

The Impact of Western Feminist Movements on Women's Higher Education in the United States: A Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The Western Feminist Movement, a social campaign driven by bourgeois women advocating for gender equality and the attainment of social status and rights, attracted widespread participation from women across various backgrounds. As the movement evolved, women's higher education in the United States developed through three distinct stages, each reflecting the broader socio-political dynamics of its time. This article examines the interplay between the feminist movement and the progression of women's higher education in the United States, tracing its developmental trajectory and highlighting the transformative impact of feminist thought on educational practices and policies.

Keywords: Feminist movement; Feminism; American studies; Women's higher education

Introduction

Feminism emerged as an ideological and social response aimed at addressing gender inequality and promoting the realization of equality between men and women on a global scale. Rooted in feminist ideology, the feminist movement -- often referred to as the women's liberation movement -- sought to secure equal rights for women and elevate their status to parity with men (Delmar and Rosalind, 2018). Following the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries in early modern Europe, ideas of liberty and equality became widely disseminated, leading to the gradual awakening of women's self-awareness. Inspired by the transformative ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Western women became increasingly courageous in fighting for their rights. This marked the inception of the Western feminist movement, which developed in tandem with historical progress, experiencing several waves of intensified activism.

During this period, American higher education, initially modeled after the British system, began to incorporate German influences as it advanced toward greater maturity and internationalization.

Guided by the feminist movement and shaped by broader socio-political, economic, and religious factors, the educational system increasingly accounted for women's interests in its objectives, curriculum design, and institutional requirements.

While the birth and development of women's higher education in the United States have often been analyzed from the perspectives of social, economic, and political factors, connecting it to the intellectual currents of the Western feminist movement reveals a significant influence. Feminism drove changes in women's higher education at various stages, shaping its goals, curriculum designs, and institutional forms.

The study of women's higher education in the United States by foreign scholars has evolved from examining it within the broader framework of the American educational system and women's education to focusing on specific issues within women's education. For instance, in 1959, Mabel Newcomer (1959) published *A Century of Higher Education for American Women*, which provided a detailed account of the first century of women's higher education in the United States.

This work explored the founding purposes of women's colleges, their curricula, sources of funding, and student demographics. From the 1960s onward, scholars began to systematically examine women's education in the United States, uncovering its historical trajectory through social, economic, and religious lenses. Notable works include Barbara M. Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (1985) and Linda Eisenmann's *Historical Dictionary of Women's Education in the United States* (1998).

Since the 1980s, research has shifted from general historical studies of education to in-depth examinations of specific issues, particularly focusing on women's education within the broader context of gender equality. Recent studies have incorporated feminist theory and concepts of social equity. For example, Madeleine Arnot and Kathleen Weiler (2005)'s *Feminism and Social Justice in Education: International Perspectives* explores these themes on a global scale.

With the development of Women's Studies, research institutions and major universities in the United States have increasingly emphasized gender equity in education. Greater attention has been paid to the intrinsic relationship and mutual influence between the development of women's education and the feminist movement, fostering a deeper understanding of their dynamic interaction.

Research on women's higher education in the United States began relatively late in China, with relevant studies only appearing in the 1990s. These studies predominantly concentrated on summarizing and analyzing specific periods or particular issues within the historical development of American women's higher education. Notable examples include Wang Baoxing

(2002)'s *An Analysis of the Historical Motive Force of the American Female Higher Education Development during the Latter Half of 19th Century* and Lin Hong (2006)'s *A Research on Several Issues Concerning American Women Higher Education in the 20th Century*, both of which represent key contributions to this field.

While Chinese scholars have extensively studied the origins and development of American women's higher education, there has been relatively little analysis of its driving factors. Research has mainly concentrated on the late 19th to early 20th century, with limited attention paid to the development of women's education in the post-war period. Furthermore, few domestic studies have examined the relationship between the feminist movement and the causes or impacts of American women's higher education from the perspective of feminist theory.

This paper seeks to address this gap by analyzing the influence of the Western feminist movement on the development of American women's higher education through its three major stages. It will explore the primary objectives, teaching methods, and curricular content of women's higher education at each stage within this context.

