

THE ABSENCE OF FEMALE HEROES IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION: CONTRADICTIONS AND PROGRESS IN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2025.6144>

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of female heroes in European educational curricula and their social representation. The analysis focuses on the presence and absence of these women in educational textbooks, highlighting the reasons why female heroes remain marginalized in educational and historical narratives. Specifically, through a thorough review of bibliographic sources, the study analyzes the inequality in the representation of heroism in historical and cultural narratives, where heroism is often equated with traditionally masculine traits such as leadership and strategic thinking. In contrast, women are frequently confined to traditional roles of support and sacrifice.

The study also explores the relationship between education and social representations of heroism. Stereotypical depictions of women in history and education limit their recognition as leading figures, even though women have played pivotal roles in shaping social and political history. The inclusion of female heroes in educational curricula can contribute to the deconstruction of these stereotypes and promote gender equality and women's participation in various societal domains.

Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of education in fostering a more just and inclusive society, where women are recognized not only as supportive figures but also as leaders in heroic narratives. The recognition of female heroes in educational textbooks promotes the expansion of social values and the empowerment of women's participation in political and social life.

Keywords: Educational Curricula, Female Heroes in Education, Political and Social Participation, Historical Representation, Gender Equality

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The recognition of women as heroes remains an overlooked aspect of history and society, particularly in the European context, despite the growing awareness of the need for gender equality. While male heroes dominate collective memory and educational curricula, women often face barriers in their struggle to be integrated into the same heroic models. Specifically, the absence of female heroes in education and European society is not merely a cultural paradox but also a reflection of social, political, and philosophical structures that continually exclude gender from heroic archetypes. This study explores the reasons why women, despite their remarkable contributions to society and history, are frequently marginalized as heroic figures,

as well as the social and educational conditions that sustain this marginalization as a deeply ingrained reality.

The lack of female heroes in education and society is linked to contradictions in the construction of heroic identity. European society has historically shaped an image of the hero as an emblematic figure of male identity, where strength, military prowess, and male dominance are considered fundamental attributes of heroism. As Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* (1949), "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 305). This social construction of female identity has resulted in the systematic underrepresentation of women in education, limiting their presence in "heroic" narratives that celebrate, highlight, and reinforce male superiority as the dominant ideal. The portrayal of women as "passive objects," with limited agency and leadership, distances them from the heroic models built around leadership and assertiveness.

In education, the female figures recognized as heroines are primarily associated with religious and familial ideals, such as the Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc, while only few women are acknowledged as heroes for their political or scientific achievements. Women like Marie Curie—arguably the most recognized female physicist in history—and Rosa Luxemburg, who played a pivotal role in the socialist movement and debates on social and political rights, exemplify how female heroes are often celebrated when their actions align with values such as faith, devotion, or sacrifice rather than with raw power or superiority, traditionally linked to male heroic models (Hartmann, 1979; Smith, 1990). However, these figures remain marginalized from mainstream educational discourse and are not integrated into the daily educational experience.

This exclusion is not incidental, as the historical construction of gender has embedded gendered norms and expectations that systematically promote male participation in heroic representations while sidelining women. According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, social structures reproduce power through practices that define which images and types of individuals are deemed acceptable and which are not (Foucault, 1975). The female hero represents a fundamental challenge for society: how to construct a heroic identity for a gender traditionally excluded from the public sphere of action? In this process, women who manage to be recognized as heroes are either exaggeratedly glorified, creating an unrealistic and unattainable image, or remain invisible to public recognition.

European society, despite significant efforts in recent years to accept women in leadership roles, remains hesitant to embrace women as heroic figures. Female heroes today continue to struggle against historical prejudices that equate heroism with traditionally masculine traits. As Edward Said highlights in *Orientalism* (1978), society often uses heroism as a tool for controlling and interpreting political history, favoring men while silencing women's contributions to political and social processes. In education, in particular, the representation of women as heroes remains limited, reinforcing the notion that women are neither suitable nor capable of assuming leadership and action-oriented roles.

Recognizing female heroic identity in European education and society represents a crucial step toward expanding perceptions of heroism. Education, as a foundation for social change, holds the power to dismantle stereotypes and present women as role models for future generations. Achieving this transformation requires a profound reevaluation of the concept of heroism and

the characteristics that define it. At the same time, society must acknowledge the invaluable contributions of women to the realm of heroism, broadening the boundaries of action and fostering a new, inclusive vision of heroism that fully recognizes the place of women.

