

Feminist Identity and Expression among Female Normal School Students in China

Liyuan Lyu *

Department of Special Education, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 10214503008@stu.ecnu.edu.cn

Abstract. Female normal school students are a special group of university students with intersecting identities of "teacher trainee" and "female". Studies have found that women face gender dilemmas in their professional studies, career development, and social life. In the face of such dilemmas, feminist ideas have been widely disseminated, but people's feminist identity is still developing. Currently, there is still a research gap for Chinese female normal school students' gender dilemma and their feminist identity. Therefore, through the literature review method, this study combs through the gender dilemmas of female teacher educators in their professional learning, career acquisition, and career development, delving deeply into their feminist identities and expressions. This study finds that the gender dilemmas of female normal school students stem from the student's lack of individual subjectivity, unequal opportunities in society, the "masculine policy" in school recruitment, the glass elevator effect in career development, and the social expectations of women's roles. Under the guidance of the teacher training program and the influence of women's self-awareness awakening, the feminist identity of female normal school students gradually manifests itself through teaching practice and social life. They are using their efforts to spread gender equality awareness and change the stereotypical image of female teachers.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist identity, female normal school students, gender dilemmas.

1. Introduction

As of 2021, there are 18, 257, 460 undergraduate students in China, of which 9, 804, 641 are female, accounting for 53.70% of the total number of students, exceeding the proportion of male students [1]. Women are increasingly involved in higher education, especially in teacher training colleges. Although women's participation in higher education is increasing, they still face several genders-specific dilemmas in their choice of specialization, employment opportunities, and career development. Especially in the field of teacher education, female normal school students not only have to face the constraints of traditional gender role concepts but also must deal with gender bias in education policies and the job market [2]. Against this background, feminist identity has become an important way for female teacher educators to seek self-knowledge and development.

Currently, there is a research gap on the gender dilemma and feminist identity of female normal school students in China. By revealing the gender problems faced by female normal school students, this paper explores the construction of feminist identity in the growth path of women from teacher trainees to female teachers, to contribute to the promotion of gender-equal education and the enhancement of women's social status. At the same time, this study also helps to enrich the research perspectives of feminist theory localization in China and promote the in-depth development of gender studies in the field of education.

This study focuses on the feminist identities and expressions of female normal school students in China. Specifically, this paper will analyze the three dimensions of gender dilemma, feminist identity, and feminist expression. This paper employs a literature review method to systematically examine the challenges faced by female teacher educators in their professional learning, career acquisition, career development, and social lives. It also delves into the construction and expression of their feminist identity.

On the one hand, this paper reveals the feminist identities of female normal school students in the context of gender dilemmas, including their strategies to cope with gender dilemmas with feminist identities in their professional learning, career development, and social life; on the other hand, it

analyzes how female normal school students express their feminist identities through the reconstruction of their teaching practices and teaching images, as well as the impact and implications of such expression on the concept of gender in the society. It is hoped that this study will provide useful references and lessons for promoting the comprehensive development of female normal school students and the in-depth implementation of gender equality education.

2. Gender Dilemmas in the Development of Female Normal School Students

2.1. Gender Dilemmas in Academic Development

The personal subjectivity of female teacher educators is deficient when applying for teacher education programs. Scholar research has shown that female students in China prefer weak-risk majors such as humanities and social sciences, while male students prefer relatively high-risk majors such as science. Teacher training majors are especially favored by students' parents because of their strong employment orientation and stable future jobs. By the end of 2019, 6.1 times more female students than male students are enrolled in normal majors [3]. However, female students in normal schools often struggle to demonstrate subjectivity when applying for higher education programs. When choosing their majors, female students lack a perfect and comprehensive plan for their knowledge of their majors and future and are more dependent on the opinions of others. Wang Lihong launched a qualitative study on female college students' choice of majors from a gender perspective. The study found that when female students chose their majors, their parents would persuade them to major in teacher training from the standpoint of female students' character strengths, the benefits of female students becoming teachers, and the weak risks of teacher training majors [4]. The students have ambiguous plans and development for themselves, so they are willing to choose to accept and adopt the advice from their parents and enroll in the teacher training program.

