Writing Women into the American Global History Curriculum

Alan Singer and Eustace Thompson
Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.

"The history of the world is but the biography of great men," at least according to Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle in *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* written in 1841 (Carlyle, 1908, 266). Unfortunately, too many global history textbooks, curriculum guides, and teachers continue to agree. As the world approached the start of the third Christian millennium, many publishers circulated lists of top 100s. One widely distributed list included only two women, Queen Isabella I of Spain and Queen Elizabeth I of England (Hart, 1998). Only ten women made *Life* magazine's 1997 list of "The 100 People Who made the Millennium" (Buzzanell, Meisenbach and Remke, 2008, 121): Mary Wollstonecraft, Florence Nightingdale, Joan of Arc, Jane Addams, Simone de Beauvoir, Marie Curie, Susan B. Anthony, Helen Keller, Queen Elizabeth I, and Catherine de Medicis. Only two of these women, Mary Wollstonecraft (26) and Florence Nightingdale (41), made the top fifty.

In 1999, *Time* magazine's "People of the Century" was a much more of a celebrity list and included in alphabetical order, Lucille Ball, Rachel Carson, Coco Chanel, Princess Diana, Anne Frank, Aretha Franklin, Martha Graham, Helen Keller, Mary Leaky, Estee Lauder, Marilyn Monroe, Emmeline Pankhurst, Rosa Parks, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mother Teresa, Margaret Thatcher, and Oprah Winfrey (Time, 1999). We love Aretha Franklin and we are glad she got some well-deserved respect, but we are not sure whether she counts as a history maker. Meanwhile Mary "Mother" Jones, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Luxemburg, Indira Gandhi, Dolores Ibárruri, "La Pasionaria," and Rigoburta Menchu are missing. I am also suspect of any list that includes Bart Simpson.

One of the most widely used Global History textbooks in the United States is MacDougal Littell's *World History, Patterns of Interaction* (Beck,
Black, Naylor, and Shabaka, 2005). The book has brief special features on 113 "history makers" across time that includes only fourteen women. The index has over fifty references to women in different epochs and societies, but students never learn or discuss why women have been so marginalized throughout most of human history.

We are proponents of what we call a social studies approach to global history, an approach that starts with questions about the present and future, uses these questions to interrogate the past, and utilizes the past to help students answer their questions and formulate new ones (Singer, 2011). A social studies approach to global history organizes curriculum, units, and individual lessons in order to go back and forth across time, to examine case studies from the past, to help us gain insights into the human condition, and to stimulate questions about the present. Every student is not going to become a historian; in fact, very few will. But educated citizens in a democratic society need to think about the past and raise questions about the present so they can be informed and active participants in shaping the future.

A social studies approach to global history is based on the idea that teachers need to balance the breadth of historical coverage with occasional in-depth case studies such as a careful examination of the Columbian Exchange and the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Everything cannot be covered extensively, but for students to appreciate the historical process and the work of the historian, some things must be. Because it is a case study approach, examples can be drawn from outside what the teacher normally perceives as the main historical narrative. Teachers can create space for more extensive examination of, for example, the non-Western world, or the role of women in history, throughout the curriculum.

In one memorable lesson, a fifth grade class discussed trans-Atlantic European exploration of the Western Hemisphere and wanted to know how people went to the bathroom on the boat. The lack of privacy led to a discussion about whether women could be explorers. This in turn led to a discussion of the role of women in history and a research project on the role women played in the European conquest and settlement of the Americas. Somewhere down the line, students discovered how long skirts acted as portable bathrooms and provided a measure of privacy as women crossed the Great American Plains on wagon trains.

As the number of students, especially women, who have taken feminist or women's studies courses in college has grown so has the tension around teaching about the role of women in different societies. Usually every class of prospective social studies teachers has women who are committed
to broadening coverage of women in the global history curriculum and men who remain skeptical about female contributions. We address this in two ways that can easily be adapted for a high school global history class. We have students examine lists of the major figures in world history that were prepared by different publishers during the frenzy leading up to the third millennium. One question that they quickly ask is where are all the women? On a list of 100 people there are generally not more than three or four women.

