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# Why is Women's Suffrage History and Feminism Ignored in Primary and Secondary Schools?

November 30, 2012 Written by [Jillian Terry Women](#)

When I was in sixth grade, I remember my social studies teacher devoting an entire week to the African-American civil rights movement. We spent that week watching a series that brought to life the events of that time; from Brown vs. the Board of Education to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I say "brought to life," because the history was told through a collection of news photos, audio and video. I can still remember the shock I felt when I saw police officers beating protesters and dispersing crowds with fire hoses. It made me angry, and I felt embarrassed for those who had defended segregation.

This series taught me everything I needed to know about that point in history, but my teacher failed to connect the dots for her class. This is because she taught history through a timeline. This meant we had learned about the Civil War and the Fifteenth Amendment weeks before we learned about the civil rights movement. Although I still remembered what I had learned about these things, I didn't get the big picture. I didn't understand that African-Americans had literally been fighting and dying for their freedom in the U.S. for over 100 years and that the fight had been non-stop. I also didn't learn how the women's civil rights movement was connected with this. Somehow, in the midst of this history lesson, the importance of women's suffrage had been lost. My history book included a paragraph about Susan B. Anthony and the Nineteenth Amendment, but nothing more.

At the time, I didn't question this apparent disregard of something so important to the history and life of American women, because I wasn't taught that it was important. Today, I wonder why more teachers aren't implementing women's studies topics into their social studies and history curriculums. The rights of women are just as important as the rights of any other

group, and the fight for these rights was just as difficult. In fact, you could say that the battle is still being waged.

In my experience, I have observed that the majority of elementary and secondary school teachers are female. This may not be logical, but I feel that this fact should lead to a world where the history of women's rights is discussed more openly within our education system. This isn't so; but why?



Ileana Jiménez is a feminist high school teacher who has proven that it is possible to discuss women's rights in secondary schools. Not only has she made it possible, but she has also found ways to make it actionable. In an opinion piece she wrote for [OntheIssuesMagazine.com](http://OntheIssuesMagazine.com), Jiménez discusses why students respond so well to the idea of feminism and how they have turned their lessons into positive community action. Teachers like Jiménez remind us that there is more to education than just reading, writing and arithmetic and that there are benefits to teaching women's studies and all issues of human prejudice. Yet, the subject is still virtually ignored by all primary and secondary schools.

One reason I believe this is so is because the women's suffrage movement in the U.S. never garnered as much attention as the African-American civil rights movement. Robert Cooney, director of the Women Suffrage Media Project, wrote a compelling [essay](#) about how the women's suffrage movement has been largely overlooked, even though it played a significant role in our quest for true democracy. Unlike our country's history with slavery and racism, the women's rights movement didn't result in war or group violence. Essentially, it wasn't as memorable. In addition, the African-American civil rights movement took place during the golden age of television, so even though most of the country did not play an active role in the movement, everyone was able to watch it unfold in their living rooms.

I am not discounting the importance of the African-American civil rights movement. I am simply stating that both movements are equally as important to teach the full picture of human prejudice, and both should be taught in our schools with the same zeal and depth. In addition to these two examples, there are no doubt other examples of inequality in the United States and abroad that should be covered, both past and present. No event should be left ignored.

Another reason I believe teachers disregard women's studies is because there is a negative stigma attached to the topic. Many women still believe it isn't "lady like" to discuss feminism in the classroom. They are not comfortable with the topic

for reasons they don't even understand. And when it comes to women's suffrage, most teachers (including myself) forget that there actually was a time when women were not allowed to vote (or do much of anything, for that matter), and that time took place not even 100 years ago!

This is a frightening realization, and it's a reminder that we can't go through our daily lives taking this right for granted. We must remember the politicians and citizens who worked so hard to fight for the right thing. When we know our past, we are less likely to make the same mistakes in our future. It wasn't that long ago when this country began its fight for racial and gender equality, and this fight is far from over. It's happening right now in the U.S. and all over the world, and all of these events are connected. We cannot afford to ignore any of history's civil rights movements. Of course, I am personally interested in women's studies, because I am a woman. However, nearly half of the world's population is also female, so I do believe there's no fault in saying that students could benefit from learning more about our country's history with female liberties.

*Jillian Terry is a freelance education writer and former teacher. As an advocate of homeschooling and online education, her writing often focuses on new methods of education and curriculum reform and is often published on education websites, such as [www.TeachingDegree.org](http://www.TeachingDegree.org). Jillian welcomes your questions and comments below!*

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