2.0 HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The position of women in history, particularly as heroic figures, is closely intertwined with the social, political, and cultural structures that shape the prevailing ideals of heroism. In Europe, the concept of the hero has long been associated with male images of power, strength, and military virtue. Although women have played active roles in significant social and political events, they remain marginalized within dominant heroic narratives. The absence of women from mainstream educational and societal narratives that construct the hero as a model of action and strength is part of a broader process of cultural and social construction that defines gender identities and the distribution of roles (Erler & Kowaleski, 1988).

Since ancient times in Europe, heroism and heroic behavior have been deeply linked to male strength and the capacity for political and military action. In Greek and Roman traditions, heroes were often idealized through narratives such as Odysseus in Homer's epics or Aeneas in Virgil's Aeneid. These figures were portrayed as warriors, kings, or generals with extraordinary abilities that shaped political and strategic developments, embodying bravery, intelligence, and determination. In the mythological and cultural narratives of the time, women primarily appeared in secondary or supportive roles, with few exceptions such as Athena and Artemis in Greek mythology, who embodied ideals of strength, wisdom, and independence, challenging established perceptions of female roles. Nevertheless, the dominant image of women in society was often aligned with the ideals of family, motherhood, and faith rather than heroic action or leadership. Despite their crucial roles in historical developments, women frequently remained anonymous or confined to roles of subordination and silence (Bock, 2002).

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the status of women was primarily recognized through religious and familial frameworks that emphasized values such as purity, devotion, and submission. These ideals defined their social identity and role, limiting their recognition to secondary or subservient positions and preventing them from developing a fully independent personality or participating in social and political life. The Virgin Mary, for example, represents the embodiment of spiritual virtue and sacrifice, and her image remains central in European culture and education. However, the heroic dimension of gender remains restricted, with women confined to the moral, religious, and familial spheres. The tension between the public and private realms has been fundamental in shaping the female role. Despite occasional exceptions, most historical heroes were either queens, such as Elizabeth I, or religious figures, such as Joan of Arc. The recognition of these women, however, was not primarily based on their political or strategic actions but rather on their faith and sacrifice for the common good (Erler & Kowaleski, 1988).

The systematic exclusion of women from heroic ideals and their portrayal as secondary figures in a society that continually promoted male values have influenced the way educational and social structures perpetuate gender stereotypes. On one hand, European education has historically focused on reinforcing the heroic image of men through school textbooks and historical narratives. While women were occasionally depicted as warriors or queens, they were rarely recognized as heroic role models. In reality, female participation in heroism and

leadership was often devalued or suppressed by the dominant belief that a woman's place was in familial and social roles rather than in leadership and strategy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *Émile, or On Education* (1762), argued that women should support men without aspiring to leadership or power, reflecting the prevailing view of the time regarding gendered social structures (Rousseau, 1762).

The modern era marks an inevitable shift in social perceptions of gender. The idea of equality and the participation of women in all aspects of public life has gradually gained greater recognition. Women, through their courage and dedication, began to play decisive roles in wars, political developments, and scientific discoveries in the 19th and 20th centuries. This gradual progress continually reminds us of the need for a more equitable and inclusive society. However, the recognition of women as leading figures and heroes has faced significant resistance, with their social acknowledgment remaining limited for a long time. As Fraser and Honneth (2003) argue, Europe's social and political system continues to view women more as supporters of male heroism rather than as autonomous heroic subjects (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

The feminist philosophical thought of the 20th century, led by figures such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, was instrumental in deconstructing gender identities and challenging traditional gender roles. The idea that gender is a social construct, and that female heroism should be recognized independently of stereotypes of weakness and passivity forms the foundation for creating new, more empowering social and educational models. However, the integration of these changes into educational processes and the public sphere has been slow and challenging.

Despite their significant contributions to politics, science, and the arts, female heroes are often excluded from mainstream educational curricula and public recognition. Although philosophical and social advancements have promoted the acknowledgment of women as heroic figures, the overall acceptance of these figures in society and education remains slow. As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) notes, women struggle to construct their own heroic image, as society consistently refuses to acknowledge their strength and ability to lead (de Beauvoir, 1949).