Women face unequal opportunities when choosing a teacher training program. Fujian, Jiangsu, and Henan provinces have implemented policies that open free teacher education to boys only or use preferential policies to encourage boys to enroll in teacher training programs. Such policies are intended to intervene in the current situation in Fujian province, where the gender structure of the elementary school and early childhood teaching force is in sharp conflict and male teachers are scarce. However, they also raise the barriers to enrollment for female students. In Fujian Province, for instance, from 2015 to 2020, the Fujian Provincial Department of Education piloted the Fujian Province Teacher Training Pilot Measures for Free Education for Teacher Trainees, proposing that a pilot program for free teacher training for primary and early childhood education would be carried out in five teacher training colleges in Fujian. The free education in this approach is only for male Fujian college entrance examination candidates, and students are exempted from tuition fees, accommodation fees, and teacher training student grants during their time in school. In other teacher-training programs in the province, if the quota reserved for male students is not filled, male students can be admitted at a reduced score, while female students are admitted at a score more than 100 points higher than that of males [5]. Such a practice reinforces gender bias and masks the problem of gender inequality in education. In 2020 China's Ministry of Education issued the Circular on Doing a Good Job in the Enrollment Work of Ordinary Colleges and Universities in 2021, mentioning that except for colleges and universities in special fields such as military, national defense, and public security, other colleges and universities are not able to stipulate the differences in the ratio of men to women in admission, which to a certain extent adjusts the problem of gender inequality in the selection of teacher training majors [6].

Yet gender-based disciplinary stereotypes still exist in the various subject choices within teacher training programs. Teacher training programs in China generally include subjects such as Chinese language and literature, history, mathematics, physics, and special education. Patricia Alonso-Ruido et al. studied the gender discipline stereotypes of college students and found that college students tend to connect humanities with girls and science and engineering with boys so that the proportion of female students in the teacher training majors of liberal arts are higher [7]. Taking the author's East

China Normal University as an example, the male-to-female ratio of English teacher training majors in the class of 2024 is 1:5, and the male-to-female ratio of Chinese language majors is 3:7, which is in a state of extreme imbalance.

2.2. Gender Dilemmas in Obtaining Employment

To ensure the "masculine" attributes of the teaching force, school recruitment will be tilted in favor of men. Adjusting the imbalance in the gender structure of the teaching force with a "masculinity policy" reinforces male privilege. For example, in a situation where female students make up more than half of the teacher training graduates, Changzhi City, Shanxi Province, proposed in 2019 to explore the possibility of setting up a 1:1 ratio of male to female for teacher recruitment, with men and women being recruited based on excellence [8]. In the case of more female normal school students, equal employment opportunities can only be obtained if female students are more outstanding. Such a recruitment program changes recruitment from a competition between men and women on the same stage to a competition between persons of the same gender.

Schools with a high number of female teachers reaching the fertile age tend to recruit male students. With the opening of China's three-child policy in 2021, many schools are taking precautions against female teachers' pregnancies interfering with school work. The male advantage of teacher trainees becomes more apparent when there is a disproportionately high percentage of female teachers of the fertile age in the teaching force [9]. Schools perceive that as male teachers they have no problem with pregnancy affecting their work. Also, at the same time when other female teachers in the school become pregnant, they can be the ones to share the workload, so these schools will prefer to recruit male normal school students.

2.3. Gender Dilemmas in Career Development and Social Evaluation

The "glass elevator" effect holds back women's career advancement. The "glass elevator" effect refers to the fact that male employees in female-dominated occupations have better benefits than their male counterparts in male-dominated companies [10]. Male employees typically receive higher salaries, enjoy more opportunities for advancement, and are more likely to rise to top positions than their female counterparts. Existing research suggests that the glass elevator effect in the teaching profession exists throughout the development of the teaching profession.

There are barriers to promotion for women in the developmental stages of the teaching profession. Research surveyed a sample of 17772 elementary schools and 1093 secondary schools and found that the gender structure of teachers and principals is inverted: 2:8 for elementary school teachers and 6:4 for principals; 3:7 for junior high school teachers and 8:2 for principals [11]. Women are faced with homogenized selection mechanisms, institutional barriers to principal training and selection, and other obstacles to male career development in the teaching profession, while men enjoy advantages in the development of the teaching profession.

