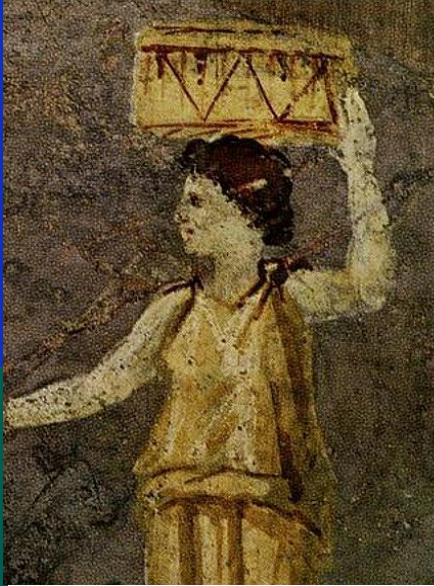


# Women in Philosophy



By Stella Crouch

# Can you name five women philosophers?

-As a member of the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) I have come to love the question that they often pose at the beginning of most events and classes. Can you name five women artists? The sad truth is that most people can't. My first five that came to mind were: Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011), Yayoi Kusama (1929-), Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), Camille Billops (1933-2019). There are plenty of other amazing women artists and if you haven't heard of these women I recommend learning about them.



-This question can obviously be substituted with any field so today I ask you to think of and write down (if you so chose), five women philosophers and think about why this is hard for you or if it isn't hard for you how much of a effort did you have to make to know the name of five women philosophers?





“Sexism and racism are parallel problems. You can compare them in some ways but they’re not at all the same. But they’re both symptoms inside the white male power structure.”

-Frida Kahlo

# Intersectionality and philosophy

The Oxford Dictionary defines intersectionality as “the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage”. While the term was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 the concept has existed for far longer. Combahee River Collective’s statement and work as a whole was full of intersectional approaches and ideas around activism and identity mainly being LGBTQ+, a women and black however their work extended beyond those intersections as well.

I believe that we need to incorporate a more intersectional approach to learning philosophy therefore even though I will be focusing on women in philosophy I will also examine how gender in philosophy intersect with race and philosophy, queerness and philosophy, disability and philosophy etc. To examine one identity and power imbalance without acknowledging the vast array of factors leads to a lack of context and a shallower understanding. If we take intersectionality seriously and understand that oppressions are mutually interlocking and inseparable in our society the intentional exclusion of women in philosophy does not simply affect women but everyone. I would argue that the exclusion of any group of people in philosophy (or any field) hurts those with historically the most power and privilege typically cis-het, white, abled bodied men.

# Why is it so difficult to study women philosophers?

-Men have historically dominated philosophy as in most other academic fields, however there have always been women philosophers. Philosophy is unfortunately one of the slowest academic fields closing the gender gap. There are large swaths of history where it is difficult to find any information on women philosophers. For instance few women entered the western canon particularly in the middle ages and early modern period.

-Feminists and historians of philosophy have cited two main issues faced when trying to study women in philosophy. The first being the exclusion of women philosophers from history and texts, which has led to a lack of knowledge about women philosophers. As a result women philosophers are less likely to be known, taught or studied. The second problem deals with what the canonical philosophers had to say about philosophy and women's place in it.

-In the early 1800s, some colleges and universities in the UK and US began admitting women however most universities were slow to allow women into their philosophy department. U.S. Department of Education reports indicate that philosophy is one of the least gender-proportionate fields in the humanities. Women make up as little as 17% of philosophy faculty in some studies.

# What happens when you simply look up philosophers?

When you search a profession or field such as writers, painters, architects or philosophers you are often presented with a preliminary list of “influential” people in that discipline. There are many issues with this as obviously who becomes remembered as influential largely has to do with the amount of privilege that person has. This is only compounded by the fact that most people likely to decide this (beyond simply technical algorithms) are people in the tech industry which is predominantly white, cisnet, able bodied men. The information that typically gets configured on this preliminary list are people who are mentioned the most in philosophy texts, articles and videos which are more often men because of women historically being left out of philosophy text and their works not being preserved as well.

