

# GENDER LENS

Applying a **gender lens** to civic engagement programs and materials means that those making content and curriculum decisions view those programs and materials with particular attention to gender imbalances or biases in what is being presented. Using a gender lens reveals the ways in which content and approaches are gendered – informed by, shaped by, or biased toward men or women’s perspectives or experiences.

It is often useful to question the assumptions and observations implicit in textbooks and other classroom material that may present a gender bias. Too often, history, political, and civic education courses reflect the prevailing gender power dynamics that have historically favored men and masculinity, perhaps even rendering women’s perspectives and experiences invisible.

To evaluate programs or materials with an eye to gender constraints, consider some of the questions below.

## Who or what is the subject?

- What is the focus of the program or material? In what ways is that focus gendered?
  - **Example:** If an exercise about the U.S. presidency focuses on the history of officeholders only, the students are seeing and discussing predominantly white men in this role. Thus, the absence of gender diversity is, in fact, gendered.
  - **Response (gender lens):** Engage students in a discussion of why no woman has served as the nation’s top executive and whether that might change in the future. Add a section that looks at the experiences (and challenges) of women who have run for president.
- Where there are multiple subjects, are they diverse, allowing a variety of students to recognize people or communities or experiences? Can all students relate to some part of the program or materials, based on their own experiences, interests, and identities?
  - **Example:** In photos of mayors or senators, include diverse examples – men and women, people of color, younger and older.
- Is the subject explicitly or implicitly gendered?
  - **Example:** Discussion of U.S. presidents is explicitly gendered because all Presidents have been male. A discussion of political leadership or civic engagement may be implicitly gendered because of assumptions about politics and leadership.
  - **Response:** Engage in discussion about what traits we associate with leadership. What counts as politics and civic engagement? Are these attributes and activities more often associated with one gender? Why?

## What kinds of examples are used?

- Are men and women, boys and girls, represented?
- Do descriptions follow gender stereotypes? Is it possible for either male or female students to identify with them?
  - **Example:** A discussion of the role of legislators, mayors or other elected officials may assume a male in the role (especially if that is the case in a given circumstance).
  - **Response:** Use gender neutral pronouns when referring to office holders and include examples of both men and women in those positions.
- Are non-human examples (e.g. animals, robots) free of gender stereotypes and bias?

## Do accompanying visuals send a gendered message, even if text doesn't?

- Are both men and women shown in public roles – as leaders, activists, and/or political participants?
- Are women and girls represented in active leadership roles or primarily in passive, supporting positions?
- Do images of women and girls focus on the importance of appearance and attractiveness more than those of men and boys?
- Are men or women any more or less likely to be shown in particular settings, in certain styles of dress, or doing specific types of activities?
  - **Example:** If male leaders are more often pictured in formal, professional settings (e.g. at a desk, speaking at a dais) than women – who may be pictured in dialogue with others or in less formal settings, viewers may perceive the leaders' credentials, prestige, or power differently.

## Where one gender is absent or plays a lesser role in the interest of historical accuracy, is that gap pointed out and explained?

- **Example:** A study of the Constitutional Convention and the Founding Fathers presents a world of exclusively white males.
- **Response:** Include a discussion of the role of women at the time. Why were there no women in the room? Very few women had education or access political power, either directly or indirectly. Some women were able to use informal channels; e.g. Abigail Adams tried to influence her husband to “remember the ladies.”

### Does the language imply gender expectations or limitations?

- Are pronouns varied to include both males and females, especially in reference to public leadership roles and elected offices?
- Do descriptors point toward gendered assumptions?
  - **Example:** “The president is the father of our country.”

### What tools might you use to highlight the problems and suggest fixes?

- To start, review and utilize TAG’s resources to permit greater integration of gender – or “mainstreaming gender” – into program planning and materials. Resources available at [www.teachagirltolead.org](http://www.teachagirltolead.org) include lesson modules for classroom teaching, program activities and exercises, and books and films about women’s public leadership.