3.0 FEMALE HEROES AND SOCIAL ROLE MODELS

Although often overlooked or silenced in history, female heroism is a crucial factor in understanding the social and cultural norms that have developed in Europe. At the heart of this issue lies the question of which models define the perception of women as heroes and how social and educational systems shape ideals of heroism. The recognition of women as heroes is intricately linked to how society perceives their role in both public and private life, while also being influenced by cultural constructs that define female nature and strength.

Examining female heroes throughout different historical periods reveals their significant presence in critical historical and social struggles, even though their heroism has often been questioned. Queen Elizabeth I of England (1533–1603) stands as one of the most influential leadership figures in European history. Despite the obstacles she faced as a female ruler in a male-dominated world, she successfully transformed England into one of Europe's most powerful nations. Through her strategic intelligence, political foresight, and diplomatic skills,

she became a model of leadership and strength. Historiography, religious references, and educational programs frequently present her reign as a period of decisive political and military developments. Her dedication to duty and the sacrifices she made in its fulfillment solidify her as a timeless symbol of female leadership. According to Rist (2008), the recognition of female heroism is closely tied to the social and political structures of each era. He also emphasizes that female heroes are often categorized as “exceptional” figures, recognized for transcending their gender rather than for the universal value of their heroic actions (Rist, 2008).

In contemporary times, the image of the female hero continues to evolve, although society still confines it within specific boundaries. In recent years, however, there has been a gradual expansion in the perception of female strength and leadership. Women in political leadership, such as Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel, have begun to reshape the public understanding of female leadership and political influence. Similarly, the increasing presence of women in science and the arts has contributed to deconstructing the traditional heroic model. However, the lack of women in central references to European heroism remains evident, resulting in female heroes continuing to be marginalized or depicted in a stereotypical manner. Nussbaum highlights that society must recognize and cultivate a broader framework of heroism that includes diverse female figures and actions (Nussbaum, 2011).

Education serves as a fundamental tool in shaping and perpetuating social norms, influencing perceptions of gender roles, values, and social hierarchies. Despite significant changes over recent decades, school textbooks continue to neglect female heroism, and the impact of this absence is profound. Historical textbooks, even while acknowledging women's contributions to society, continue to depict the heroic archetype primarily as male. Women are presented in ways that reflect traditional social and familial responsibilities, often restricted to the roles of mothers or wives. The exclusion of female heroism from school curricula underscores the deeply conservative nature of European education. As Connell (2005) observes, the absence of female role models in educational settings profoundly affects perceptions of gender and heroism, limiting young people's ability to think about gender beyond traditional norms (Connell, 2005).

The integration of female heroism and its recognition as a social model is linked to the broader acknowledgment of women as equal to men in society. Social changes and educational reforms gradually contribute to the recognition of women as heroes, with all the societal and cultural implications this entails. Bourdieu (2001) argues that recognizing women as heroic figures requires dismantling the social and cultural structures that perpetuate male dominance, encouraging the transformation of social norms that restrict the expression of female power and leadership (Bourdieu, 2001). Despite the slow pace of social change, women are gradually gaining the necessary tools and support to emerge as heroic role models.

Despite the progress made in recent decades, European society remains hesitant to fully embrace women as heroes, often due to deep-rooted cultural and historical traditions that continue to confine them to the roles of wives and mothers. The acceptance of female heroism requires a radical reevaluation of social values and the promotion of models that reinforce gender equality, action, and leadership in all areas of social life.

4.0 THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN AS HEROES IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION

The integration of female heroism into European education is an issue that has garnered significant attention, highlighting inequalities in how women are portrayed in school curricula. Education, as a central institution, shapes students' perceptions of the world and the values they adopt. However, the presence of female heroes remains limited, with only few figures such as Marie Curie or Hildegard of Bingen being recognized for their remarkable achievements. Even so, their visibility in educational processes remains undervalued. The absence of female heroes in areas such as politics and social activism underscores the need for a deeper reassessment of the concepts of heroism and gender (Kramarae, 1981).

When female heroes are included in educational programs, they are often presented through narrow and distorted lenses. For example, although Marie Curie is considered a leading scientist, she is rarely depicted as a heroic role model beyond her scientific accomplishments. The political and strategic dimensions of her heroism are frequently downplayed, while her portrayal is limited to an image that emphasizes sacrifice and suffering rather than strategic or political action (Lorber, 1994). Female heroism is often framed within a narrative that portrays women primarily as victims, focusing on their sacrifice and pain, sometimes exaggeratedly and artificially, rather than on their leadership, resilience, or transformative actions. This predetermined distinction shapes the social representation of heroism, reinforcing stereotypes that associate gender with limited conceptions of heroism (Arnot, 2002).