The First Stage of the Western Feminist Movement and the Development of Women's Higher Education in the United States (Mid-19th Century to Early 20th Century)

Inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity", French feminist leader Olympe de Gouges made a bold challenge to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen with her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen in 1791. This pivotal act not only called for the recognition of women's rights but also marked the onset of the first feminist movement. In the United States, the feminist movement gained significant traction with the Seneca Falls Convention in July 1848, held in New York. During this landmark event, the Declaration of Sentiments was drafted and signed, representing the first formal demand for women's suffrage as an essential component of full citizenship. The Seneca Falls Convention catalyzed the rapid expansion of the first wave of feminism in America, laying the foundation for future feminist activism.

During this period, influenced by the liberalist movement, liberal feminism emerged, laying the foundation for subsequent feminist theories. Liberal feminism held liberty, equality, and justice as its highest political values and emphasized equal opportunities and justice for women. Advocates of liberal feminism argued that education was a critical means of achieving equality, enriching women's knowledge, encouraging them to realize their potential, and improving their disadvantaged social positions. However, societal norms and inadequate legal systems prevented women from enjoying equal access to education and competing fairly. Feminists, therefore,

called for reforms in education and social systems to secure equal rights and opportunities for women.

The first women's rights convention in the United States, held in July 1848, was a landmark event. Prominent leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments sparked widespread attention, demanding not only suffrage but also equal rights in other areas of society, including education.

In the mid-19th century, women's higher education in the United States began to develop, albeit at a level equivalent to secondary and collegiate education. This movement was championed by advocates who established private women's colleges. Notable examples include the Troy Female Seminary, founded by Emma Willard in 1821; the Hartford Female Seminary, established by Catherine Beecher in 1827; and Mount Holyoke College, founded by Mary Lyon in 1836.

In 1836, the Georgia state legislature approved the establishment of Georgia Female College, which began granting degrees in 1840. Following the Civil War, four prominent women's colleges were established: Vassar College in 1865, Wellesley College and Smith College in 1876, and Bryn Mawr College in 1884 (Jin, 1999). These institutions played a pivotal role in the development of women's higher education .

Beyond the women's college model, other formats emerged, including coeducational institutions and coordinate colleges. Oberlin College became the first coeducational institution in the United States, admitting women in 1837 and granting them degrees. In the Midwest, state universities such as the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Michigan also adopted coeducation.

The coordinate college model, which established separate women's colleges within traditional universities, was pioneered by Harvard University with the establishment of Radcliffe College in 1874. Columbia University and Brown University followed, founding Barnard College and Pembroke College in 1889, respectively. These coordinate colleges reflected the institutional resistance women faced in traditional educational structures and highlighted the systemic inequality in their access to higher education.

During this stage, feminist discourse championed women's equal access to education, while simultaneously acknowledging the "distinct and subordinate social roles" that women were expected to occupy within society (Hu, 2010). Feminists of this era emphasized the importance of recognizing gender differences in educational approaches, thereby delineating the primary goals of women's education into two fundamental areas: first, to "instill proper ideas in women to prepare them for future motherhood", and second, to "train women as qualified teachers".

While some progressive institutions, such as Vassar College, aimed to provide women with “the same high-quality education offered to young men at leading universities -- a rigorous and well-structured liberal arts education tailored to meet their needs in life”, the broader goal of women’s higher education during this period was largely focused on cultivating culturally refined and well-educated wives and mothers. In this context, the curriculum was often designed to equip women with the skills necessary to fulfill these traditional roles, rather than encouraging their participation in a wider range of professional fields. As a result, the majority of women who graduated during this period typically assumed roles that adhered to these societal expectations, such as teaching or homemaking, rather than pursuing careers in other professional sectors. This educational framework, while advancing women’s intellectual capabilities, nevertheless reinforced conventional gender roles, limiting women’s opportunities for broader professional engagement and social mobility.

