

On the basis of sex: a liberal feminist analysis of women's struggle for education

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the portrayal of women's struggles for education as depicted in the Hollywood film "On the Basis of Sex." It seeks to address the pervasive influence of patriarchal dominance that impedes women's educational rights. The narrative is primarily framed around the life experiences of the film's central figure, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who contends with male counterparts in her quest for admission to prestigious law school programs in the United States. Simultaneously, feminists advocate for education as a cornerstone for women's empowerment and gender equality. It empowers women to become agents of change, thereby emphasising their equal rights to shape a better world. The research adopts a qualitative approach, collecting both primary and secondary data, and employs liberal feminist critical theory for data analysis. Key findings reveal the disadvantaged state of American women in the late 1950s, marked by limited educational access. Despite these obstacles, women, exemplified by Ginsburg, displayed unwavering determination and unity in their pursuit of improved educational opportunities, subsequently expanding their presence in the legal profession and public employment. Ginsburg's remarkable journey serves as an enduring symbol of resilience and inspiration for others, reaffirming the notion that education is a universal right transcending gender barrier.

Keywords: *women's struggle; education; patriarchal domination; women's empowerment; liberal feminist theory*

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Introduction

The International Seminar on Women's Education and Empowerment convened by the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) and the Principal Regional Office for Asia and Pacific (PROAP) in 1995 reported that the conditions of women's education in different parts of the world are similar (Medel-Anonuevo, 1995) e.g., stereotyping formal and informal education. It implies that women are not the leading group to access schools. It situates them under discrimination while schooling is considered a powerful tool for reducing their negative inequality to their counterparts. It is an essential milestone of women's empowerment that enables them to face challenges and to live their lives better. Wollstonecraft strengthens this idea of educational power for women. In

her book, *the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she was extremely confident in women's abilities, that women must absorb their own identities from knowledge, education, and reason (Wollstonecraft, 1992). As a feminist of the early modern time, she encouraged women to share their rights and grow more perfect than just emancipated.

In nearly the 18th century in the United States, men had to attend classes, as the women not (Madigan, 2009). The latter were much prepared for being future wives and mothers rather than for attending schools. This idea clarifies that education for women is not essential, apart from the statement of the United Nations declaring that education is a human right to which all human beings are entitled. However, women's education and

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empowerment got attention, and action on women's concerns has steadily increased, either in forms of consciousness-raising or skills acquisition since the declaration of the Decade of Women by the UN in 1975.

Some previous studies about women's struggle for education have proved that the issue is still sensitive and misconceived. Pramesti and Widayanti (Pramesti & Widayanti, 2019) exemplify that societies still have prejudices or misconceptions about family, traditions, and women's position. It certainly causes women to suffer from the inequality of education to men, in particular. Their places are in the kitchen and becoming mothers for their children. It then situates men in their best position and women in unintelligence. Giving them accesses to education can move them from a weak place to execute a power (Sahoo & Mishra, 2020). Accordingly, King and Winthrop promote seven benefits of girl's or woman's education to society. The benefits may share among the following aspects, 1) A country's leadership and entrepreneurial aptitude; 2) Economic growth; 3) Work equality; 4) Health and reproduction; 5) Future investment; 6) Self, familial, and environmental protection; 7) human rights (King & Winthrop, 2015)

In addition to these points, women's access to education remains unequal, a prevailing theme in numerous literary works. The portrayal of uneducated women is a recurrent motif in literature, where their struggles for education emerge as prominent issues (Asri, 2014; Diana & Hayati, 2018; Pramesti & Widayanti, 2019)). This disparity can be attributed to gender differences in patriarchal societies (Winarti & Kusuma, 2017), where men tend to possess the majority of resources, while women are often relegated to domestic and family responsibilities (Patil, 2023). However, research focusing on this matter is both captivating and imperative for advancing women's empowerment and fostering social awareness.

