

WHO SHOULD WEAR THE PANTS?

by Carolyn Pereira and Anna Bowie

Adapted from a lesson in Educating for Citizenship, a joint curriculum of the Constitutional Rights Foundation, the Law-Related Education Program for the Schools of Maryland, and the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law.

Introduction

This activity helps students to realize that laws are not fixed, but rather change to reflect a changing society. It also focuses on the evolving role of women in society. Historically, the lesson links to the reform movements of the 19th century in general, and specifically to the movement for women's rights.

Objectives

Students will:

- understand the influence of individuals and their impact on United States society.
- use questioning skills to gather information about the past and present.
- conclude that rules, laws and customs change just as society changes.
- compare and contrast women's roles in society today to women's roles in the past.

Materials

Handout 1: Who Should Wear the Pants?

Handout 2: Then and Now (survey form)

Procedure

1. Distribute copies of Handout 1: Who Should Wear the Pants? to all students and ask them to read it.
2. Ask and discuss the questions below.
 - a. Why did people think women should wear long skirts? Do you think men had the same reasons as women?
 - b. Does your school have any rules about what you can wear? If it does, why do you think the rule(s) was (were) made?
 - c. April 28, 1993, was the first "Take Our Daughters to Work Day." Parents were encouraged to take their daughters to their workplaces for the day. Why did people think this was a good idea? What did they think girls needed to learn by going to work with their parents?
 - d. Why wasn't there a "Take Our Sons to Work Day?"
 - e. Some people say that "When girls grow up and become women, they worry about how to balance having a career, a husband, and a family. When boys grow up and become men, they get married." What do you think this means?

3. For homework, have the students interview one older woman and one older man using the “Then and Now” survey form. Give two copies to each student. (Remember that for students, “older” can mean 21. Therefore, it is suggested that the interviewees be at least 40, so there is a recollection of significant changes).
4. After the homework assignment is completed (you may want to let the students have several days to complete the assignment), have each student report to the class the social differences recollected by their interviewees. Have a student keep a tally of results mentioned, and display it on a wall. Also keep a list of comments regarding question #9 of Handout 2: Then and Now. Allow students to add to it as they hear or think of other social changes regarding women.
5. As a culminating question, ask if the changing role of women has affected men and boys; if so, how? A good starting point for this discussion might be to talk about how fathers were once supposed to be authoritarian and remote, and how that has changed. It is not unusual nowadays for fathers to change diapers, bathe children, etc.
6. You may want to repeat the assignment, this time focusing on the changing roles of African-Americans, Hispanics, Jews, Poles, or other minorities.

Resource Person

A female attorney or legislator could serve as a resource person by listening to the students' discussion and reacting to their reasoning.

Extension Activity

Assign groups of students to research the following questions:

1. What other “rights” were not guaranteed to women in the 18th and 19th centuries?
2. What is meant by the term “glass ceiling?”
3. What problems of inequality do women still face today?

For the Teacher

Responses for #1 of the extension activity may include voting, serving on juries, inheriting money and/or property, belonging to certain clubs and/or organizations, and holding certain jobs.

“Glass ceiling” may be defined as limitations on professional advancement due to gender bias.

HANDOUT 1

WHO SHOULD WEAR THE PANTS?

I love winter, but I remember trying to walk to school wearing all of my heaviest clothes. I could hardly move.

Even when it got warm, I had trouble because of the clothes the other girls and I had to wear. Girls always wore skirts or dresses to school. My school had a rule saying girls could not wear pants unless it was a very cold day. On very cold days, we could wear pants under our skirts and take the pants off at school.

I was lucky, however, that I wasn't born over 100 years ago. I would have been wearing floor-length hooped skirts. Some of the hoops were so big that women couldn't get through doors!

One woman, Amelia Jenks Bloomer, didn't want to wear hooped skirts. She shortened a dress to just below her knees and made puffy pants to wear under the dress. Those puffy pants became known as “bloomers.”

Although what she did wasn't against the law, it was against what most people thought was right and proper, or the custom of the day. Both men and women made fun of her and called her names.

Amelia Jenks Bloomer went around the country always dressed in her bloomers. The bloomers became a symbol for women's liberation. Women wearing bloomers could do many more things—things that “ladies” were not supposed to do. Can you think of some of these things?

Amelia wanted to make life better for women not just by changing what they could wear. She spoke for laws to protect both married and unmarried women, help them get a better education, and let them vote. Now women can vote, go to public school, and certainly can wear pants!

HANDOUT 2

THEN AND NOW

Interview one man and one woman. Make sure that each person you interview is at least 40 years old. Circle one response for each question. The person I interviewed on this form was a:

woman

man

1. Do you think more, less, or about the same number of women go to high school now as when you were a child?

more

less

about the same

2. Do you think more, less, or about the same number of women go to college now as when you were a child?

more

less

about the same

3. Was it unusual for married women to work outside the home when you were a child?

yes, it was unusual

no, it was not unusual

4. When you were a child, did many mothers of young children work outside the home?

yes, many

no, not many

5. When you were a child, was it unusual for women to run for political office?

yes, it was unusual

no, it was not unusual

6. When you were a child, were women ever bosses at work?

women were often bosses

women were seldom bosses

7. When you were a child, were there many women doctors?

yes, many

no, not many

8. When you were a child, were there many women lawyers?

yes, many

no, not many

9. What do you think has been the biggest change for women in your lifetime?