Many university students particularly in recent years have complained that when women philosophers are taught they are often only taught in more advanced philosophy classes meaning that people who might just be interested in philosophy but aren't necessarily pursuing it as their main academic focus often don't get to take philosophy classes teaching women philosophers. These more “intro level” or “beginner” classes can influence whether someone goes into or continues studying philosophy. For women, especially queer women, trans and nonbinary people, women of colour and disabled women this can be extremely discouraging and othering. It has been proven that representation matters including in academia and that students are less likely to pursue a field they rarely or never see themselves in. In many universities women are just as likely to enroll in philosophy classes as men however they are less likely to be already majoring in or decide later to major in philosophy. At Georgia State, for example, women make up about 55 percent of Introduction to Philosophy students but only around 33 percent of philosophy majors. The authors of *Quantifying the Gender Gap: An Empirical Study of the Underrepresentation of Women in Philosophy* by Molly Paxton, Carrie Figdor and Valerie Tiberius collected data from over 700 women and men students on their experiences in the Introduction to Philosophy course at their university. The findings were revealing, as Adleberg explained:

“We expected, of course, to find some gender differences in the survey responses. But the extent of those differences was surprising to me. Male and female students seem to have quite different experiences in introductory philosophy courses.”

Overall, women found the course less enjoyable and the material less interesting and relevant to their lives than men in the class. Compared to male students, they also felt that they had less in common with typical philosophy majors or with their instructors, reported feeling less able and likely to succeed in philosophy, were less comfortable participating in class discussions and were less inclined to take a second philosophy course or to major in philosophy. Contrary to some speculation in the field, women students did not perceive classroom discussions as overly aggressive, and they were no more likely to say that students in the class failed to treat each other with respect. Thompson wrote:

I was really surprised that both women and men do not perceive the philosophical discussions in their introductory course to be excessively combative. Given my experience attending both philosophy talks and neuroscience talks, I've noticed a distinct difference in the types of questions asked and the way that criticisms are raised.

Notably, the differences in men's and women's responses were equivalent when the course was taught by male and female instructors, but in both cases female students were more likely to disagree with the claim that the syllabus included a "fair proportion" of readings authored by women. In fact, the readings on the syllabus were overwhelmingly by men (over 89 percent) Thompson went on to explained:

This problem is compounded by the fact that introductory philosophy textbooks have an even worse gender balance; women account for only 6 percent of authors in a number of introductory philosophy textbooks.

There have been similar findings in regards to racial, queer and disabled representation. This gap in enjoyment and continued studies in philosophy is not unique to women and can be compounded for women of colour, queer and disabled women.

Another factor that plays into how many women and minorities go into philosophy is that most people before university don't get to take a philosophy class. It is not considered to be within the "core subjects" students must take stating in their first year at school typically, language arts/english, history, math, science. Those few students who do get to take philosophy classes before they enter university are typically enrolled in private school. This contributes to another issue which is that philosophy often seems like "elite subject". It often feels like an impractical subject to study one that we are told is above our heads until it suddenly isn't. This aura of wealthy men sitting around and discussing topics that often aren't even very complicating or at least don't have to be especially at first loses a lot of people. Students often enter university never having even considered philosophy as a field of study because they just spent their whole lives not being taught much or any of it.

Of course, students' experiences in introductory philosophy courses are but one part of a larger story. Assorted social and cultural forces influence women's decisions and careers at all life stages, with some special challenges for mothers. As in math, engineering, and the physical sciences, gender-based differentiation is likely occurring even before college.