Therefore, this research on Mimi Leder's film, *On the Basis of Sex*, which was released in 2018, is particularly noteworthy due to its poignant exploration of a highly sensitive and profound issue. It delicately encapsulates a woman's journey striving for an improved life while contending with pervasive male supremacy across various dimensions. The

cinematic work projects the image of a liberal and feminist icon through a process akin to heroification. The portrayal of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's extraordinary journey highlights her transformation into a top student and a lawyer, a transformative achievement that underscores women's empowerment outside the confinement of traditional domestic roles (Journell, 2020). However, this achievement does not come without its attendant challenges, most notably in the form of persistent gender discrimination (Sitepu & Diandora, 2020). These nuanced perspectives certainly serve as the foundational framework for this study. Employing the critical paradigm of liberal feminism, this research seeks to delve deeper into the intricate dynamics of women's pursuit of enhanced educational opportunities and their endeavour to harness education as a means of self-empowerment.

As a critical theory, liberal feminism puts inequality of rights and opportunities between men and women. The idea sees women's position in society, regarding their artificial barriers for participation in the public world, beyond the family and household. Accordingly, the concept of liberal feminism focuses on the same opportunity in education, political rights and economics, freeing women from the lowest condition (Puspitasari, 2016). The educational strategy offered by liberal feminists brings a fundamental goal for women's power at large (Sultana, 1990). In a most specific term, the theory criticizes that the social system must be importantly impartial. All deviations, including the educational right, may most likely happen due to inadequate data about women's problems and the legal constitution to cope with them. The most recommended solution is the State's almsgiving contribution to formulate and assure women's freedom of education and other social and economic domains (Stromquist, 1990).

To some extent, the State's participation in the legislation design and implementation will be advantageous for women's continuous access to better schooling. In the end, women can determine their destiny. In doing so, Enyew and Mihrete (Enyew & Mihrete, 2018) add that giving more access to the public sphere is vital to provide men and women equal opportunities to attain gender equality.

In short, liberal feminism emphasizes individual rights, encouraging women to actualise their full personhood and gain women's autonomy and gender equity. Liberal feminists put its fundamental opposite criticism towards the patriarchal ideas that interfere with women's individual and political choices. In doing so, some policies are issued to remove the barriers to protect sex and gender discrimination, e.g., The Equal Rights Amendment or Title IX of the United States Educational Amendment Acts of 1972

Method

The study applied a qualitative method that explores and explains social phenomena that occur or operate in a particular context. It gives aids to grasp the social world where we live and why things go as they are (Polkinghorne, 2005). It excludes statistical analysis and empirical calculation (Brink, 1993). Hence, the research tries to analyse a

Result and Discussion

This part discusses the data findings and the result of the research concerning the problem: women's struggle for education represented by Ruth Bader Ginsburg as the movie's main character. The analysis of the data covers three main parts: (a) women's condition in the United States in the 1950s, b) Ruth's struggle for education, and c) Ruth as a heroine.

Women in 1950s

In the 1950s, American culture had produced the "Perfect Women" idea that placed them in a domestic locale. Childbearing and taking care of households signified their roles.

regulated educational institutions receiving federal financial aids (Bailey, 2016).

The impact of Title IX on American women's education was significant. Based on Equal Access to Education Forty Years of Title IX (2012), increasing the number of women pursuing higher education in 2009, approximately 87 per cent and 28 per cent of women earn more degrees. Allowing women to make education is linked to other benefits, such as participation in the labour force, increased earnings, better health and increased access to healthcare.

social phenomenon in the early sixteenth century American society, especially concerning women's fight for education. The analysis uses the images and script of the movie as the primary data and some information from the related journals, books, and digital sources as the secondary data. The analysis utilizes the liberal theory of feminism, especially by Mary Wollstonecraft.

The idea even became the national campaign that assigned women to stay at home, being comfortable with washing dishes, preparing meals, and cleaning their house. That was how they would become "the Perfect Women" (Lamb, 2011). Indeed, the idea blocked women from participating in public affairs to contribute in social and national development. This condition also appears in the movie as the object of this study, where women have no chances for public access, including education. For the American government, education was a privilege for men only. In the movie, this fact occurs to Emily as one of the characters.