The absence of female heroes from most educational curricula is the result of a historical process that has shaped the values and norms of society. The perception of heroism as a defense of the homeland or the people—typically linked to strategic and military action associated with male figures—prevents the recognition of women as leading figures. Instead, women are often assigned social roles related to caregiving and emotional support, which, while significant, are not always acknowledged as heroic acts. This distinction has a clear impact on the social representation of heroism, limiting the potential for women to be recognized as equal leaders or heroic figures (Kramarae, 1981).

The challenges of integrating female heroes into educational narratives are closely related to cultural values that shape perceptions of gender and power. The educational system functions as a carrier of these values, perpetuating social structures that define which actions are considered heroic and who is deemed worthy of recognition as a hero. The stereotype of heroism is commonly associated with power and strategic thinking, which are often considered male attributes, simultaneously disregarding women's ability to lead, fight, and transform society (Arnot, 2002). As a result, education does not provide a solid foundation for integrating women as heroes, as existing representations and role models remain deeply tied to male dominance.

To fully recognize women as heroes with equal rights and acknowledgment, education must embrace a broader understanding of heroism, one that includes women in leadership roles and social activism. The inclusion of female heroes in curricula should be structured in a way that promotes the continuous recognition of female heroism as equal to that of men. This requires acknowledging women as real leaders and strategists while also fully recognizing the multidimensional roles they play in society and history. Such recognition can only stem from a conscious shift in the values that shape educational policy and curricula (Lorber, 1994).

Transforming these educational representations will lead to the development of a society that recognizes women as equal contributors in the social and political spheres. Education, oriented towards equality, can help shift traditional perceptions and allow students to understand heroism as something that is not restricted by gender or conventional strategic actions, but as a broader social practice that includes all individuals, regardless of gender (Kramarae, 1981). This recognition will contribute to building a fairer and more inclusive society, where women are acknowledged as heroes not only for their sacrifices but also for their revolutionary ideas and actions.

5.0 THE GRADUAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN AS HEROIC FIGURES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH EDUCATION IN EUROPE

The evolution of women as heroic figures, both socially and educationally, is a complex process spanning centuries, influenced by social, political, and cultural transformations. Education, as a fundamental factor in shaping values and social structures, plays a decisive role in either reinforcing or challenging this evolution. In Europe, female heroism remains confined to stereotypical roles. Education can either strengthen or challenge these limitations, shaping societal perceptions of women as heroes.

Historically, women's participation in public and political life has been heavily repressed and extremely limited. Until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the dominant perception was that women lacked the ability to emerge as heroic figures in the same way that male heroism was defined. Men dominated political and social life, and educational systems reflected these entrenched values. As Joan Scott (1999) notes, women were often regarded as "passive" or "private" figures, rarely acknowledged for their political or strategic actions (Scott, 1999). Education, particularly school textbooks, reinforced these norms by assigning women roles aligned with the "private" and "moral" side of society. Consequently, female heroism was not only silenced but, in the rare cases where women were recognized as heroes, they were often portrayed as excessively passive or dependent rather than as active, decisive personalities.

From the mid-20th century onward, however, there has been a gradual shift in the recognition of female heroism, linked to social and educational reforms across Europe. Women, through continuous struggles for equal rights, succeeded in challenging the stereotypes imposed on them. Gender equality movements, beginning with 19th-century feminism and extending to contemporary social changes, paved new paths for enhanced female representation in leadership roles and public action. Female heroism, as exemplified by leaders such as Kamala Harris or Christine Lagarde, began to be more widely acknowledged and incorporated into social and political norms. According to Nussbaum (2011), female heroism must be recognized as a broad spectrum of heroic acts that transcend stereotypes defining its social and educational acceptance (Nussbaum, 2011).

Education, as a social tool, determines how future generations perceive female heroism. Its incorporation into school curricula is crucial for shaping new perspectives that highlight and elevate women for their heroic actions. Despite efforts to depict women more equitably in educational materials, their presence often remains superficial and limited to traditional roles. The philosophy of education and the broader social context of Europe contribute to this tradition, perpetuating stereotypes that weaken the ability of women to be recognized as heroes in many areas of social and political life.

