



## THE INFLUENCE OF WESTERN FEMINIST MOVEMENT ON WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE USA

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Article information

Received:16/6/2021  
Accepted: 18/7/2021  
Published online:21/07/2021  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.3.12](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.3.12)

### ABSTRACT

Western feminist movement started in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and reached its first climax in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. During its history of nearly 200 years, it has gone through three waves. As one of the influential cultural thoughts, feminism has a profound impact on American society. For more than two centuries, they have made unremitting efforts to strive for equal opportunities with men, and have also made certain achievements. Feminism and the spread of "woman study" has been awakening women's self-consciousness, making women aware of their rights and values, and strive for their rights. It broadens people's vision, provides a new perspective for social and political thought, and provides a powerful ideological weapon for the progress of human rights and the improvement of women's status in practice. In America, women's higher education also witnessed three stages of development. The first stage is from the 1820s to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the second stage is from the 1920s to the end of the Second World War, and the third stage is from the Second World War to today. This paper attempts to analyze the characteristics of the three waves of Western feminist movement, and discuss its influence on the development American women's higher education.

**Keywords:** feminist movement, woman, higher education

### 1. Introduction

From the rise in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, western feminist movement has gone through three waves. Each new wave contains the reflection and correction of the previous stage. Different schools of feminism have different ideas, but the core of them is to establish equal gender relations. While pointing out the irrationality of patriarchal society, they try to find the root for women's oppression and the way of liberation, hoping to establish a new order of equality and harmony on the basis of mutual respect. As one of the influential cultural thoughts, feminism has a profound impact on American society. For more than two centuries, they have made unremitting efforts to strive for equal opportunities with men, and have also made certain achievements. Feminism and the spread of "woman study" has been awakening women's self-consciousness, making women

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American higher education has a history of more than 300 years since the establishment of Harvard College in 1636, but in the first 150 years of its development, the formal higher education was only the privilege of rich and upper class men. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that American women really received higher education. American women's higher education has developed from scratch. At first, the rise of women's higher education is not aimed at women's development, but at social development. Educating women is to enable them to better educate the next generation. Later, with the improvement in the level of female education, the unfair treatment to women was gradually questioned, and women began to learn male dominated subjects. In recent decades, women's education has developed to a higher level, and more women scholars have entered the field of science and technology. This paper attempts to analyze the characteristics of the three waves of Western feminist movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and further to explore its influence on the development of American women's higher education.

## 2. The Development of Western Feminist Movement

Feminist movement, also known as women's liberation movement, is a social movement. It's the struggle to end sexist oppression and to fight for equal rights for women. The history of feminism can be traced back to the period of the Enlightenment. During the period of the Enlightenment, various enlightenment groups rose a rebellion to against the tyrant system of feudal society and fought for the bourgeois regime. At the same time, women began to raise the issue of gender inequality, challenging the tyranny brought by men (Watkins, Rueda, Rodriguez et al. 1999).

In the 1840s, the first wave feminism rose, which formed the Liberal Feminism. Liberal feminism demanded to break the biological determinism of patriarchal theory, that is, men's superiority over women is caused by physiological differences, and advocates that men and women have the same rights in education, law and occupation. During this period, scholars represented by Mary Wollstonecraft believed that men and women had the same rationality and ability. They opposed the differences between men and women, but emphasized the similarities. In the 1920s, women in many countries began to enjoy the same right to vote and education as men. During this stage, the main participants of the feminist movement were middle-class women. Generally speaking, the quality of their theories was relatively low, and the form of their struggle was moderate.

After the Great Depression in 1930s and the Second World War in 1940s, great changes have taken place in the United States. The society is stable, the economy is prosperous, and people's life is relatively comfortable. Men return to work from the battlefield, while women get married and have children. They are satisfied with family life and are unwilling or unable to find a job in society. By the 1960s, women's economic status had improved, but their social status was still low. Women began to realize that the acquisition of the right to vote did not really improve their situation, so in order to fight for real equality, they must act again, which contributed to the second wave feminism that began in the United States in the 1960s. With the spiritual heritage of the first stage of feminist movement and Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as the theoretical source, Radicalism Feminism became the main thought and theoretical school in the second stage of the feminist movement. Radicalism Feminism held that women were the first oppressed group in history. Women's oppression was the most common and influential form of oppression, which could be used to explain other forms of oppression. Gender is constructed by the society to limit women to subordinate status (Friedan 1988). Besides Radicalism Feminism, Marxist Feminism and Liberal Feminism were also rather active in this period. On the whole, feminism in this period has transformed from changing the law to changing people's thoughts. The equality between men and women has been given a new meaning, from the equality of political and economic status to the equality of values.