We follow with a simple assignment that they are hard pressed to complete — working individually, list twenty women prominent before the twentieth century who you feel should be considered for this list and be prepared to explain your recommendations. Few students, even some of those who studied women’s history, can come up with as many as five names.

The issue becomes: Are we just ignorant of the accomplishments of women, have the accomplishments of women been covered over or overlooked because of discrimination and because most history books have been written by men, or have women really done less significant things than men either because of ability, because they are wired differently as mothers and caregivers, or because of oppressive conditions in male-dominated patriarchal societies? As a follow-up, students search through their textbooks to examine its coverage of women and attach their own additions and commentaries where they feel it is necessary to provide adequate coverage of the role of women in global history.

Part of the problem in deciding why women do not regularly appear in the global history textbooks is because the historical record and its coverage of women is often so sketchy. One way to address this is to focus on women specifically while studying different historical epochs.

In a lesson on creation stories from around the world, we introduce students to Divine Woman the Creator from a traditional story told by the Huron people of North America (Hamilton, 1991, 59-63) In this legend, Divine Woman falls from the sky with a range of power and with the help of a giant turtle creates the earth. Students discuss why the Huron would believe creation was an act of a woman. In lessons on the ancient Mediterranean world, they examine the Plight of Women as described by Sophocles (Athens, mid-5th century BC), a funeral eulogy delivered by a Roman husband for his wife in the 1st century BC, a legal complaint against an abusive husband from 4th century AD Egypt, and Christian New Testament passages on the role of women. They can compare these with Confucian teachings on the status of women. Activity sheets using these primary sources and those that follow are available online at http://people.hofstra.edu/alan_j_singer/teaching_global_history.html
Most Confucians believed the subservience of women to men was natural and proper and part of the harmonious organization of the universe. Failure to maintain this unequal status could result in the breakdown of society. While rare, there were women who challenged Confucian norms and rose to prominence in Chinese history. During the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD) Wu Zetian was the only woman to be emperor of China. A former child concubine, she became empress in 656 AD and in 690 AD declared herself Emperor, claiming she was a Buddha reincarnation in feminine form.

During the Han Dynasty, Ban Zhao (c. 45-116 AD) followed her brother as imperial historian and completed his dynastic history. Ban was also an adviser to Empress Deng, who assumed power as regent for her infant son in 106 AD. The best-known work by Ban is her Lessons for Women, which was written as an instruction guide on feminine behavior for her daughter. Despite her own achievements, Ban accepted the inferior status of women. In the introduction, Ban described herself as “the unworthy writer, . . . unsophisticated, unenlightened, and by nature unintelligent,” who, “being careless, and by nature stupid,” had taught and trained her own children without system or clear purpose.

An excellent primary source translated into English on the status of noble women in feudal Japan is Sarashina Nikki or the Sarashina Diary. It is a memoir of life written by Lady Sarashina who lived from 1009 (?) to 1059 AD. She appears to have married in her thirties and become a “lady-in-waiting” or assistant to a higher-ranking noble woman in the imperial court. Her surviving memoir is actually from a version produced two hundred years after she died. In feudal Japan women of the samurai or warrior class were expected to manage household affairs and supervise the education of their children when their husbands were absent and many were literate. What is amazing about this memoir is the ordinariness of Lady Sarashina’s concerns.

