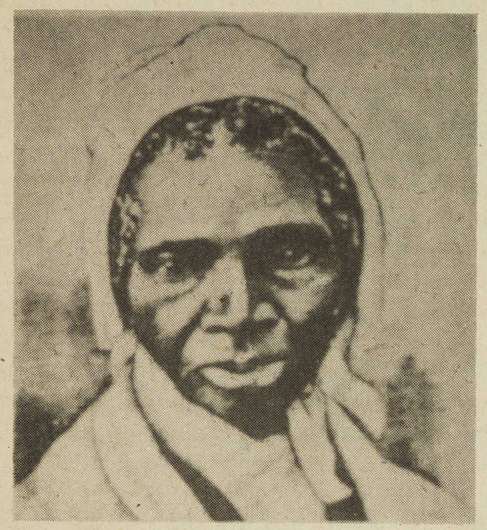
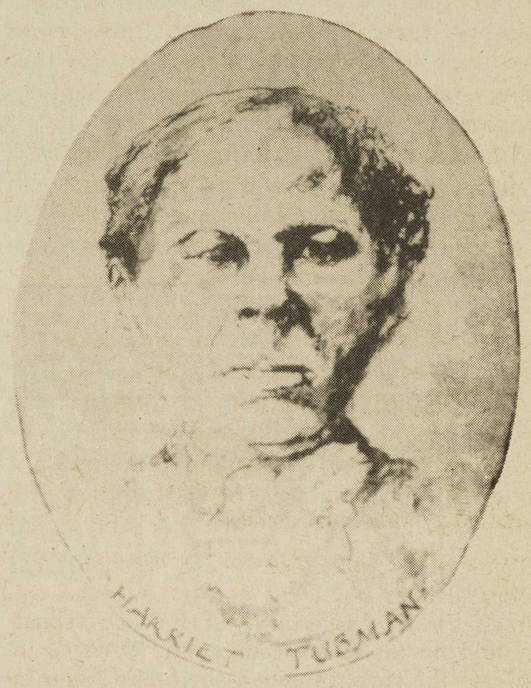
Three Women Ignored by Our History



THE MAN over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over puddles or gives me the best place . . .

. . . AND AIN'T I A WOMAN?
Look at my arm/ I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me
. . . and ain't I a woman?
I could work as much as a man and eat as much as a man when I could get it - and bear thelash as well
. . . and ain't I a woman?
I have borne thirteen children, and seen most of 'em sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me
. . . and ain't I a woman?
—Sojourner Truth



Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery in 1849 and later helped hundreds of slaves escape: "I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death. If I could not have one, I would have the other."

Textbooks

[Woman's] development, her freedom, her independence, must come from and through herself. First, by asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second, by refusing the right to anyone over her body; by refusing to bear children, unless she wants them; by refusing to be a servant to God, the State, society, the husband, the family, etc., by making her life simpler, but deeper and richer. That is, by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities, by freeing herself from the fear of public opinion and public condemnation.
—Emma Goldman, early U.S. feminist and Anarchist.

(Readings in American History)
The essential demands of the abolitionists, the feminists, the educational reformers, and the labor unions were all eventually fulfilled. (History of a Free People)
After the vote, American women now assumed an unquestioned role in shaping the production of goods — material, humanistic, literary, and artistic. They were the chief spenders of money. (History of a Free People)
It is interesting to note that the fashions — flappers and bloomers — are stressed more than the historic feminist activities of the times.

Women as workers are consistently downplayed in textbooks though women and children were among the most overworked and underpaid workers in America. The story of women in labor is limited to their exploitation in the textile mills in the 1820's. Textbooks rarely cover women and work with more than three entries of a few lines each. In the 1890's,women were mostactive in factories (outnumbering men in clothing factories and about half of the labor force in textile mills and tobacco factories). Women were simultaneously organizing strikes and fighting to end child labor abuses and other inhumane factory conditions.

Discussion of contemporary labor problems also ignore women, even though more than 1/2 of all women between 18 and 55 spend at least part of each year working for pay. The reasons for women's subjugation in the lowest paid work is never discussed. The issue of unpaid housework is never discussed and undoubtedly will evoke a defensive reaction from any male historian or history teacher.

Texts symbolize the belief (myth) that only "man's work" merits description. There is no consideration of the farm women who were actively engaged in the family's common work. Or of Civil War women who were cooks, spies, scouts, and guides. Why is the female Civil War nurse given so much attention? What of women writers, dancers, and artists who made huge contributions to our cultural heritage?

Students will get the impression that the 19th amendment (the right to vote) solved all problems of discrimination against women. We know this is far from true. The white male superstructure must be fought on many levels by feminists.

Many blatently ignored issues must be taken up in order to educate women about their rights (and lack of them). Sex-role socialization should be an important issue for social studies texts. Young people should understand the forces that shape concepts like femininity and masculinity so that they will understand themselves and the politics of society.

The inclusion of women in history need not be limited to objective accounts. Subjective experience through the use of novels and poetry will not only make history come alive (something male historical accounts failed to do for everyone), but will also enrich any understanding of the role and oppression of women throughout history.

Since schools themselves maintain sex role tracking, and their texts reflect only *his*tory, for now students will have to rely on outside sources. Some useful materials are listed on page 79.