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Costa Rica: School Textbooks Perpetuate Subordinate Role Of Women

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On Nov. 13, the Rome-based Inter Press Service reported on a study carried out by the Education Ministry's Center for Women and the Family. The study, sponsored by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), analyzed the portrayal of men and women in textbooks used in Costa Rican schools and the impact of such images on the development of self-image among children. Researcher Marta Ibarra said school textbooks praise men but disregard women. According to Ibarra, phrases like "great men taught us..." appear all too often in Costa Rican textbooks. "For instance," she added, "In social studies texts, the contributions of women to historic events appear as merely decorative...Men are always described as rigid, tough, serious, forceful, and energetic while women are pictured as passive, docile, and submissive." Ibarra said the exclusion of women is even more extreme in textbooks printed by private publishers where over 80% of the illustrations are of male characters. When women do appear in the books, they are nearly always seen carrying out traditional gender role activities. She noted that only a tiny fraction of male or female characters are shown engaging in non-traditional work. Ibarra said portrayals of women and men in these texts reinforce traditional gender roles in the minds of the young. "The negative images of women result in a major problem for young girls who cannot find effective models to identify with," she added. These negative role models are reflected in the work world as well. The study indicated that 75% of the activities outside the home are done by men, while home-related work is relegated to women. According to the study, nearly 75% of manual and handicraft labor is done by men. One out of eight men, and just one in 70 women are community leaders. More men than women hold managerial positions, are politicians or religious leaders, while women outnumber men in professions which are an extension of the domestic role, e.g., teaching and nursing. Mayrene Arce, Education Ministry research representative, said authorities are working on a project to revise or substitute school textbooks over the next few years. She added that "most of the sexist stereotypes that discriminate against women" could be eliminated within five years.

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