Influenced by the patriarchal system, women receive cultural knowledge and social role concepts different from those of men from an early age, and under the combined effect of family, school, and society, women internalize gender culture into their consciousness and form socio-cultural roles. When people make decisions that are inconsistent with their gender roles, socio-cultural constraints may marginalize them [12]. Based on this social role expectation, girls are choosing the teacher training program. However, if some of their studies find that they are not suited to be teachers or do not like to be teachers, they, for fear of being marginalized by the social culture, cater to the social role expectations and choose to engage in the profession of teaching, which they do not like, after graduation.

3. Feminist Identity of Female Normal School Students

3.1. Feminist Identity in Academic and Professional Development

The ideology and politics course in colleges and universities is an important part of university education. Ideological education in Chinese colleges and universities is consciously integrating correct gender cognition and value concepts into the education process, awakening women's sense of subjectivity and rights. Moreover, the ideology and politics courses not only need to educate female students in the traditional sense of female ideology but also focus on cultivating and guiding male students to form rational and positive gender cognition and the concept of common development of both genders [13]. First, the ideology and politics courses in Chinese universities at the present stage take Marxism as their basic position and organically incorporate Marxist views and theories on women into the existing education and teaching system. For example, ideological and political education centered on women's issues, the protection of women's rights and interests, the development of people's livelihoods, and the historical experience of social movements involved in construction are discussed in the classroom. Secondly, in the teaching of ideological and political education, by introducing the theoretical and practical achievements of Western feminism and comparing the differences between the capitalist feminist movement and the socialist women's emancipation process in the ephemeral and the co-temporal, students are guided to identify the nature of the pluralistic women's cultures and the complex social trends. Thirdly, in the Civics class, the Civics teacher will respond specifically to the real-life problems related to women and feminism that young students encounter in their lives [14].

Comprehensive quality education for teachers includes the cultivation of the concept of gender equality education to ensure that teacher trainees have a sense of gender equality after teacher training. The basic courses for teacher trainees include Principles and Methods of Moral Education, History of Chinese and Foreign Educational Thought, Principles of Education, and so on. The textbooks for these courses published by East China Normal University are rich in stories of women teachers' growth. At the same time, they critically think about the traditional Chinese cultural ideology of the gender order of male superiority and female inferiority, and the feudal moral and religious norms that put women in an inferior position. In addition, the comparison of Chinese and foreign educational thought enriches the teacher trainees' concept of gender equality and enhances their feminist identity.

3.2. Feminist Identity in Career Development

Young female teachers are becoming more aware of gender equality in their teaching activities. Some studies have found that there are some differences in teachers' gender awareness and cognition with the difference in teaching age [15]. Teachers with lower teaching ages are closer to new ideological changes, more in favor of gender equality, and less influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Young female teacher trainees are more likely to take the initiative to practice gender equality education in schools after graduation as teachers. In addition, the more educated an individual is, the more likely she is to advocate for gender equality [16]. As the proportion of female teachers with higher education continues to increase, they are also more likely to emphasize a relatively fairer attitude and way of treating male and female students in teaching.

Female teachers have awakened their self-awareness in their professional development, and their feminist identity has become more obvious. The difficulties in the career development of female teachers in schools are mostly centered on the decline of career level, insufficient promotion space, and the difficulty of balancing family and career [17]. A culture of gender equality can be more conducive to releasing female charisma and giving female teachers better development opportunities, and many female teachers will take the initiative to learn about this. Some female teachers have also seen the plight of women in their professional development and have set up women's development organizations, such as the public welfare organization "Care for Her", which focuses on female teachers in rural elementary schools, helping them to solve their physical and mental health problems

and to improve their teaching and management standards, to provide fairer career development opportunities for female educators.

3.3. Feminist Identity in Social Life

Female normal school students actively practice feminist values in their daily lives, demonstrating the independence and self-confidence of women in the new era.