The Second Stage of the Western Feminist Movement and the Development of Women’s Higher Education in the United States (Post-World War II to the 1970s)

After the first wave of feminism, which was led by figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton (noted for her annotations in *The Woman’s Bible*) and Susan B. Anthony (recognized as a leader of the new generation of feminists) and focused primarily on the struggle for women’s suffrage, substantial changes to the content of higher education did not materialize. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the first wave of feminism had achieved significant accomplishments, such as women’s suffrage, but eventually waned. Despite this, American women began to make strides into traditionally male-dominated spheres. For instance, between 1917 and 1945, 38 women served as members of the U.S. Congress, signaling an incremental but meaningful increase in women’s participation in public and political life.

From the end of World War II to the early 1960s, the world faced both the aftermath of economic depression and the devastation of two world wars. Despite these challenges, opportunities arose that gradually elevated the status of women in Western countries. In the United States, women made significant advances in politics, the economy, and education. However, patriarchal culture and systemic gender discrimination persisted, leaving a considerable gap between the aspirations for women’s liberation and genuine gender equality and the realities on the ground.

During this period, feminists sought to establish independent spaces for women, realizing that a radical rejection of male values and the dismantling of patriarchal cultural systems and societal structures were necessary for true gender equality and the further liberation of women. Radical feminists during this time opposed patriarchy as the primary source of gender inequality, viewing

the state as a tool of patriarchal oppression. They advocated for creating women-centered spaces, promoting female culture, and identifying the roots of women's oppression and paths toward emancipation.

In the educational field, feminists of this stage could no longer tolerate gender discrimination. They opposed the emphasis on gender differences in education and adopted the slogan "equal access to education, equal education for all". They argued that men and women should not only study in the same institutions but also have access to the same curricula and disciplines.

A landmark achievement was the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited gender-based discrimination in educational programs receiving federal funding. Title IX explicitly stated: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Yu, 2005). This legislation provided a legal guarantee for women to receive education on equal terms with men.

In August 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA), which mandated federal support for local governments to eliminate barriers and challenges faced by women in education and other fields. This landmark legislation laid the foundation for creating a more inclusive educational environment by addressing the systemic obstacles that hindered women's participation. In 1975, the Departments of Education, Health, and Welfare collaborated to develop regulations that required the allocation of resources based on the interests and abilities of both genders, ensuring equal access to athletic facilities and support services for both men and women.

With these institutional safeguards in place, many educational leaders began to actively implement feminist principles of gender equality. Notably, institutions like Wellesley College and Smith College introduced curricula identical to those offered at traditionally male-dominated universities such as Harvard and Yale. This move was emblematic of the growing belief that women should be afforded the same academic opportunities and achievements as men. These colleges not only mirrored the educational offerings of their male counterparts but also championed the idea that women, like men, had the right to pursue and excel in the same areas of study, thus advancing the cause of gender equality in higher education.

This period represented a pivotal advancement for women's higher education in the United States, as systemic discrimination was actively challenged through both legal reforms and practical changes in educational practices. The passage of legislation such as the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) and the subsequent regulatory adjustments were instrumental in dismantling longstanding barriers to women's access to educational opportunities. These efforts

not only opened doors to academic and professional realms previously dominated by men but also symbolized a broader societal shift toward gender equality. As women gained greater access to higher education, women's education became an essential pillar of the feminist movement's larger push for social, political, and economic equality. This period laid the groundwork for future generations of women to not only pursue higher education but to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles across all sectors of society.

The Third Stage of the Western Feminist Movement and the Development of Women's Higher Education in the United States (Late 1970s to Present)

The third wave of the feminist movement in the United States began in the late 1970s. During this stage, Western feminists shifted from vigorous activism to more reflective thinking. They gradually began to focus on academic and cultural research, continuing to explore the roots of gender inequality. This period saw the emergence of new academic disciplines and theoretical schools, such as postmodernism. As a product of the fusion of postmodernism and feminism, postmodern feminism expanded beyond a focus on the realities of women's conditions and gender issues. It advocated for a reexamination of Western culture, a reconstruction of gender power relations, and the creation of more space for women's existence, with the goal of achieving diversity, openness, and respect for differences.

