

A Comparative Study on Returns to Higher Education in China and the United States from the Perspective of Gender Equality

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Abstract: With the changes in social culture, the role of women in higher education worldwide has gradually strengthened. Although women have made significant progress in higher education, they still face inequality after graduation in the workplace. This article explores the similarities and differences between China and the United States in terms of higher education returns from a gender equality perspective and offers suggestions. The study finds that China and the United States have gender disparities in employment opportunities, levels of employment, and compensation. Some American women face more challenging employment situations than Chinese women. While women in the United States are gradually taking important positions in certain fields, there isn't a prominent phenomenon like this in China. The returns on higher education for Chinese women are more influenced by family factors and traditional views, while in the United States, the impact of these factors is smaller. To address these issues, relevant measures should be implemented. Firstly, it is essential to strengthen anti-gender discrimination laws and regulations to reduce the unfair treatment women face in the workplace. Secondly, promoting women to leadership positions and encouraging them to enter non-traditional fields after graduation are effective ways to reduce occupational gender discrimination. Additionally, employers should offer parental leave, flexible working hours, and remote work options to help women better balance their professional and family responsibilities. Lastly, the state can use social media and cultural events to disseminate the concept of gender equality and encourage women to engage more freely in their career development.

Keywords: higher education, returns, gender equality

1. Introduction

With the opening of culture, changes in social structure, and the strengthening of female agency, the feminization of higher education has gradually become a global phenomenon [1]. The "Gender Equality and Development" report indicates a significant global increase in women's access to higher education opportunities compared to men [2]. As a representative country of higher education feminization, the United States provides some noteworthy findings. Since the 1990s, women in the United States have not only caught up with men but have also surpassed them comprehensively, with white women leading the way [2]. Women make up 53.1% of adults with bachelor's degrees or above

in the United States, while males make up 46.9%, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Education for 2021 [3]. Similarly, in China, women are gradually gaining a significant presence in higher education. Over the ten years from 2000 to 2013, the number of Chinese female university students rose from 6.43 million to 13.65 million, representing a growth rate of approximately 112.33% [4]. In comparison, the number of Chinese male university students increased from 7.73 million to 12.83 million during the same decade, with a growth rate of 66.00%, much lower than that of female university students [4]. China and the United States are currently experiencing trends of feminization in higher education. However, despite women attaining higher educational degrees, their employment prospects are not optimistic. Women's higher education return cannot match their higher education attainment [1]. China and the United States share similarities and differences regarding the return on investment in higher education. Next, this paper will analyze the commonalities and differences in the return on investment in higher education in China and the United States from a gender equality perspective and provide recommendations to address inequality issues.

2. Concept Definition

Higher education return refers to the income, employment opportunities, and career development prospects a person can obtain after a higher education degree [5]. Returns to higher education are usually presented in the form of economic and career success, including improvements in salary levels, employment opportunities, career advancement, and social status [5].

3. Similarities

3.1 Facing Issues of Gender Inequality in Employment Opportunities

Gender conflicts in employment opportunities within higher education returns represent an unfair phenomenon individuals encounter due to gender differences during the initial screening of higher education returns [6]. In the United States, data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) indicates that in the employment rates of doctoral and professional master's degree holders, both women and men maintain relatively high employment rates. However, during 2004-2011, the employment rate for women was lower than that of men, particularly in 2010 and 2011, where women's employment rates were 1.9% lower than men's [7]. Over the eight years from 2004 to 2011, the average employment rate for women with professional degrees was 97.51%, while for men, it was 98.68%, with men outperforming women by 1.17% [7]. In China, gender inequality in post-graduation employment opportunities is also a significant concern. According to a survey conducted at a Chinese university, under the same conditions, female graduates had only 87.7% of the employment opportunities that male graduates had, and the initial employment rate for female graduates was only 63.4%, which was 8.7 percentage points lower than that of male graduates [1]. Additionally, according to a national statistical monitoring report, a survey of 62 cities across China revealed that 67% of employers imposed gender restrictions, undoubtedly negatively affecting female graduates' access to employment opportunities [8]. The Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (2021) reports that 81.4% of female university students encountered gender discrimination during their job-seeking process, with 37.1% experiencing repeated rejections [4]. Female university students face gender conflicts in the initial screening of educational returns, and gender discrimination is a severe issue.

3.2 Exhibiting Differences in Employment Levels Between Men and Women

In the United States, while there has been an increase in the number of female chief executive officers (CEOs) within Fortune 500 companies in 2021, it is still evident that the majority of companies are

led by men, outnumbering those led by women by a significant margin [9]. Additionally, nearly half of the U.S. workforce consists of women (47.0%) [7]. However, despite completing higher education and entering the workforce, some women find that their educational background does not provide sufficient career advancement opportunities. In fact, in 2021, only 40.9% of senior management positions were held by women, compared to their 47% representation in the labor force market [3]. This disparity indicates challenges in achieving greater equality in higher education outcomes and leadership positions within U.S. workplaces. In China, men and women occupy key team positions differently in businesses and organizations, which also makes a big difference in how much power they have [10]. According to a survey conducted among 636 Chinese companies, only 6.4% had female CEOs, and 26.3% had female chief financial officers (CFOs) [10]. Furthermore, a study by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (2021) revealed that women face obstacles when it comes to attaining high-level administrative roles at the provincial, municipal, and higher levels in government agencies and public sectors where decision-making power predominantly rests with men [4]. These findings highlight the challenges faced by women in both China and the United States as they strive for better career development.

