

# High School Students' Attitudes Toward Women's History and Feminism: Implications for Teaching History



by

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Over the past several years, I have observed anecdotal and journalistic evidence of a "backlash" to feminism. However, there is no literature on high school students' attitudes toward feminism. Based upon my experience as a high school history teacher, I had a sense that students resisted feminists' understanding of women's historical development. Such resistance collides with the tremendously rich outpouring of women's history. This historiography has transformed our understanding of historical development by demonstrating the power of gender as an organizing force in society – for women and men.

A history of feminism is essential to the teaching of history because it reveals how women and male allies have struggled to undermine gender-based institutional structures of power. Further, the work of feminists and historians have provided us with a comprehensive study of the past which no longer misrepresents or entirely skips over the lives, work, and experiences of women.

As more school districts mandate the teaching of women's history, a discussion of feminism must occur because it is the social and political movement which brought women's history to the forefront. Student attitudes of support or resistance must be assessed in determining how best to reach and engage students in the teaching of women's history and feminism.

My research project focused on student attitudes toward women's history and feminism through the use of an open-ended questionnaire. Six classes were surveyed in an Iowa high school with an enrollment of 1300 students. Of the 128 students in the six classes, 114 completed the survey. Sixty males and fifty-four females participated. All of the students were 17-year-olds with the exception of three who were 16 and two who were 18. Table 1 reports on student responses to the question: Is it important to learn about Women's History?

**Table 1. Is Women's History Important?**

	YES	NO
Males	89%	11%
Females	100%	--
Total	91%	9%

Historians of women's history and educators alike should be encouraged by the high rate of *positive responses* among high school students toward women's history.

There appears to be fertile ground for teaching how women undermined gender-based inequities. Paradoxically, in contrast to students' positive attitudes toward women's history, my research revealed a high level of *resistance* to feminism. Student attitudes, however, were based upon misperceptions of what constitutes feminism. Although definitions of feminism vary, a

widely shared definition refers to women attaining equal rights and equal opportunities. Among 114 high school students, 40% were able to identify feminism as "something to do with equal rights for males and females." Half of those who equated feminism with equal rights responded favorably to the concept. The remaining 60% of students responded negatively and did not use equal rights as a basis for their definition.

In fact, a majority of the students' definitions or responses were disparaging of women they perceived as supportive of feminism. Below, I have provided a representative sampling of those responses:

*A bunch of women who are brainwashed by Oprah.*

*Women who think they should be promoted because of sex and don't have to work as hard.*

*Women complaining and whining - unstable about their sexuality.*

*They have too much free time and don't know how good they really have it.*

*They should realize that the oppression is over and stop seeking revenge for the past. They need to be kept quiet.*

It is clear that a majority of the students reacted irrationally to the term feminism, rather than to a widely shared definition of the term's meaning.\* However, lack of knowledge regarding feminism did not prevent students from attacking it or the

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\*Feminist ideas, and even the word feminism, have always been controversial. The meaning of feminism is contested not only between feminists and anti-feminists but among feminists themselves. Historian and educator, Linda Gordon, uses the term in its most inclusive and historical sense, to mean disapproval of women's subordinate status, the belief that women's disadvantaged position is not inevitable and can be changed, and a doubting of the "objectivity" of history as it has been previously written in a male-dominated culture (1990, p. 187).



women who support it. Male students commonly described feminists as "crackpots," "irritating," "overbearing," "men-bashers," "pathetic," "gay," "overboard," "dorks," "nuts," and "sexist." Females used descriptors such as "silly," "men-bashers," "extreme," "unnecessary," and "selfish." Somehow they had learned that feminism is something negative, something to be ridiculed, even if they did not know the definition of the term.

For the most part, feminism and feminist history are not taught in the high school history classroom. This is reflected in the general lack of understanding and awareness exhibited by the students who participated in this survey. History teachers have the responsibility of comprehending feminist history in order to position students to understand how feminists have undermined gender-based structures of inequality. Instead, the accomplishments of feminists are largely unknown to students and overshadowed by their negative perceptions of feminism and feminists. The resistance on the part of high school students is particularly evident by the fact that very few of them were willing to identify themselves as feminists.

**Table 2. Are You a Feminist?**

	YES	NO
Males	2%	98%
Females	6%	94%
Total	8%	92%

The question remains: how do history teachers teach *to* this resistance? More effectively, how do history teachers get *beyond* that resistance? This study has identified high school students' attitudes toward women's history and feminism. The negative and sometime hostile attitudes toward feminism and feminists would directly impact the learning environment if feminist history were taught. Leaving feminist history out of the curriculum in the face of this resistance should not be the alternative.

A plethora of feminist and women's history scholarship confirms the necessity and importance of teaching about the

lives and experiences of the one-half of our population who have previously been silenced, marginalized, or excluded from the "narrative or story" of history. Women's voices should be heard throughout the history curriculum. High school students should understand how women shaped the life and culture of America.

There is much debate over *how* to teach women's history. Social studies teachers must sift through the research and resources on this topic, just as they would any other, in determining the style that works for them. The variety of stages for teaching about women are much the same as those for teaching about men. The elite versus the ordinary, leaders versus grassroots activists, political versus social, and a combination of thereof. The "notable women" approach is most commonly used by history teachers as they attempt to integrate women into the curriculum. Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Abigail Adams, and Molly Pitcher are among the women covered in this approach.

Some instructors incorporate the stories of women on the frontier, in the factory, in families, as immigrants, and so on. Documents such as labor contracts, diaries, letters, birth records, family albums, advertisements, posters, photographs, journals or magazines, and newspapers are excellent sources for this integrative approach. Any attempt at inclusivity is a step in the right direction.

Of all the approaches to teaching women's history, the feminist history approach gets the "short shrift." Most of us in the social studies teaching profession have had little or no instruction in feminist history, feminist theory, and feminism. We must seek out new materials, read books, take classes, and request staff development in this area. The question then arises, on whose time? Teachers find it difficult enough to keep up with ever-increasing demands inside and outside of the classroom. It is beyond the scope of this article to present in-depth methodology for teaching women's history in general, and



feminist history, more specifically. However, I do conclude with a list of resources on women's history which I have found helpful.

My research indicates that high school students are receptive to women's history but resist feminism and feminist history. Just as a comprehensive history of America must include women, a comprehensive history of women must include feminist history. Feminism is the social and political movement that brought about much needed changes for women's lives: their rights, their status, their opportunities, their pay, their choices. Feminism continues to advocate for improvements while challenging sexism, patriarchy, oppression, discrimination, and subjugation. Feminist history in the high school classroom creates a space for dialogue, introspection, and critique of important and engaging issues.

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