



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2020 Volume I: The Place of Woman: Home, Economy, and Politics

Introduction

Overview:

Teachers seek both to educate and to inspire, two goals that are sometimes in tension. Nowhere is this tension sharper than in teaching about the place of women in our world today—in politics, the economy, and society. Educating students entails opening their eyes to persistent gender inequalities in political representation, in income, and in leadership roles, which is no easy matter when some students have internalized many of these inequalities as common sense. How can teachers inspire students to be excited about their future lives when sexism still abounds? How can they help students see possibilities for themselves that their families may not embrace? How can they think about gender inequality in ways that are sensitive to even greater racial inequalities in America today? How do people experience gender inequality and racism at the same time?

An amazing group of New Haven public school teachers took up these challenges in this seminar on The Place of Woman. Their units show sensitivity and warmth towards students of diverse backgrounds, they engage both boys and girls in a celebration of gender equality and fluidity, and they lay out strategies for students to grow in self-awareness and acceptance of themselves and others.

Girls are more likely than boys to have heard that they should be empathetic, modest, and well behaved. These are all good qualities, and perhaps the gender imbalance is in their favor. But girls are also often taught that they are destined for motherhood and the family work that entails. Their parents may have demonstrated a gendered division of labor in the home, even if both parents work. In America, mothers spend more time cooking, cleaning, and caring for children than fathers do; and this gendered division of labor is even starker in many other societies around the world. For children from immigrant families, these other traditions remain strongly present in their lives. Teachers seek to affirm students' diverse backgrounds, while also preparing them for lives in American society where we, at least aspirationally, embrace gender equality and sexual tolerance.

Another challenge for teachers is that, as students approach puberty and depending on their sexual orientation, girls and boys may seek to be attractive to each other. Girls who come from relatively gender-equal families, a growing body of literature tells us, may experience unequal expectations of their time and likely career trajectories when they have, or anticipate having, children of their own. Only then, for many people, will they realize that gendered family roles can stand in the way of career ambitions (if they have not already shrunk those dreams down to acceptable size).

This seminar invited Fellows to reduce the tension between education and inspiration, by building pathways

towards equality and self-actualization, based on strong social science knowledge and analysis of why the genders are unequal in practice. Students can help to make the world a better place, but they first need to know a great deal about what ails the world, and why.

Introducing the Fellows' Units:

This document arranges the Fellows' units by the intended age group of students, because teaching about gender necessarily follows students' relevant experiences and preparedness. Teachers encourage school children in their early years to think about the world as a friendly, inspiring, and welcoming place. Challenges and setbacks are presented as background for inspiring stories of perseverance. As students approach puberty, they can handle more hard truths, but the emphasis is on exploration, self-acceptance, and empathy. Other students are prepared to understand the world in its complexity and, sometimes, in its unfairness. Teachers of these other groups of students are prepared to explore some of the saddest events of history, but also think with students about strategies for how to make the world a better place.

Carol Boynton offers a lively and imaginative unit for young children on how to become good leaders. She begins with three of Vashti Harrison's picture books (*Little Dreamers: Visionary Women Around the World*; *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History*; and *Little Leaders: Exceptional Men in Black History*) to model for students the obstacles leaders have overcome to be the people we admire today. As is appropriate for this age, the accent is on learning historical knowledge, and on inspiration. By focusing on remarkable people, rather than on women per se, Boynton appeals to all students in the classroom.

Daniel Croteau is a gifted writer who teaches his craft to seventh and eighth graders. In this unit, he gives students deep insights into how power inequality infuses relationships between men and women around the world. With a selection of short stories by women writers, he guides his students to grapple with the depictions of gender that the authors describe and invites his students to question their own assumptions about the place of woman in the world. Why are relationships the way they are, and what can be done about them? His unit guides students to become astute readers, skilled writers, and empathetic human beings.