From an educational perspective, postmodern feminism emphasizes the fact that knowledge in all disciplines is either gender-blind or based on a single gender, reflecting and describing human life through the male knowledge system, presenting male values and experiences as the entirety of human existence, interpreting all social history and development issues from the male perspective, and explaining the world from the male interest (Hu, 2010). Therefore, in order to challenge the male dominance and the subordinate status of women in education and other fields, the development of women's higher education in the United States progressed to a stage where it confronted patriarchy and the male-dominated knowledge hegemony. During this period, in addition to continuing to eliminate gender discrimination and fight for equal rights, women actively attempted to incorporate new academic perspectives on race, gender, and age into middle school curricula. They hoped to break through the male perspective and change women's subordinate status through the development of new textbooks and curricula, ultimately aiming to challenge gender discriminatory ideologies.

On the other hand, a new phenomenon in women's studies emerged during this period: the number of women's research centers steadily increased, the scale of women's study groups expanded, and academic research in women's studies gained official recognition. In 1981, several policy research institutions and women's research centers came together to establish the

National Council for Research on Women (NCRW), which was primarily responsible for sharing research data, promoting the work of various association departments, and advancing the development of related courses. After the 1990s, the development of the American women's movement became more closely linked with the growth of the discipline of "Women's Studies" in the United States. The feminist movement provided a platform for uniting women and created an ideal practical foundation for the study of women's issues. The development of women's higher education in the United States gradually raised the awareness of women's education, and the growth of the feminist movement further facilitated the expansion of academic disciplines in higher education, broadening the scope of subjects offered by higher education institutions.

Through the efforts of feminists, the dissemination of feminist ideas and the establishment of "Women's Studies" made more women aware of their rights and value, leading them to actively fight for their rights. Meanwhile, women's higher education in the United States moved towards greater maturity. However, there remains a continuing focus on improving women's academic and research abilities in higher education, as well as addressing the persistence of the "glass ceiling" (Wang, 2011). Additionally, U.S. universities are making strides towards gender equality in academic offerings, working to break public stereotypes about certain disciplines, and encouraging more women to participate in fields traditionally viewed as male-dominated. For example, recognizing the low participation of women in STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), as well as the challenges in educational quality and fewer female professionals in these fields, the U.S. introduced the "All-hands-on-deck" STEM initiative in 2013, which particularly emphasized STEM education for girls and minority students. Following this, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) further highlighted the importance of providing all students with comprehensive educational opportunities through STEM, focusing on increasing access for female students, minorities, English-language learners, students with disabilities, and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Lü&Feng, 2019). In February 2017, the Trump administration authorized NASA and the National Science Foundation to enact policies that would encourage more women and girls to enter STEM fields.

Conclusion

Since the mid-19th century, the trajectory of women's higher education in the United States has closely mirrored the ideological currents of the Western feminist movement. This movement, initially marked by the fight for women's suffrage, evolved through successive phases, from its critique of patriarchal structures to a more nuanced exploration of the root causes of gender inequality. Over time, Western feminism transitioned from large-scale, overt activism to more academically rigorous reflection and theoretical inquiry. Similarly, the development of women's higher education in the U.S. has been significantly influenced by the progress of the feminist movement, moving from the establishment of women's colleges that emphasized gendered

distinctions in education to the creation of coeducational institutions and divisions. This shift eventually gave rise to a model of education that emphasized gender equality, culminating in the institutionalization of Women's Studies as a legitimate academic discipline.

The evolution of women's higher education in the United States has not only played a crucial role in safeguarding women's rights but has also fostered a heightened collective awareness among women regarding their rights and their rightful place in society. By providing women with both the intellectual tools and institutional support, this progress has empowered many to actively participate in shaping social, political, and economic landscapes. While challenges persist — particularly in terms of access, equity, and representation— there has been undeniable progress. The advancement of women's higher education in the United States serves as a valuable case study for similar initiatives in other parts of the world. In particular, the lessons drawn from this development hold significant implications for the future of women's higher education in China. As the Chinese higher education system continues to evolve, there is much to gain from understanding the successes and challenges of the U.S. experience, particularly in terms of gender inclusion, curriculum reform, and the broader social transformations that accompany such educational progress.

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