Another strategy is to look at women who led dissident movements in the past or challenged European imperialist expansion such as Joan of Arc in 15th century France, Anne Hutchinson in 17th century New England, and Dorothy Hazzard and Mary Cary, prominent “levelers” during the religious upheaval in 17th century England, or Tzu Hsi, the Empress Dowager of China, and Tjut Njak Dien, a Acehnese rebel leader in Sumatra. Students try to understand why women, who were denied traditional leadership positions in these societies, rose to prominence in these movements. It also sets the stage for the study of social movements in the modern era, the 20th and 21st centuries.
Jeanne D'Arc (1412-1431 AD), known in English as Joan of Arc, is a French national hero. Her followers and enemies knew her simply as the “Maid,” which signified her status as an unmarried young woman. She was declared a Roman Catholic Saint in 1920.

Joan was a farm girl who grew up in the eastern part of France in the region now known as Lorraine. As a nineteen-year old young woman, she led a French army involved in the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453). Joan claimed, and her followers believed, she was inspired by a divine voice. However the English and some French opponents charged she served the devil.

After troops under her command successfully broke the English siege of the city of Orleans, Joan was captured by French forces allied with the English. She was turned over to the English for trial as a heretic and witch. Joan was tried in an ecclesiastical or church court in the city of Rouen, convicted, and executed by being burned alive. Amongst the evidence presented against Joan was that she wore men’s clothing and cut her hair short. Court records survive and can be read by students.

Historians continue to debate the importance of Joan’s role in the Hundred Years’ War. Whether she played a significant role in the war or not, her life, the trial, and her death tell us much about European society at that time.

In the last years of the 19th century, a nationalist movement known as the Boxers led a rebellion against foreign influence that hoped to restore China to its previous position as the world’s leading power. One of its slogans was “Support the Qing, destroy the foreign.” In November 1899, Italy demanded that it be permitted a sphere of influence in China. In response, the Qing Empress Dowager, Tzu Hsi, issued a secret edict to administrative heads across China calling on them to resist further efforts by European nations to seize control over Chinese territory. When the Boxers placed the capital in Beijing under siege, an Eight-Nation Alliance that included British, Japanese, Russian, Italian, German, French, and United States troops invaded China. The Qing tried to repel the foreign invaders but both the Boxers and government forces were defeated.

At the beginning of the 17th century, merchants from the Dutch Republic, later known as the Netherlands, used trade to establish a small foothold on the island of Java in the South East Asian Indonesian archipelago. In the 1820s, the Netherlands started a series of military campaigns to consolidate control over the area. The most intense fighting took place between 1873 and 1909. Fierce battles were often followed by atrocities committed against civilian populations. Very little is known in the West about the actual
fighting that took place between the Indonesians and the Dutch or about the
rebel fighters. Few Indonesian sources have been translated into western
languages. Tjut Njak Dien was a guerilla leader from Aceh, a province on
the northern tip of the island of Sumatra. Her father and husband initially led
rebel bands and when they were both killed she assumed command of a unified
guerilla army fighting against the Dutch.

Women have been prominent in struggles for equality and human
rights on a number of fronts. Four sisters, collectively known as Los Mariposas,
were instrumental in opposition to the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican
Republic during the 1950s and early 1960s and became martyrs after three
of them were assassinated. Rigobertu Menchu became well known during
the campaign for the rights of indigenous people in Guatemala and won a
Nobel Peace Prize. Aung San Suu Kyi has become the international symbol
of the movement to democratize Myanmar (Burma). Jian Qing was one of the
“Gang of Four” that led the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s. Winnie
Mandela ran the day-to-day struggle against apartheid in South Africa while
many of the prominent male leaders were imprisoned.

Both Jian Qing and Winnie Mandela were later heavily criticized
and placed on trial for excesses committed under their leadership, which in
itself challenges stereotypes that female leaders are not as strong-willed or
as emotionally hardened as men. One reason for focusing on these particular
struggles where women had leadership roles is because it exposes students to
regions of the world that are rarely addressed in the global history curriculum.

If a high school global history teacher cannot generate classroom
battles over these topics they are not trying. The trick, which comes with
preparation and teaching experience, is to use the controversy and the interest
it generates in students, to get them to think about and learn the history.

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