The third stage of feminist movement appeared in the late 1970s, when research centers on women appeared one after another, and the scale of feminist groups became even larger. In the 1980s, with the western countries entering the postindustrial society and the emergence of post-modernism, modern feminism has

undergone some changes in general, and experienced a process of deradicalization. During this period, feminism combined with postmodernism, and the anti-essentialism and anti-centrism of postmodernism were embodied in feminism. Since the 1990s, the development of American feminist movement is closely related to the development of American Women's Studies, which provides a theoretical basis for the former. Generally speaking, after the cold war, with the reactivation of the left in the west and the further development of the new social movement, the feminist movement recovered to a certain extent. With the improvement of women's living situation and education, more and more women participated in the movement, and their consciousness to struggle and level were significantly improved.

### **3. The Development of Women's Higher Education**

The development of American women's higher education has gone through different stages. The first stage is from the 1820s to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the second stage is from the 1920s to the end of the Second World War, and the third stage is from the Second World War to today.

During the colonial period, women were not allowed to receive education, let alone higher education. Before marriage, girls received instructions from their mother or housekeeper at home, mainly to learn how to do housework. After marriage, the husband became the head of the family, and wife was the vassal of him.

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some progress has been made in women's education. New England began to allow girls to study in formal Latin grammar schools, but they could only enter the classroom before boys had class in the morning or after school in the afternoon. In the southern colonies, some rich families hired private tutors to teach girls dance, music, French and social etiquette. In some remote areas, some middle schools that had not recruited enough students would recruit some female students to make up the number.

It can be seen from the above that only a few women had access to secondary school. But in the field of higher education, no university was open to women. It was not until the 1820s that American women's higher education began.

#### **3.1 The First Stage of American Women's Higher Education**

In the 1820s, women began to enter the field of higher education. At the beginning of its establishment, the level was relatively low, equivalent to that of middle school and college. Female seminaries in this period are good examples, such as Troy Female Seminary founded by Emma Willard in 1821, Hartford Female Seminary founded by Catherine Beecher in 1827, and Mt. Holyoke Seminary founded by Mary Lyon in 1836.

With the establishment of these schools and the continuous increase of the number of female teachers, the educational concept in the United States began to change. Oberlin College, which was founded in 1833, took the lead in enrolling both boys and girls, and became the first coeducational college in the United States. Before the Civil War, there were three main types of higher education for women: independent women's universities, women's colleges affiliated to comprehensive men's universities, and coeducational colleges. Before 1860, there were 39 women's universities and colleges (Dexter 1919).

The Morrill Act, signed by President Lincoln in 1864, played a decisive role in women's higher education. Because although several schools had tried the policy of coeducation before, the scale was rather small. The land grant college established by the act emphasized serving all people, receiving both men and women, thus setting off a nationwide upsurge of coeducation. By 1900, four fifths of universities had enrolled female students, and they accounted for 40% of the total (Wang 1991).

With the development of coeducation, independent women's colleges were also developing. From 1860 to 1901, 67 women's universities and colleges were founded (Dexter 1919). In addition to independent women's universities and colleges, the comprehensive universities in which women's colleges belonged to men's also achieved great development in this period. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's colleges in the East, North Central and South Central United States, which belonged to men's comprehensive university, were recognized by the society.

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At that time, with the rapid development of women's education, the number of female students in many universities exceeded that of male students, which caused some schools to limit the enrollment rate of female students. For example, North Western University limited the number of female students by accommodation, and Leland Stanford limited the number of female students to 500.

### **3.2 The Second Stage of American Women's Higher Education**

Women's higher education in this period inherited the style of the previous period. There were three ways for women to receive higher education: coeducational universities, independent women's colleges or women's colleges in traditional universities.

Furthermore, women's higher education had achieved further development. According to statistics, the proportion of female teachers in colleges and universities increased from 19.76% in 1900 to 27.63% in 1940. At the same time, the proportion of female students who obtained bachelor's degree increased from 19.11% to 41.26%; the proportion of female students with master's degree increased from 19.14% to 38.24%; as for doctoral degree, from 6.82% to 13.04% (Morrison, Commager, Leuchtenburg et al. 1991). The data above show that the level of women's higher education is constantly improving, and women's participation in higher education industry has been further developed.

Be that as it may, the gap between women's higher education and that of men's is still enormous, especially in master and doctoral education.

### **3.3 The Third Stage of American Women's Higher Education**

From the Second World War to the end of 1970s, American women's higher education has achieved great development. From 1947 to 1948, there were 95,571 female college graduates, accounting for 35.24% of the total number; while from 1967 to 1968, it was 276,203, accounting for 41.43% (Long 1970). This shows that the proportion of female students in the United States has increased in the past 20 years. However, the proportion of female graduates is lower than that of male graduates.

