



On Hispanic Education:

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Hispanic Women's History

It is absolutely essential that Hispanic women's history be a major component of the history of Hispanics in the U.S. To ignore teaching about Hispanic women is to ignore over 50% of our Hispanic population. During the month of March, however, teachers in our public schools have even more reason to teach about Hispanic women. In 1987 and for the first time in our nation's history, the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives passed a resolution to declare the month of March as "Women's History Month." The President has therefore been requested to issue a proclamation calling upon the people of the U.S. to observe this month with appropriate ceremonies and activities.

In our classrooms from preschool to postdoctoral programs, therefore, teachers will want to use the month of March in particular as a time to highlight Hispanic women's history along with the history of other women. Assuming that teachers will design instruction for the age, grade, and ability level of their students, the history of Hispanic women in the U.S. can be incorporated into the social studies in a number of scope and sequence possibilities. Five ways that Hispanic women's history can be organized are as follows: a) chronologically, b) culturally and ethnically, c) geographically, d) demographically, and e) by areas of accomplishment.

Hispanic women in the U.S. can be studied chronologically. Because of our mestizo heritage, the ancestors of Hispanics were in the Western Hemisphere long before Columbus; it is very useful therefore, to examine the precolumbian history of females in North, Middle, and South America. The various precolumbian civilizations in which women took part demonstrated accomplishments in architecture, astronomy, math, art, agriculture, etc., that rivaled or surpassed civilizations in Europe and Asia at the time. Secondly, the period of history between the arrival of Columbus (1492) until the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) can then be studied for the role that Hispanic women played during the conquest and fight for independence by various countries in the Western Hemisphere. Finally, the history of Hispanic women can be studied from 1848 to the present. Each of these three epochs can then be organized, if desired, by the divisions listed below.

U.S. Hispanic women belong to a culture that is multiethnic. It is therefore necessary when teaching their history to give representation to Hispanic women of Mexican descent (Chicanas), of Puerto Rican descent, of Cuban descent, and Central and South American descent. Incorporated into the study of women from each of these groups should be the customs, traditions, and values which characterize these Hispanic subgroups. The unique immigrant or indigenous experience of the women from each of these ethnic groups deserves to be examined in our classrooms. It should be kept in mind that Hispanic women have had to endure a triple oppression in the U.S.: as women, as minorities, and as members of a group with a history of colonial subjugation. The variations, similarities, and differences in the historical experiences of various Hispanic women in the U.S. should prove colorful,

stimulating, and interesting to students of all ages and sexes.

When we look at the history of Hispanic women in the U.S. we also can ask ourselves where this history took place. The history of Hispanic women can therefore be studied by geographical designation. The history of Chicanas, for example, was centered for the most part in the U.S. Southwest, the history of Puerto Rican women was centered in Puerto Rico and the Eastern seaboard, the history of Cuban women was centered in Cuba and Florida, etc. Given particular times in history, however, these geographic designations don't apply under all circumstances to the above Hispanic subgroups. Due to the mobility and migration of these populations, their history occurred in various places. This is why teachers should always be alert to include content about what was happening to Hispanic women when studying various regions or locations in the U.S. Additionally, we can study the history of Hispanic women in rural versus urban environments, in developed versus underdeveloped areas, and in geographic areas with harsh versus mild conditions.

Another way that we can study the history of Hispanic women in the U.S. is demographically. No matter what point in time, ethnic group, or geographic designation, we need to consider the status of women in various demographic ways. For example, at any given time and place, what was the educational status of Hispanic women? their social status? their economic status? The history of Hispanic women needs also to be examined from the perspective of young women versus older women, lower class women versus middle or upper class women, married versus unmarried women, skilled women versus semiskilled or unskilled, etc. By looking at various demographic characteristics of Hispanic women, we can better understand why they played the role they did or didn't play the role they could have in the history of our people. Demographic characteristics help to delineate, if not explain, the exploitation and subjugation of Hispanic women in the U.S. We can therefore more effectively understand the history of their oppression and hopefully avoid such oppression in the future.

Finally, the history of Hispanic women in the U.S. can be studied by looking at individual or group accomplishments and achievements in various areas. When we examine our political system, for example, we will want to focus on outstanding Hispanic female political leaders. When we look at the labor movement in the U.S. we will want to look at the labor contributions of female individuals and/or groups of women. Other areas to examine are sports, entertainment, education, art, music, government, business, industry, science, agriculture, media, etc. In these numerous areas teachers should identify examples of Hispanic women who contributed in some way or distinguished themselves. In highlighting individual Hispanic women achievers, however, it is important that teachers don't forget the contributions of everyday Hispanic women, who although in the majority, were unsung and chiefly ignored in the history books of the past.