women are included in history textbooks since the publication of the National History Standards (1994), although the impact of the standards on gender balance is unknown.

However, while female representation in textbook content and illustrations increases across grade levels, male representation increases at an even greater rate. Thus, as students proceed through the grade levels, they are exposed to an increasingly smaller ratio of females-to-males. Since the range of pages on which males are represented is also significantly higher than the range for females, it is apparent that overall textbook content continues to be male dominated.

Of the three grade levels evaluated, elementary texts appear to be the most gender equal. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Scott Foresman text, authors used stories to teach not only about famous people and places but also about families, making the study of history interesting, reader friendly, and developmentally appropriate. Women were an integral part of these stories. In the middle school and high school texts, authors gravitated from *history as story* to a more didactic approach. These textbooks offered a concise view of historical names, dates, and places, with little focus on the contributions of women to the growth of our nation.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The guidelines of the American Historical Association (2004) stipulate that factual coverage in American history textbooks must be balanced with respect to race, class, and gender; however, they fail to define “balance.” Since the publication of the National History Standards and its controversial revisions, there have been increases in the number of women included in

text content and illustrations. The issue of the invisibility of women has become a non-issue; however, there continues to be significantly more males than females overall. Since the American Historical Association has called for gender balance, they must be held accountable for defining it. If they are calling for a 50/50 split in the gender representations of historical figures, textbook publishers have yet to meet that goal.

Consider, however, that women are now included in greater numbers than in previous textbook additions. In addition, we must acknowledge that men have certainly had a major impact on the historical record. With male Presidents of the United States, male battlefields, and male world leaders, it may be unrealistic to expect perfect gender balance in history textbooks. To attempt to achieve such balance could result in, what Sewall (2005) describes, a modified historical record in the name of balance.

However, it would seem reasonable for female representation to increase with at least the same rate as male representation across grade levels. Therefore, in future history textbook editions, educators should call for textbook publishers to pursue more balanced gender ratios. Perhaps textbook authors should consider utilizing the concept of *history as story* through the middle school and high school grades. Not only might more women be represented but history textbooks might also be more appealing to adolescent learners.

At present, teachers and textbook adoption committees must contemplate how to proceed with the teaching of American History. High-quality history instruction is always the goal. First, consideration should be given to the limitations of any history text. A textbook is a resource for the teaching of history, but it is not the curriculum. Teachers and curriculum committees must assess the value of using children's and young adult's literature, primary documents, diaries, simulations, and videos, among other resources, to achieve curricular goals. When textbooks do not include notable women, teachers may supplement with materials from organizations such as the National Women's History Project (2005), an educational nonprofit organization, and *Teaching Tolerance*, sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2005). These organizations produce materials such as teaching kits, videos, children's books, and poster sets, which encourage critical thinking and hands-on learning opportunities. Materials from *Teaching Tolerance* are provided free to schools.

Students, especially those at the middle school and high school levels, can benefit from discussions and debates on gender balance and gender bias. Students can debate the definition of terms such as "balance" and "equity" and learn to detect bias in curricular materials. Reese (1994) recommends that textbook authors include gender as a primary historical distinction. She believes that women's historical experiences make little sense to students in the absence of gender analysis. History is gender specific, and topics such as women in the work force, women and family, women and our nation's economy, and women and war could be used to analyze various time periods in American history. Until textbook authors realize the value in Reese's recommendation, teachers can help students to complete their own gender analysis of our nation's history.

While there continue to be significantly more males in American history textbook content and illustrations, the number of females represented is increasing in current textbook editions. It may be unrealistic to expect perfect gender balance, and any attempts could result in a modified and confused historical record. However, it would seem reasonable for textbook publishers to increase female representation at a rate commensurate with male representation across grade levels. In doing so, future students who journey through time will experience many more women than in earlier times, and the historical record will be narrated by individuals of both genders.

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