Felicia Fountain, who teaches social studies to seventh- and eighth-grade students, has developed a powerful unit aiming to both educate students about the human cruelty of racism, and inspire students to recognize ways, in whatever straitened circumstances they find themselves, to be forces for good. Her initial thought was to focus on women who fought Apartheid in South Africa as a way to explore the intersectional challenges of Black African women. Partly because the Black Lives Matter movement brought persistent American racism sharply into public view, Fountain broadened her aims to consider parallels between Apartheid, historical Jim Crow, and today's America. She deftly uses this grim material to focus on models of human empathy and leadership.

Taniesha Granger is one of three Fellows who use Sandra Cisneros's classic and powerful coming of age book, *The House on Mango Street*, to help guide her students through puberty to mature social awareness. Granger aims high: understanding that her eighth graders come from a range of family and cultural backgrounds, she uses this and other texts to aid self-discovery, self-acceptance, and personal transformation. Granger's unit is in some ways the most ambitious of all our units: While inculcating her students with deep appreciation and gratitude towards their families, she also wants to empower them to develop their own values and priorities in service of life-affirming and independent lives.

Cheryl Canino also assigns Cisneros's *Mango Street* in her middle school English Language Arts classes. Canino helps students read this and other texts to recognize models and critiques of stereotypical femininity.

Canino is particularly sensitive to the cultural experiences of LatinX students and aims to teach them both self-respect and empathy towards others. Affording her students a deeper understanding of the forces that make us who we are, Canino gives them opportunities for personal growth and a greater range of choices.

Eden Stein powerfully deploys Cisneros's *Mango Street*, along with other texts, to help students navigate puberty and young adulthood in a healthy, life-affirming way. After a segment of the unit in which students learn about the history of gender inequality and the women's movements fighting them, Stein assigns *Mango Street* and other coming-of-age books. Stein asks her students to join Cisneros in writing about their own experiences, or those of an imagined person, to develop both their writing skills as well as their appreciation of the life-shaping effects of context.

Danny Roque employs his school's theme of CRAIGs (Compassion, Respect, Action, Integrity, and Greatness) to introduce ninth graders to women who embody these impressive attributes. Roque's unit piques student interest with five case studies of remarkable women whose exemplary lives have much to teach about each of the CRAIG's qualities. He then invites students to develop the research skills with which to uncover other people with these remarkable traits. In the process of these explorations, students will have both learned about world history and become inspired by remarkable people who overcame obstacles to live admirable lives.

Sean Gorman offers more mature students, grades 10-12, a rich exploration of the effects of the global economy on the economic and social lives of women. The first part of the unit tracks the growth of female employment in rich democracies in the 20th century, and the connection between women's personal income and their authority within the home. His unit then draws students' attention to the more complicated effects of globalization on women of the global south. Where women's wages are insufficient to afford an independent livelihood, as for some groups of working women in India for example, cultural mores such as femicide can persist or even accelerate. Gorman guides his students through these complex dynamics and the reasons behind them.

William McKinney offers a highly sophisticated course that explains why it is important to consider gender as an integral part of AP economics: if we consider individual utility rather than family utility as the unit for maximization, the gendered division of labor (whereby women stay at home and men work) has systematically negative effects on the wages and job prospects of *all* women. McKinney unpacks the logic of statistical discrimination and related concepts that relate also to racism today. McKinney helps his students understand how discrimination is a form of market failure, what role the government plays in correcting market failures, and to understand unintended negative consequences of poorly designed policies.

Barbara Sasso offers a feast of erudition for advanced students. Taking political inequality as her starting point, Sasso takes students on a romp through English literature and history for examples of women who rise above their circumstances. Beginning with ancient Greek drama and medieval fiction, she ends with modern fiction that explores "women's work" and marginalization, and what women did about it. Sasso invites students to understand why plagues and natural disasters amplified women's voices, concluding with lessons from the COVID disaster of our own times.

Aron Meyer engages his students to understand not only gender inequality, but the meaning and construction of gender itself. In this life-affirming unit, Meyer guides his students through core texts (Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*) to consider how people can be trapped in constructions of gender that don't match with how they feel about themselves, and what to do about it. While teaching the core language arts skills of reading for understanding and writing for clarity and

beauty, Meyer also teaches self-knowledge and empathy.

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