Since the 1970s, the number of women entering universities in the United States has increased year by year; women who obtained master's and doctor's degree accounted for 40% of the total recipients of these two degrees respectively (Liu 2001). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a phenomenon that the number of female students exceeded that of male students.

At the same time, the number of women's academic study centers has been increasing, the scale of women's research groups expanding, and women's academic research has been officially recognized. In 1977, the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) was officially established, whose purpose was to promote the social, political and professional development of women's studies in various educational environments throughout the country (Liu 2007).

## **4. Women's Higher Education under the Influence of Feminist Movement**

It can be seen that the 1920s and the 1950s were the shared watershed years in the development of American women's higher education and the development of western feminist movement. Next, I will analyze the influence of Western feminist movement on American women's higher education from the three periods of feminist movement.

### **4.1 The First Stage: the Beginning of Low-level Higher Education**

Under the impetus of the first feminist movement, the Seneca Falls Convention held in 1848 adopted Declaration of Sentiments. Striving for women's equal access to education was an important topic of the conference. Since the late 1860s, the feminist movement has gradually shifted the focus of women's rights to receive education to higher education. The pioneers of the movement are tirelessly promoting women into the field of higher education. Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1836, and in 1850, she completely adopted the school running standard of men's college. This is the first women's college that really belongs to the category of higher education in American history. After that, the school running mode of women's colleges

was quickly recognized and generally supported by the society. A large number of women's colleges rose and developed throughout the United States, becoming the main way for American women to receive higher education at that time (Wang 2011). There has been a rapid increase in female enrollment. By 1920, the number of female college students accounted for 47.3% of the total number of college students (Cohen and Kisker 2010). Looking back on the development of American feminist movement, we can find the climax of the first stage of feminist movement in 1920.

However, the focus of the feminist movement at this stage was only on the acquisition of basic political rights, and it ignored the quality and the implementation of those rights. In the field of education, although women had obtained the basic right to receive higher education, the quality of their education was still low. Thus, the first feminist movement was often regarded as a relative failure by later feminists. Mary Wollstonecraft, a feminist thinker at that time, believed that women should be given the same right to education and all other social rights as men, so as to cultivate women's rational thinking and enable women to truly fulfill their social responsibilities as good wives and understanding mothers, which had a great influence on people's educational thoughts and was widely regarded as the goal of higher education. As Emma Willard, the founder of the Troy Female Seminary, said in 1821, "because of women's different characteristics and responsibilities from men's, women's education should be different from that suitable for men (Howe 2004)." Katherine Beecher, the founder of Hartford Female Seminary, agreed with Rousseau in her "A Treatise on Domestic Economy", that is, women's education should be limited to family education, but she also realized the social and political significance of women's education and its urgency (Zhang 2004). Historians have pointed out that this traditional characterization of the sexes, based on gender-defined social roles, was elevated to the status of universal male and female attributes in the nineteenth century (Spielvogel 2013).

In short, under the continuous struggle of feminists, women began to enter the field of higher education. However, due to the relatively moderate feminists and the lack of scientific theoretical guidance, the movement was not thorough enough, and the rights they gained were not equal and sufficient. Women were still trained as traditional female roles, such as teachers or housewives. Thus, the level of women's higher education at this time was relatively low.

#### **4.2 The Second Stage: the Transition to Male Dominated Curriculum**

The first feminist movement greatly liberated people's minds and increased women's educational opportunities. Women began to receive higher education in women's colleges and coeducational colleges. However, with the global economic crisis in the 1930s and the demand for work and remuneration of the demobilized men after the Second World War, women's employment and working treatment are affected, and the trend of anti-feminism is rising. At this time, some social problems were wrongly attributed to the dislocation of women's roles, and women were required to return to families. Meanwhile, the proportion of women receiving higher education also declined. Women's difficulties in work and study, as well as their dissatisfaction with their social status, inspired the rise of the second feminist movement.

For the scholars of the second feminist movement, they insisted on the equality rather than the opposite education between men and women. They demanded that all fields be open to women, so as to narrow the differences between men and women and make the two sexes converge. Feminists at that time believed that women should overcome their femininity and strive to develop masculinity, including aggressiveness and independence. They did not agree that motherhood was born, nor did they agree that women were born higher than men morally. They are particularly opposed to the emphasis on gender differences, but emphasize the similarities between men and women. They thought that the reason why women were mentally retarded was that they do not get the same educational opportunities as men.