Figure 1. Emily told everyone the reason why she joined as a Harvard law student in front of people.

Emily : Emily Hicks. Hello. Connecticut. When I finished Mt. Holyoke, my mother wanted me to get married. But I didn't want to do that. And I didn't want to be a teacher or a nurse. So when I--

Griswold : Ha. That's not a very good reason.

The figure above shows Emily's initiative to introduced herself to her friends and professors and explained her reason why she joined the Harvard law school. At first, she

was told by her mother to be a teacher or nurse, but she then decided to advance her education at the law major.



Figure 2. Ruth answers all eyes' questions of studying at Harvard.

Ruth : I'm Ruth Ginsburg, from Brooklyn.

Griswold : And why are you here Miss Ginsburg?

Ruth : Mrs. Ginsburg, actually. My husband Marty is in the second-year class. I'm at Harvard to learn about his work. So I can be a more patient and understanding wife.

On the other hand, Ginsburg's motivation for pursuing her college education diverged significantly. Her educational pursuit was driven by the aspiration to become a more proficient spouse for her future husband. She believed that acquiring education would afford her an enhanced comprehension of her husband's world, enabling her to fulfil her domestic role more effectively. Her decision to enrol as a law student, particularly within a primarily male-dominated field, unveiled a remarkable courage. It implied that her quest for legal knowledge was aimed at not only navigating the male-centric sphere but also augmenting her competence in both her domestic and public roles.

Emily and Ginsburg serve as exemplars of women who courageously contested the prevailing archetype of the "Perfect Woman," a construct that had long constrained women within traditional domestic roles. Their resolute pursuit of education underscores the notion that women are full-fledged citizens, possessed of equal rights to their male counterparts across all spheres. This unequivocally substantiates the ideals articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft regarding women's entitlement to educational rights, premised on the belief that women, when empowered through education, can contribute to the cultivation of more robust generations and actively engage in public sectors.



Figure 3. Among the male crowds, Ginsburg enters an impressive building with columned arches.

However, Ginsburg's aspiration to become the first female lawyer confronted formidable challenges, primarily due to the entrenched privileges enjoyed by men in this profession. In the United States, the legal field was considered prestigious and predominantly dominated by men who had been systematically groomed for professional legal careers through their education at the esteemed Harvard Law School. Consequently, it was a rare occurrence for women to gain entry into this institution, given the prevailing male dominance.

As vividly portrayed in the above-mentioned scene, Ginsburg's solitary journey through the architectural corridors of the institution stands as a poignant symbol of her isolated presence as the sole female student amidst a sea of male peers. This powerful imagery is further underscored by the resonating music echoing throughout the edifice, which aptly symbolises the prevailing climate of male ambition and triumph, as embodied in the title of the composition, "Ten Thousand Men of Harvard." The lyrics of this composition are particularly emblematic of this ethos and serve as a compelling testament to the prevailing male-centric ambiance that Ginsburg had to navigate during her pursuit of a legal education.

"Ten Thousand Men of Harvard want victory today.
For they know that o'er old Eli, fair Harvard holds sway.
So then we'll conquer all old Eli's men.
And when the game ends, we'll sing again.
Ten thousand men of Harvard gained victory today"

The song reverberated throughout the building, and men, adorned in impeccably tailored dark suits and sporting self-assured grins, entered the auditorium. The lyric, with its persistent repetition of the words "men" and "victory," serves to highlight the prevailing dominance and influence of men. Of particular significance is the recurring use of the term "Eli," which, in Hebrew, signifies elevation or loftiness. This linguistic choice serves as a vivid representation of the perception that men are the future leaders of America who will safeguard and uphold the principles of law enforcement. In the American cultural context, the role of a lawyer is intrinsically linked to that of a future leader, dedicated to the preservation and implementation of the rule of law in the nation. This sentiment was eloquently expressed by Professor Erwin Griswold, one of the prominent characters whose speech held considerable influence and resonated widely.