philosophers



All

Images

Books

Videos

News

Maps

## Philosophers

From sources across the web

Philosopher

Writer

Philosophy

United States



Plato



Aristotle

384 BC–322 BC



Socrates

–399 BC



Friedrich Nietzsche

1844–1900



Immanuel Kant

1724–1804



René Descartes

1596–1650



Karl Marx

1818–1883



Ludwig Wittgenstein

1889–1951



Jean-Paul Sartre

1905–1980



David Hume

1711–1776



Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

1770–1831



Confucius

551 BC–479 BC



Thomas Aquinas

1225–1274



Bertrand Russell



Bertrand Russell

1872–1970



Baruch Spinoza

1632–1677



Martin Heidegger

1889–1976



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

1712–1778



John Locke

1632–1704



Epicurus

341 BC–270 BC



Søren Kierkegaard

1813–1855



John Stuart Mill

1806–1873





Epicurus  
341 BC–270 BC



Søren Kierkegaard  
1813–1855



John Stuart Mill  
1806–1873



Pythagoras



Thales of Miletus



Augustine of Hippo  
354 AD–430 AD



Thomas Hobbes  
1588–1679



Michel Foucault  
1926–1984



Diogenes  
–323 BC



Jacques Derrida  
1930–2004



Simone de Beauvoir  
1908–1986



Arthur Schopenhauer  
1788–1860



Hannah Arendt  
1906–1975



Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz  
1646–1716



Voltaire  
1694–1778



Parmenides



Laozi



Niccolò Machiavelli  
1469–1527



Albert Camus  
1913–1960



Noam Chomsky



Similar results can be found across the internet with lists of notable or influential philosophers being composed of little to no women. On this list of 51 philosophers all but two of them are men, number 33 and 35. This is not isolated but rather a pattern, a system, that needs to continuously be addressed. While obviously there is information about women in philosophy on the internet in various forms, the fact that one must often go looking for said information is an issue.

# Famous Sexist Quotes in Philosophy

Acceptance of women in philosophy isn't helped by many of the men who are the most accepted who have said and written many sexist ideas. A few examples of this being:

- "Women's minds are not adapted to the higher sciences, philosophy, or certain of the arts."

- "The man who acquits himself well in war should be given...more liberal opportunities to sleep with a wife..."

- Plato

- "The female is as it were a deformed male"

- "A proper wife should be as obedient as a slave."

- "Silence is a woman's glory."

- Aristotle

- "When a woman turns to scholarship there is usually something wrong with her sexual apparatus"

- "The true man wants two things: danger and play. For that reason, he wants woman, as the most dangerous plaything."

- "Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman hath one solution - it is called pregnancy." - Friedrich Nietzsche

-“It is the law of nature that woman should be held under the dominance of man.” -Confucius

-“Women, with their two-fingered wisdom, have a difficult time understanding what I teach.”  
-Gautama Buddha

“Women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality, but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions” -Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

-“Men are by nature merely indifferent to one another; but women are by nature enemies” -Arthur Schopenhauer

This is not to say that all of these men's philosophical ideas and works should stop being preserved or taught however we should adopt a more nuanced understanding of these men. We can recognize their sexist (or racist, homophobic transphobic, ableist etc) views while still studying them as apart of philosophical education and education at large. To exclude the prejudice in their works is not only non objective and incomplete, it can also lead to women, LGBTQ+ people, people of colour, disabled people etc. feeling like their experiences aren't addressed, that the systemic oppression within philosophy doesn't matter, at least not enough to include in a course, book or discussion. This only leads to less diversity in philosophy and so the cycle continues.

# Commonly asked questions about gender and philosophy

Some of the questions that appeared as “people also asked” when I looked up “women in philosophy” and “gender in philosophy” were:

- Do women study philosophy?
- Are girls welcome in philosophy?
- What's it like to be a woman in philosophy?
- Did ancient Greece or Rome have women philosophers?
- Is women's studies a type of philosophy?
- How is gender apart of philosophy?
- Why are women not taught in philosophy classes?
- Why do so few girls at my college study philosophy?
- Since when have women been allowed to study philosophy?



# Who is remembered and why?

-Hipparchia of Maroneia (350 BC - 280) was born in Maroneia, but her family moved to Athens where her brother would become a pupil of Crates. Crates was the most famous Cynic philosopher in Greece at that time. She pursued him and they began a romantic relationship. Despite the disapproval of her parents, they married. She went on to live a life of Cynic poverty on the streets of Athens with her husband. Little survives of her own philosophical views. Her influence mainly lies in the way she led her life, choosing a type of life which was usually considered unacceptable for “respectable” or “virtuous” women of the time. The story of Hipparchia's pursuit of Crates, going against her parents' ideas for her future and the initial reluctance of Crates, was a popular tale from the 16th century onwards. Many books, plays and films have drawn influence from her life. Although there were many other women who chose to live as Cynics, Hipparchia is the only one whose name is somewhat known to this day.

While there are countless famous cynics that continue to be studied you are lucky if you get to study this one woman whose work and life hasn't even been well documented. Just to name a few famous cynics who were men were, Antisthenes, Diogenes, Onesicritus, Menippus, Teles of Megara, Theombrotus, and of course Crates of Thebes and Metrocles, Hipparchia's husband and brother respectively.

