

# Reflections on Gender Equity in Education from the Perspective of Modern Feminism

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## Abstract

**As the basis of women's development and the prerequisite of improving women's social status, education has always received extensive attention from researchers. With the development of times, there has been an increasing awareness that the development of women's education is not only an issue that makes women receive the education they deserve, but also a major issue that is of strategic significance and is related to national quality, the country's progress and social development. This thesis analyzes gender equity in education from the perspective of western feminist theory.**

## Keywords

**Modern Feminism; Gender Equity; Education Equity; Realization Path.**

## 1. Introduction

In the long-term historical development process, patriarchal social systems and culture have widely existed worldwide, resulting in an apparent gender inequity between men and women in education. Since the rise of the feminist movement in the West, women have gradually obtained the opportunity to participate in equal education. However, many problems of gender bias or gender inequality have remained until today.

"Gender equity in education" refers to advocating and striving for gender equity in the field of education. In other words, it is initiating, pursuing, designing and implementing education that can reflect gender equity with the guidance of the concept of gender equity. The field of education mainly focuses on advocating the idea of gender equity and improving the awareness of gender equity. Then integrate the awareness of gender equity into education and teaching activities, formulate and implement educational policies of gender equity, create an educational environment conducive to the realization of gender equity, and design and adopt educational measures of gender equity. The ultimate goal is to eliminate gender inequity in education, construct education that can reflect gender equity, and ensure boys and girls' fair, adequate, and healthy development.

## 2. The Rise and Development of Gender Equity in Education

In her book *Modern Feminist Thought*, Eisenstein believed that the modern western feminist movement had experienced two climaxes. The first was from the 1830s to the first 20 years of the 20th century, which carried out a reform in the political and social fields. This reform had corrected many practices of gender inequality in the fields of politics, education, economy and law. However, it had not impacted the concept and ideology of this inequality. The conservative forces against reforms in western society ultimately returned and disintegrated the strength of the women's movement.

Since the 1950s, Beauvoir and her fellows started the second climax of women's struggle for equal rights. From the beginning of this struggle, the target was directed at the long-standing social work division mode and structure that fixed men and women in it and the traditional values that demonstrated its rationality. Unlike the first climax, education became a particular

concern of feminists because education is significant to forming social genders, and they believed that education might play an essential role in eliminating gender inequality. During this period, their basic views and practices were the criticism of traditional gendered education and promoting gender equity in education.

The purpose of advocating gender equity in education is to break the stereotypes of gender in traditional education, eliminate gender discrimination and prejudice, form a gender-equal learning environment, and create a gender-equal learning experience through equal interaction between teachers and as well as between male and female students. "The National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education" in the United States has repeatedly stressed that it would be impossible to achieve the expected national educational goals if female students are not paid special attention. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the various characteristics of male and female students and attach importance to the differences among female students from multiple ethnic groups, socio-economic status and cultural backgrounds.

In the 1980s and 1990s, social gender equity in education received increasing attention from the United States and other countries. Feminist educators constructed the educational mode of gender equity. James Banks put forward five essential elements of this education model, including the integration of content, the construction of knowledge, reducing prejudice, equitable teaching and empowering schools to reconstruct their internal culture and structure.

### **3. The Main Problems of Gender Equity in Education Existed in School Education**

Modern feminist educators believe that in an ideal school of gender equity, male and female students can equally participate in school life. Moreover, teachers have the exact expectations for all students in all disciplines, male and female students can equally participate in classroom interaction, and they can receive the same concern and attention from their teachers. In addition, teachers' attitudes toward the career choices of male and female students are based on student's interests, abilities and academic performance, and managers have the exact expectations for leadership of male and female students. However, feminist research has found in practice that schools rarely have the above characteristics, most teaching practices are beneficial to boys, and significant differences exist in the educational experience between male and female students at school, which mainly includes the following aspects:

#### **3.1. Gender Issues in Textbooks**

Textbook culture is one of the areas that received the earliest attention from feminist educators. Many researchers have extensively investigated various textbooks and found many cases of gender prejudice in the books. The female images in the texts are far less than male images. The male and female images are shaped according to the traditional gender roles, the stereotypes of genders are serious, and the issues about women are often exceedingly superficial or distorted. For instance, Ma Guoyi concluded in his article "Ignoring Women--An Analysis and Research on the Female Images in Chinese Textbooks for Junior Middle Schools" that a significant difference exists in the number of pieces, with 45 texts describing men and only 13 for women. The male images are primarily positive, involving excellent talents of various social classes, ages and fields, whereas female images are rare with even fewer typical glorious images. Moreover, men are dominant in terms of social status. Their identities are mainly middle and high-level roles in society, including police officers, heroes and leaders, while women often play subordinated roles such as babysitters, laid-off workers and homemakers. In terms of image, men are masculine and tall, and they can ultimately show their style on the broad social stage and realize their life goals and pursuits. At the same time, women are weak, humble, often infringed on and insulted, with their fate mainly being determined by uncontrollable forces,

which finally ends in tragedy. In terms of the scope of activities, men are more active in the social field, while women mainly focus on family life. In terms of ability, men are knowledgeable with outstanding skills, while women are more ignorant and incompetent. The traditional gender stereotypes that men are strong and women are weak, and men are superior to women have been inherited and accepted through textbooks in the historical development over thousands of years, which sowed the seeds of gender stereotypes in human society, exerting a profound impact on the gender consciousness of future generations.