In their daily lives, they advocate gender equality, oppose gender discrimination, use it for expression, are not afraid of challenges, and speak up for women with practical actions. They are concerned about women's rights and interests, and actively participate in public welfare activities, such as fundraising and publicity for women's education and health issues, and strive to create an inclusive and harmonious social atmosphere. At the same time, they also focus on self-improvement, continue to learn new knowledge, broaden their horizons, and face life and the future with a more open mind. The female normal school students have interpreted the core spirit of feminism with their practical actions, i.e. pursuing equality, respecting differences, advocating justice, and gradually changing the stereotypes of women in society with their own efforts.

Female normal school students tend to regard themselves as members of the female group and establish close ties and interactions with other students. They are willing to share each other's experiences, emotions, and opinions, and work together to safeguard women's rights and dignity. In the face of gender discrimination or injustice, they were able to unite and fight together for more rights and opportunities for women.

4. Feminist Expressions of Female Normal School Students

4.1. Spreading Feminist Awareness through Teaching

Women spread feminist and gender equality awareness through classroom teaching. The Programme for the Development of Chinese Women (2001-2010) explicitly provides for the incorporation of gender awareness into teacher training curricula to make teachers more gender-sensitive [18]. In the latest Programme for the Development of Chinese Women (2021-2030), it is further proposed that efforts be made to increase the education, dissemination, and popularization of scientific knowledge for women [19]. Guided by the spirit of the Outline, teacher training colleges are also increasing the number of courses on gender education and feminist education. The tendency of female normal school students to choose feminist and gender-aware topics in micro-teaching, educational internships, and study reports is increasing. Female normal school students understand as future teachers-to-be, their educational concepts and behaviors are diffuse, radiant, and continuous. Their own gender experiences not only influence their concepts and behaviors but will also be diffused and reinforced through education. Education is not only the transmission of knowledge but also the shaping of values and the promotion of gender equality. In the classroom, they skillfully incorporate the concepts of feminism and gender equality through well-designed curricular content according to the student's academic level, guiding students to realize that gender should not be a shackle limiting their personal development. They encourage students to think about the diversity of gender roles and challenge traditional gender stereotypes, thereby developing critical thinking and gender sensitivity.

4.2. Reinvention of the Female Teacher Image

The image of teachers based on a gender role view is being changed. Traditional gender role concepts categorize men and women in a binary way, limiting each person to a fixed role type and restricting individual development. On the one hand, the image of female teachers in the future society is a reconstruction of the traditional gender roles, in which female teachers are no longer only the transmitters of knowledge, but also the guides and supporters of students' overall development. They can show stronger leadership and innovation while having more autonomy and choice in the family and society. Women play an equally important role as men in academic research and school

management and should enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men in the field of education, and gender stereotypes should be eliminated from the education process. On the other hand, female normal school students, as future teachers, construct the image of a perfect teacher with a bisexualized personality. The theory of bisexual personality advocates that people, whether male or female, can combine the strengths of both male and female gender roles.

5. Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the gender dilemmas faced by female normal school students in China and their feminist identities. Through the study, it is found that female normal school students encounter different degrees of gender dilemmas in their professional learning, career acquisition, and career development. These dilemmas are not only reflected in unequal opportunities for professional choice and barriers to career advancement but also deeply affect their social evaluation and sense of self. However, with the widespread dissemination of feminist ideas and the advancement of educational reform, teacher education programs have consciously conveyed feminist ideas to female teacher educators, and female teacher educators have demonstrated a certain degree of feminist identity in their professional development and social life. They spread the awareness of gender equality through classroom teaching, try to change the traditional image of teachers, and practice feminist values in their daily lives, showing the independence and self-confidence of women in the new era.

This study reveals the complexity and diversity of female normal school students' gender dilemmas, filling a gap in the current research field. At the same time, this paper also finds that feminist identity has a positive impact on the growth and development of female normal school students. It not only helps female normal school students to improve their self-knowledge, but also encourages them to actively practice gender equality in their work, and helps them to strive for more rights and opportunities in social life. In addition, the expression of feminism in the teaching practice and image of female normal school students is of great significance to the promotion of gender equality and the elimination of gender stereotypes in the field of education.