# Harassment on women in philosophy

-As in with many fields women are more likely to face harassment in philosophy than their fellow male students or colleagues. Philosophy has been designated as a “high risk of harassment field of study” by many universities.

-In 2014, Inside Higher Education described philosophy as “...discipline’s own long history of misogyny and sexual harassment.” On March 28, 2011, the blog New APPS published a post examining the allegations of persistent sexual harassment faced by women professors in philosophy, due largely to “serial harassers” continuing to work in the field despite widespread knowledge of their actions.

-Jennifer Saul, a professor of philosophy at the University of Sheffield, stated in 2015 that women are “...leaving philosophy after being harassed, assaulted, or retaliated against.”

I could not give this talk without addressing how salient it is to stop harassment of women in academia and the world at large. We can’t have true equality in philosophy until we work to end harassment.

# What can be done to increase inclusivity in philosophy?

-Start teaching philosophy as a “core subject” from primary/elementary school. This means introducing philosophy to students and meeting them where they are and challenging them with basic philosophical concepts. This will lead to a greater understanding of the importance of philosophy for everyone not just those in higher education or professors. We need to make philosophy more accessible and people, especially young people will start to make connections between philosophy and other subject and how philosophy is relevant to their lives.

-Shift away from only teaching “the greats” and give more time to women, LGBTQ+, BIPOC and disabled philosophers. Having more diversity on the syllabus alone will help build a more inclusive and comfortable space for everyone. This is obviously the bare minimum and not enough on its own.

-Teach a more intersectional philosophy, one that acknowledges the reasons and ramifications of a lack of women in philosophy. Explore how different systems of oppression have impacted philosophers and different philosophical movements throughout history. Examine the similarities and differences and have those conversations.

-Have no tolerance for harassment of women (or anyone) in philosophy so that the study of philosophy can feel safe for everyone. The aim is to have more women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ people, disabled and neurodiverse people in philosophy not to have less cishet, white, able bodied men.

# Additional Reading and Resources

-Buxton, R., & Whiting, L. (2020). The philosopher Queens: The lives and legacies of Philosophy's unsung women. Unbound.

-Hutchison, K., & Jenkins, F. (2014). Women in philosophy what needs to change? Oxford University Press.

-On Women in Philosophy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLH8pJIQFSM>

-Quantifying the Gender Gap: An Empirical Study of the Underrepresentation of Women in Philosophy by Molly Paxton, Carrie Figdor and Valerie Tiberius This journal along with many others on feminist philosophy can be found in Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy, a peer-reviewed academic journal published quarterly by Cambridge University Press.

<http://hypatiaphilosophy.org/>

-TEDxOverlake - Dr. Sara Goering - Philosophy for Kids: Sparking a Love of Learning

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DLzXAjscXk>

# Sources:

-Alcoff, L. M. M. (1996, January). Linda Martin Alcoff · philosophy and racial identity (1996). Philosophy and racial identity . Retrieved January 5, 2022, from <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/philosophy-and-racial-identity>

-Buxton, R., & Whiting, L. (2020). The philosopher Queens: The lives and legacies of Philosophy's unsung women. Unbound.

-Flaherty, C. (2014, May 19). Unofficial internet campaign outs professor for alleged sexual harassment, attempted assault. Unofficial Internet campaign outs professor for alleged sexual harassment, attempted assault. Retrieved January 3, 2022, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/05/19/unofficial-internet-campaign-outs-professor-alleged-sexual-harassment-attempted>

-Guardian News and Media. (2015, January 5). Philosophy is for posh, white boys with trust funds' – why are there so few women? The Guardian. Retrieved January 3, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jan/05/philosophy-is-for-posh-white-boys-with-trust-funds-why-are-there-so-few-women>

-Hutchison, K., & Jenkins, F. (2014). Women in philosophy what needs to change? Oxford University Press.

-Paxton, M., Figdor, C., & Tiberius, V. (n.d.). Quantifying the gender gap: An empirical study of the Underrepresentation of Women in Philosophy. Retrieved January 16, 2022, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23352311>

-Yancy, G. (2018, June 18). The pain and promise of black women in philosophy. The New York Times. Retrieved January 4, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/opinion/black-women-in-philosophy.html>