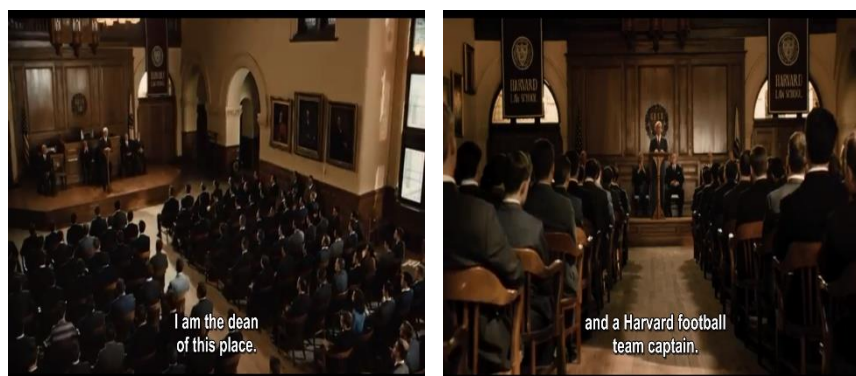


Figure 4. Prof Griswold asserted that the profession was pride and prestige for all American men, especially those graduated from Harvard.

Professor Griswold : "Together, you will become lawyers. It is a privilege you share. And a responsibility that you accept. Consider: what does it mean to be a Harvard man? A Harvard man is intelligent, of course. But he is also tenacious. He is a leader devoted to the rule of law. He is mindful of his country. Loyal to tradition. And he is respectful and protective of our institutions."

The professor's address highlighted the dual importance of pride and responsibility for American lawyers, particularly those who

graduated from Harvard. These qualities constituted the standard for a Harvard-educated lawyer. Pride in the legal profession

was closely associated with intellectual consistency and unwavering determination. Responsibility, on the other hand, was demonstrated through a lawyer's resolute dedication to upholding the rule of law, a strong commitment to the welfare of the nation,

a solid respect for tradition, and a faithful protection of legal institutions. For some women like Ginsburg, these emphasised characteristics appeared to pose a formidable challenge when considering a career in law.



Figure 5. Ginsburg applied to be a lawyer in Greene's office.

- Ginsburg : Mr. Greene. I want to be a lawyer. I want to represent clients before the court in pursuit of justice. (*replies her resume*) You can see I worked hard through school. I did everything I was supposed to, and I excelled. I swear it: I'll do the same for you.
- Greene : Thing is... We're a close-knit firm. Almost like family. And well--the wives, they get jealous.

The statement implies male scepticism regarding women's capabilities. After successfully completing law school, Ginsburg, not discouraged by Professor Griswold's earlier remarks, sought to establish a legal career. Her academic achievements encouraged her belief that she could excel as a professional lawyer, akin to men. In pursuit of this goal, she applied for a position at Mr. Green's law firm. Unfortunately, her application met with an ambiguous rejection. Mr. Green contended that his law firm was highly competitive and challenging, indicating potential difficulties for women. He also suggested that Ginsburg's success might arouse jealousy among other women. Nevertheless, his concluding tone unmistakably indicated that women entering the legal profession would infringe upon privileges traditionally held by men.

This situation underscores the lack of equal opportunities for women in a patriarchal society. Women are frequently marginalised and find it challenging to access public spheres, such as pursuing a career as a lawyer or receiving equal pay for comparable work to men. These inequalities persist because of

men's authority. Consequently, women often occupy subordinate roles relative to men.

Viewed through the lens of liberal feminism, the experiences of Ginsburg and Emily, as detailed above, serve as compelling illustrations of the systemic inequality in rights. The pervasive influence of patriarchy actively inhibits their access to various spheres of society. In patriarchal societies, the prevailing belief perpetuates the notion that a woman's primary role is to stay at home and manage the household, while their husbands are the primary breadwinners. Society often assumes that men inherently possess superior intelligence and bear the responsibility of sustaining the household. Consequently, women are often denied the agency to make choices about their own lives.