The gradual evolution of female heroism is linked to the social recognition of women as full and active members of society. European education, although initially slow in adopting these changes, has started to recognize the need for new teaching methods that integrate female role models. Including the stories and examples of female heroes in school textbooks and educational materials is a crucial step toward this transformation. Approaching female heroism through the lens of social activism and public discourse aligns with the need for educational programs that acknowledge women's contributions across significant domains, from politics to science and the arts. As Bourdieu notes, recognizing women as heroes is intrinsically tied to dismantling the social and cultural norms that define gender value and its place in society (Bourdieu, 2001).

Undoubtedly, European society and education, despite considerable progress, continue to face challenges in fully integrating women as heroic figures. However, the gradual transformation of education offers new opportunities for the acceptance and promotion of female heroism. Through curriculum development and the systematic recognition of women's contributions, education can establish a framework for shaping a new social model, one that acknowledges female strength and leadership as an essential part of European culture.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS – CRITICAL REFLECTION

The historical and social position of women in Europe is often reflected in the educational process, where their presence as heroes remains limited or absent altogether. Throughout historical, social, and educational transformations, stereotypes and models have been shaped that deeply influence the perception of female heroism, revealing contradictions and challenges that persist in contemporary times. Despite noteworthy progress, there remains growing concern about the lack of substantial representation of women as heroes, both in educational curricula and in the broader social consciousness. The findings emphasize the need for greater recognition and promotion of female heroes, as well as the implementation of initiatives that enhance female heroism in education and society. At the same time, perspectives for further research are highlighted, which can contribute to addressing inequalities and stereotypes.

The analysis of female heroism has demonstrated that society and education in Europe have historically marginalized women's participation in heroic models, restricting their presence to passive or stereotypical roles. Education, as a key mechanism for disseminating values and norms, has shaped, and often perpetuated a model of heroism based on male leadership and action, largely ignoring women's heroic acts. Rather than being recognized as active and decisive, female heroism is often confined to roles associated with family and private life, such as traditional mothers or wives who influence society through morality and ethical values. In modern times, this trend persists, with education maintaining conservative tendencies in the recognition of female heroes, while their promotion to leadership positions remains limited.

The need for greater recognition of women as heroes in European educational systems is urgent. Acknowledging this heroism is not only about correcting historical injustice but also about building a fairer and more inclusive society. As Judith Butler (2004) notes, gender representation in public discourse and education shapes social reality and molds the expectations and possibilities of future generations. The failure to recognize female heroism leads to an education system that deprives students of the opportunity to see dynamic, multidimensional female figures as role models. The systematic silencing of these figures

undermines the full recognition of women's roles in society and weakens efforts for social equality.

Education is the key to changing this dynamic. Curricula must integrate women as heroes not only in history but also in areas such as politics, science, art, and social activism. Their inclusion in curricula, their presence in textbooks, the acknowledgment of female heroic acts through the teaching process, and the dismantling of stereotypes about women are essential steps toward creating a new social model that promotes women's participation and distinction in leadership roles.

To achieve this, a continuous and coordinated effort is required from society and educational institutions. Society must promote a more open and inclusive educational policy that highlights the diversity of heroic models, incorporating women into all levels of social and political action. Female heroes should not be confined to historical figures but must also be recognized as leading personalities in all areas of society.

The need for actionable proposals is equally significant. Education programs should focus on developing content that promotes gender equality and enhances women's leadership potential. The inclusion of female heroes in various fields, from science to the arts and politics, can be achieved through the enhancement of educational material and the implementation of awareness programs that encourage students to recognize women's capabilities and heroic contributions.

Broader society must also acknowledge the need for political and social participation of women as a means of shaping a more just and inclusive world. Reevaluating women as heroes within society can serve as a guiding force for a fairer political governance and a society that respects diversity and the participation of all its citizens.

The limited recognition of women as heroes remains a pressing issue, particularly in the field of education. The integration of female heroism into educational curricula is a crucial step toward creating a dynamic and inclusive learning framework. Highlighting female heroines as subjects of study and role models enhances the understanding of the diverse role women can play in history and society. At the same time, it provides students with the opportunity to be inspired by figures that embody values such as strength, resilience, and innovation. Such an approach not only promotes equality and plurality but also contributes to shaping an educational environment that challenges gender stereotypes and fosters the equal participation of all in social and political affairs. The female figure, in all its dimensions, must be projected as a defining factor not only in social and political but also in educational processes, reinforcing her role as an agent of change and progress.

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