### **3.2. Teachers' Biased Gender Consciousness**

Under the pressure of helping the students enter better colleges and universities, Chinese teachers attach more importance to cultivating students' intelligence. At the same time, ignore the education of students' gender differences. Most teachers regard the gender difference as a natural and reasonable issue. They rarely consider the reasons for the formation of gender difference, for the teachers themselves still have immature gender concepts. Teachers as social members have long been immersed in the social culture for a long time. They have constantly received those conventional ideas, thus unconsciously forming a fixed gender bias in their minds, which is reflected in the following two aspects: firstly, women have a strong sense of family roles. Study shows that more than 50% of female teachers and 76.2% of male teachers believe that the most critical task of mothers is to take care of their families and educate children, while the most essential mission of fathers is to work and fulfil social responsibilities. Teachers generally tend to position men in the public fields and women in the private areas. Secondly, teachers' concept of female development is deeply influenced by the traditional gender concept. Most teachers have relatively low expectations for the career development of women. Women can sacrifice their careers for the sake of family. When female teachers encounter setbacks in their careers, they always turn to rely on marriage. These aspects fully reflect the weak concept of self-development of female teachers who have poor self-consciousness and recognize the traditional idea of women's development.

## **4. The Realization Path of Gender Equity in Education from the Perspective of Modern Feminism**

### **4.1. To Reconstruct School Education -- Paying Attention to Women's Education**

Feminists have pointed out that the real implementation of gender equity in education must be built on the basis of the reconstruction of school education with the premise of multicultural education mode. James Banks put forward five elements of this educational mode, including:

1) the integration of content, which means that the educational contents containing gender, races and ethnic groups can be integrated and infiltrated into the curriculum, rather than being pieced together. Multicultural courses of gender equity should be set in the regular school curriculum, including the experiences of men and women in all social classes. Female images must be seen by male and female students in their textbooks.

2) the construction of knowledge, which is to understand the relationship between power and truth, change the knowledge connotation under the current social and historical conditions from a new perspective, and create a new knowledge system;

3) the reduction of prejudice, which is to criticize different kinds of stereotypes and provide each student with a channel to understand the experience of others;

4) equitable teaching, which is to bring each student's ability into full play in learning;

5) empowering schools to reconstruct their internal culture and structure, which means that only when schools reconstruct their culture, structure and teaching practice can they show real equity in education.

## 4.2. To Reform Curriculum and Textbooks

First of all, the school should incorporate a gender perspective into the curriculum design theory to treat men and women's experience, tradition, value, and historical contribution with an equal attitude. Thus the curriculum can genuinely become a material to promote the development of boys and girls, rather than a tool to publicize gender prejudice and strengthen gender stereotypes. Secondly, the school should add more professional female images to improve the situation of lacking lively and specific contemporary female gender role models close to students' real life in the current textbooks. For example, to eliminate gender bias and discrimination in school education, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources of Korea has deleted the contents of female roles, social activities, professional activities that reflect women's inferior status. It has correspondingly increased the female characters, showing women who are prosperous, scientific, and progressive.

## 4.3. To Strengthen the Guidance of Public Opinion and Change the Current Situation of Gender Consciousness

Social identity theory holds that "stereotype occurs not only in the individual's mind but also in the cognitive process of a group. Each individual needs to gain a positive identity in an active group". Over time, women have recognized and returned to their subordinated status in the process of self-setting and self-positioning. In recent years, women in many European countries have started campaigns to delete the contents related to stereotypes of female images in primary school textbooks. For example, the Portuguese Education Commission has established a "Plan of Change", which aims to change attitudes towards women by advocating to deliver a new concept to children from childhood: men and women are the same, except for physical differences, and there is no reason to be treated discriminately due to gender difference, no matter in schools and family or in future employment in society. Therefore, strengthening the guidance of public opinion is a crucial step to change gender stereotypes.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, feminism has received significant attention in the past hundred years because women are living beautifully and admirably. Women's issue is ultimately the issue of the overall development of human beings. With the progress of society, advanced gender culture can be widely promoted and accepted. As a result, men and women can develop harmonious development, and gender equity in education in China will grow stably and profoundly.

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