In the future, it is expected that more studies will focus on the gender dilemmas and feminist identities of female normal school students to further enrich and improve the research in this field. At the same time, a call is also made for education departments and schools to take more proactive measures to provide more opportunities and resources for female normal school students to help them overcome their gender dilemmas and realize their self-growth and development. In addition, with the enhancement of gender equality education and the promotion of gender awareness in the whole society, a fairer, more inclusive, and harmonious social environment should be created for female normal school students. Through these efforts, it is expected that more female teacher trainees will be able to play a greater role in the future educational and professional fields.

References

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Number of Female Students of Schools by Type and Level, (2020-06-11) [2024-10-20]. http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_560/2020/quanguo/202108/t20210831_556360.html.
- [2] Chen Yan & Li Xin Sherry. Group Identity and Social Preferences. *The American Economic Review*, 2009, 99 (1): 431 - 457.
- [3] Wang Weiyl & Xie Desheng. Who Are Studying in Normal Majors in Universities? *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2023, (01): 38 - 47+205.
- [4] Wang, L. H. Research on female college students' major choice under a gender perspective, Shanghai Normal University, 2018.
- [5] Fujian Provincial Department of Education. Notice on the Issuance of Measures for Free Education for Teacher Students in Fujian Province (for Trial Implementation), (2025-06-01) [2024-10-24]. https://jyt.fujian.gov.cn/xxgk/zywj/201506/t20150603_3179731.htm.

- [6] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Circular of the Ministry of Education on Doing a Good Job in the Enrollment Work of Ordinary Colleges and Universities in 2021, Bulletin of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021, (3): 12 - 29.
- [7] Patricia Alonso-Ruido, Iris Estévez, Cristina Varela-Portela; Bibiana Regueiro. College Students' Stereotyped Beliefs. *Social Sciences*, 2023, 12 (5): 1 - 11.
- [8] Zhang Huijun. Changzhi City: Deepening Basic Education Reform "Ten Major Actions". *Shanxi Education (Management)*, 2020, (1): 14 - 17.
- [9] Kerry Robinson, Charol Shakeshaft, Margaret Grogan, Whitney Sherman Newcomb. Necessary but Not Sufficient: The Continuing Inequality between Men and Women in Educational Leadership, Findings from the American Association of School Administrators Mid-Decade Survey. *Frontiers in Education*, 2017, 2: 12.
- [10] Williams, Christine L. The glass escalator: hidden advantages for men in the "female" professions. *Social Problems*, 1992, (3).
- [11] Cai Ru, Zhang Xingping, Yao Jijun, Zhou Shike. Gender difference or gender discrimination? An Empirical Study on the Phenomenon of "Female Soldiers and Male Generals" among Principals of Elementary and Secondary School. *Journal of Education*, 2023, 19 (5): 145 - 161.
- [12] Ramirez, Francisco O., Wotipka, Min C. Slowly but surely? The global expansion of women's participation in science and engineering fields of study, 1972-92: a Magazine of Theory and Practice. *Sociology of Education*, 2001, 74(3): 231 - 251.
- [13] Cheng, Mingli. Gender equality education opens new thinking for moral education in colleges and universities in the new era. *Journal of Tonghua Normal College*, 2018, 39 (05): 7 - 11.
- [14] Shin, W. H. The Importance of Women's Thought Education in Civics Classes of Colleges and Universities in the New Era. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Science Edition)* 2021, 48 (06): 21 - 26.
- [15] Zhang Dan, Kristin Detthead. Teachers' Gender Awareness and Perceived Differences under the Perspective of Educational Equity - An Example from Shanghai Elementary School Classrooms. *Global Education Perspectives*, 2018, (08), 69 - 81.
- [16] Xiaoling Shu. Education and Gender Egalitarianism: The Case of China. *Sociology of Education*. 2004, 77 (4): 311 - 336.
- [17] Wang, Shiyu. An analysis of work-family conflict dilemmas among middle-class working women in contemporary China. *Western Journal*, 2021, (16): 32 - 35.
- [18] The Office of the Working Committee on Women and Children under the State Council. Study Materials for the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2001-2010). Beijing: China Women's Press, 2003.
- [19] The State Council. Circular of the State Council on the issuance of the Outline for the Development of Chinese Women and the Outline for the Development of Chinese Children, (2021-09-08) [2024-10-25]. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2021-09/27/content_5639412.htm.