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by Jillian Blume

Generations of Women Moving History Forward

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The United States finally has a formidable female presidential candidate who is a serious contender, but women still have a long way to go to achieve equality of the sexes. The United States lags behind the rest of the industrialized world; while women comprise only 16 percent of the U.S. Congress, in numerous countries—including Chile, New Zealand, Ireland, Liberia, Germany, and Canada—women currently serve as presidents, prime ministers, and chancellors. Women’s history still is marginalized in world history textbooks, which include about one woman for every 10 men. If a classroom is supposed to be a democratic experience, then how will teachers teach students about the world when the core material presents an inequality?

It’s hard to believe that the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution still hasn’t been ratified. Introduced into Congress in 1923, the amendment states that “equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” Women’s History Month is a necessary reminder to focus on fundamental issues that touch every aspect of our lives and how we view the world.

The National Women’s History Project led the drive to establish March as Women’s History Month. Molly Murphy MacGregor, the executive director and co-founder of the National Women’s History Project, believes it’s an opportunity to educate women and men alike about the various roles women have played in shaping history—women like Marian Anderson. She became the first black singer to perform at the Metropolitan Opera in 1955, paving the way for other black classical performers—despite being banned in 1939 from singing in Washington’s Constitution Hall because of her race. And women like Gertrude Elion. She graduated from Hunter College with a biochemistry degree in 1937, but was unable to find work in a laboratory until 1943, when so many men went away to war. Eventually, she received the 1988 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for her research, which led to drugs for treating cancer and viruses.

Or Helen Free, who invented the home diabetes test. Or Ada Lovelace, who became the world’s first computer programmer. Or Amanda Jones, who revolutionized food production by inventing vacuum packed canning.

“In surveying the schools, we realized that women’s history was completely absent,” MacGregor recalls. “We were omitted from the history books, and teachers—given that they teach what they know—weren’t teaching anything about women because they hadn’t been taught anything about women. So the idea was to establish a focal point to begin this discussion about women as a force of history.”

MacGregor believes Women’s History Month is just as relevant now as it was decades ago.



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“We continue to have these incredible stereotypes about who women are and what we have done,” she explains. “Women who are actually put forward as successful are seen as the exception rather than the rule. And when we look at women’s history in terms of talking about American culture, you can see women have always been prime movers. Just because their stories haven’t always been told or celebrated doesn’t mean that they haven’t accomplished incredible things.”

Melody Drnach, action vice president for the National Organization of Women, thinks the nation should be focusing on these issues all the time. “While I understand that people appreciate taking time to call special attention to women’s history, we are a long way from achieving equality in this country, so we have a lot of hard work to do,” she says. And while she believes the young women who intern at NOW are aware of the issues, the idea that young women might take women’s hard-won rights somewhat for granted persists.

“I do have a sense that they don’t have the same urgency about the issues,” Drnach says, “because women who went before me made it a lot easier for me, and my generation has, in turn, continued to fight and has made it easier for my sisters behind me. But we are at a time when we’ve lost a lot of ground, especially in reproductive rights, health and justice in the country.” Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation and publisher of Ms. Magazine, hopes young women do take their rights for granted. “I know that might be an unusual thing to say, but rights are something we should take for granted,” she says. “They are birthrights and yes, we’ve had to fight for them, but it’s only when you have confidence in your rights that you utilize them. Young women must feel they have a right to them because if you don’t feel you have a right to them, you don’t achieve, you don’t step forward because you don’t feel that it’s your place—and I hope that women know that everywhere is their place.”

While Women’s History Month is a time for people to focus on the issues, it’s often hard to get information out, Drnach contends. “We just had an organizer down in Atlanta, and she was going to have a community meeting in the library, but when they found out she was going to watch the video The Abortion Diaries as the framework for a community-based discussion, they told her she couldn’t have the meeting,” she says. “So there’s a lot working against all of us trying to help young women understand the importance of their rights. We try through Women’s History Month and through whatever voice and vehicle we have as activists and as women, but it’s difficult to make it through the noise.”

Smeal thinks that the real purpose of Women’s History Month is education and public awareness. “For women to exercise their rights and to be full citizens, they have to know where they came from and they have to know the struggle,” Smeal says. “I think these consciousness-raising programs are very important and shouldn’t be put down. ... It has helped advance people’s awareness and promote equality, which a majority of Americans support. But I don’t think they realize how far we have to go.”

Jillian Blume has written for numerous magazines and Web sites including, Self, Marie Claire, MSN Lifestyle, Home By Design, Life By Design, INSIDE San Francisco, among others. She’s based in Manhattan.

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