Therefore, people began to pay more attention to what areas of education women should receive. At that time, a famous American social critic once pointed out: "on the surface, our education system is providing girls with an open and free marriage life and professional life, but the fact is that they rarely exist in the actual society. For example, in normal universities, the proportion of female students is still very high. Because the profession of teacher has the function of educating and raising children, it has been recognized by the society

as a profession suitable for women. Moreover, among female college students, there are many who take home economics and health science as their major, reaching 1:14 (Ravitch 1995).” As a matter of fact, in various universities, female college students seldom set foot in the fields like engineering, physics and other natural sciences, which had always been regarded as the scientific fields of men’s research. Thus, at this stage, American women’s higher education began to shift from the early pursuit of gender differences to the pursuit of gender equality. Not only can men and women study in the same school, but they should learn the same courses and majors.

Such a school running mode, reflects the progress of the society, but also reflects a social limitation: taking the value scale of male education as the only criterion is also the manifestation of sexism, and the content of these girls has a great conflict with their social role after graduation. With the rise of the third feminist movement, feminist educators have realized its limitations, and the purpose of American women’s higher education has undergone important changes.

### **4.3 The Third Stage: the Challenge to Patriarchal Knowledge Hegemony**

Since the 1990s, feminism have been integrated with postmodernism and become a part of it. From then on, it has entered the third wave feminism - the postmodern feminism development period. Under the influence of French thinkers Michel Foucault and Derrida, feminists took deconstruction as their goal and opposed the thinking mode of binary opposition. Its goal was not to reverse the current system of men oppressing women, but to dispel the current concept of gender and deconstruct all previous theories on gender relations.

From the perspective of education, postmodern feminism emphasized the fact that the knowledge of all disciplines is single sex. It was to express and describe men’s value standards and experience as the whole content of human life under the male knowledge system, interpret all social history and social development issues from the male perspective. Therefore, in order to change the subordinate status of women, it was necessary to break through the male perspective, seek neutral or asexual perspectives to interpret and explain the world. Under the guidance of this concept, the development of American women higher education had entered the third stage, namely, challenging the patriarchal knowledge hegemony and criticizing the male centralism in the fields of education and academic, so as to gradually eliminate the social prejudice against women.

The influence of the third feminist movement on American women’s higher education is mainly manifested in two aspects: first, it mobilizes women to fight against gender discrimination in the field of education. Secondly, it promotes women’s research on women’s issues, and opens up a new academic field - Women Studies/ Social Gender Studies (Wang 2002).

In the long run, the courses of women’s studies in American colleges and universities had had a positive impact on young women and the American society. In 1970, a total of 3, 976 women in the United States received doctorates, which tripled in a decade. By 1977, 30% of doctoral degrees in the United States were awarded to women (Weiner 1994). In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, researchers conducted two public opinion surveys on American female college students, asking them questions about university education, family life and personal career. The results show that most of the female college students in 1969 not only regard family life and career as incompatible, but also plan to start a family and have children first, and then go to find their own career. However, in the similar survey conducted in 1981, only 1% of female college students said that the main purpose of university education is to prepare for family, while 40% believed that “the main purpose of higher education is to prepare for the development of their own career” (Davis 1999). The change of these ideas of American female college students undoubtedly shows that their understanding of their social roles has changed greatly.

With the further development of society, the feminism movement and the deepening of women studies, the education of American women is getting higher, the difficulty to find jobs is declining, and the possibility of unemployment is getting lower. Therefore, it is obvious to see the role of feminism movement and external motivation on American women’s higher education.

However, there are still some problems for women in the field of employment. First, the income of women is generally lower than that of men. Statistics from Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017) show that in 2017, the median weekly earning of women in the United States was only 81.8% of that of men. Second, there is still hidden gender discrimination in the field of employment. For example, they are unfairly treated by employers because of pregnancy, and the proportion of women at the top of government or enterprises is relatively low. Third, in modern society, women still bear most of the housework. Therefore, women do not have too much time and energy to compete with men, and they bear much more physical and psychological pressure than men.

## 5. Conclusion

By and large, in order to adapt to the development of society and women movement, American women's higher education has developed from scratch. The development of American women's higher education, especially since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is inseparable from the feminist movement. The first feminist wave liberated women's minds and offered them the rights to receive basic and higher education. The second feminist wave emphasized the commonness between men and women. Which made it possible for women to learn male dominated courses and majors. With the rise of the third feminist wave, feminist educators once again broke the limitations of the previous stage, abandoned the male evaluation standard of and turned to a neutral perspective to interpret and explain the world. The feminist movement promotes the development of American women's higher education, while the development of women's higher education provides theories and talents for the feminist movement. The feminism movement and women's higher education have been forming a promoting symbiosis with each other.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my tutor Prof. Haixia Yang for her continuous support and valuable advises to my research. I am highly indebted to NCEPU College of Foreign Languages for providing necessary information regarding this research and for their support in completing this endeavor.

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