3.3 Having Disparities in Employment Treatment Between Men and Women

The gender pay gap is a recognized issue of workplace inequality worldwide. Women in the US only make 79 cents for every dollar earned by men, resulting in an average salary that is just 79% of their male counterparts [2]. Moreover, male scientists earn \$29,000 more annually than female scientists; male doctors make \$15,000 more per year than female doctors and male teachers receive \$6,600 higher salaries compared to female teachers [2]. These statistics demonstrate an apparent trend: even when holding the same positions and performing the same job responsibilities as men, American women generally receive lower salaries. Similarly, China also experiences similar patterns. Despite Chinese Labor Laws stipulating equal pay for equal work between genders, a wage gap persists in the Chinese workplace [11]. According to data from the Chinese Government Website (2021), on average, female university graduates earn only 71.57% of what their male counterparts do [8]. To be more specific, women in the same positions or industries frequently face lower wages compared to men [6]. For instance, women still face wage disparities in equivalent positions in manufacturing, finance, or the technology sector [6]. This reflects the universality of the gender pay gap issue, not limited to a specific industry or region.

4. Differences

4.1 Some American Women Face More Challenging Employment Situations

The reasons for the career inequality American black women face can be traced back to intersectionality. Intersectionality highlights that an individual's social identities are not isolated but interconnected [12]. Intersectionality theory posits that understanding a person's or group's social status and experiences requires considering multiple identity factors rather than singular identity characteristics [12]. On one hand, black women in the United States face workplace discrimination due to their female identity. Gender-related factors contribute to some unequal treatment. On the other hand, their black identity also subjects them to racial discrimination in the workplace. These women not only encounter discrimination related to their gender but also face discrimination related to their race, and these two forms of discrimination intersect to create a unique social experience for American black women [12]. This results in them facing more obstacles in the job market, and their salary package is generally lower than that of white individuals [7]. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), black women's earnings in 2020 were only 63% of what white men earned in the United States [7]. In contrast, while Chinese women also face discrimination in their work, the

reasons for their discrimination are relatively singular. They experience some inequality based on their female social identity. China does not have a severe issue of racial discrimination. Therefore, American black women, with the dual social identities of gender and race affecting them in the workplace, face more complex oppression and inequalities than Chinese women, who are primarily influenced by a single identity factor.

4.2 Women in the United States Gain Significant Positions in Specific Fields

Some traditionally male-dominated occupations in the United States undergo profound gender equality transformations. For example, taking the legal profession as an example, the percentage of women lawyers holding valid law licenses has risen from 29% in 2000 to an inspiring 38% [13]. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), the employment rate of women in legal and law-related professions after graduation increased from 63.8% in 2010 to 68.5% in 2020 [7]. This indicates an increase in employment opportunities for women in the law field and a rise in higher education returns but also reflects the trend of women gradually occupying dominant positions in the legal sector. A similar trend is observable in the medical field. In 2022, the proportion of female medical students reached nearly 30%, a significant increase from the 10% in the 1970s [13]. However, in China, the educational return rates for women in these fields are somewhat disappointing. In China, national or local, the proportion of female judges remains relatively low, consistently hovering between 20% and 25% [14]. In some less developed areas, the proportion of female judges at grassroots courts is even lower, falling below 20% [14]. In healthcare, over 90% of registered nurses nationwide are female [15]. Fewer women enter fields like surgery or hold higher-level and more remunerative positions, such as surgeons [15]. Women do not have an advantage in salary levels, career advancement, and social status after graduation.

4.3 Differences in the Impact of Family Factors and Traditional Beliefs on Women's Higher Education Returns

In China, the family is seen as the foundation of society, and traditional beliefs place importance on women's roles within the family [16]. These values often portray women as primary caregivers and educators for children, prioritizing family stability and happiness [16]. As higher education becomes more common among women, these traditional beliefs can cause a dilemma for them: choosing between career success or focusing on family life. Despite significant progress in Chinese women's higher education, they still face constraints from family factors and traditional beliefs when participating in the workplace. Decisions about career development are influenced by considerations related to family responsibilities, thus impacting how far they can pursue their career goals. This, in turn, affects various aspects like salary levels, employment rates, career advancement, and social status after investing in higher education [16]. In contrast, American culture emphasizes individual autonomy and freedom to pursue career achievements [2]. While gender equality challenges exist in the United States as well, societal pressures are comparatively lesser than those in China [2]. This allows American women greater freedom to choose their paths without being constrained by social or familial expectations [2].

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of gender equity, there are similarities and differences in higher education returns between China and the United States. Similarities include gender inequality in employment opportunities, differences in employment levels, and disparities in employment treatment in both countries. Differences include lower higher education returns for black women in the United States compared to Chinese women, the gradual advancement of American women in some traditionally

male-dominated fields compared to Chinese women, and the greater influence of family factors and traditional beliefs on Chinese women's higher education returns compared to the situation in the United States. Several measures can be taken to address the issue of unfair higher education returns and promote gender equality. Firstly, strengthening anti-gender discrimination laws is essential. Relevant authorities should enhance and rigorously enforce anti-gender discrimination laws to reduce the unfair treatment of women in the workplace. Secondly, promoting women into leadership positions and encouraging them to enter non-traditional fields after graduation is an effective way to reduce gender discrimination in the workplace and increase women's higher education returns. Governments and enterprises can take action to encourage more women to take on leadership roles and enter fields traditionally dominated by men. They can provide leadership training, scholarships, and career development programs to attract more women. In addition, the implementation of family-friendly policies is crucial. Employers should offer parental leave to help women balance their professional and family responsibilities better. Lastly, public awareness and changes in traditional culture are also conducive to improving the issue of unfair higher education returns for women. Nations can use social media and hold cultural events to promote gender equality, allowing women to engage in career development more freely.

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