The core principle of liberal feminism accentuates the imperative of gender equality to facilitate women's meaningful participation in public and social life. This equality necessitates granting women the opportunities to access higher education, receive equitable compensation for similar work, secure voting rights, and the capacity to pursue public office

(Anderson, 2016). Liberal feminism advocates for creating such opportunities, thereby affording women liberation from oppressive

Ruth's Struggle for Education

Education is the first step for empowering men and women to contribute to more remarkable aspects of life. However, in reality, women often experience

systems, patriarchy, and gender discrimination.

discrimination. As shared by Ginsburg, women's struggle for education is irrespective. Expressing opinion in public is a forbidden thing for women to do, including making a career.



Figure 6. Ruth wants to answer the question and raise her hand.

When Ginsburg competed with the other students to participate in the class discussion, the professor did not give her a chance, although she raised her hand first. She decided to raise her hand again to provide correction and clarification to another student's answer. Finally, a pair of men shared glances, and the class laughed after she gave the correct answer. The scene above illustrates that

Ginsburg tried to speak up about the right things, yet people mistreated her. Further, it indicates that the patriarchal structures intrude on women's freedom and produce gender inequality which thwarts them from empowerment.

In another scene, Ginsburg and her female friends get a cynical welcome from their professor, as shown in this statement below:



Figure 7. At the head of the table, Professor Griswold tapped his glass and started to speak in front of the audience.

Professor Griswold : Esteemed colleagues. Ladies. This is only the sixth-year women have had the privilege to earn a Harvard Law degree. This little soiree is our way of saying welcome. (Pointing her out) My wife Harriet and I are glad all nine of you have joined us. Let us go around the table. And each of the ladies, report who you are, where you're from... And why you're occupying a place at Harvard that could have gone to a man.

The professor's speech above shows that women are still unpreferred (Leung et al., 2012). It implies men's cynical attitude towards women that may generate their fear of women's influence (Day et al., 2003). In line with this, the nine law female students of Harvard

confronted to the cynicism. Though a little, their number sufficiently promoted women's power. The next scene may prove this idea, especially when Ginsburg attended a class for her husband.



Figure 8. Ruth enters the class; Professor Freud seems surprised and watched her find a seat.

Freund : Which also provides the first examples of circumstances where precedents may be overturned. Judges are bound. Excuse me. May I help you?
 Ruth : I'm Martin Ginsburg's wife. I'll be attending his classes for him.

In the aforementioned scene, Ginsburg substituted for her husband in a class due to his health condition. Her action harvested widespread admiration and signified a growing acceptance of women in the public sphere, particularly among men. Furthermore,

her remarkable ability to cooperate and multitask highlighted that women were not only skilful in managing households but also capable of activating their strengths for broader societal contributions.

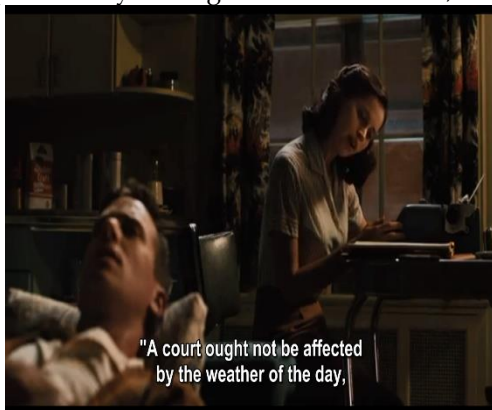


Figure 9. Ruth helps Martin complete his college tasks and comes to jane's room

The figure depicted a scene in which Ginsburg was seated at the kitchen table before a typewriter, with an open door revealing only a partial view of her husband, Martin. Martin, from his room, was dictating some text, and Ginsburg was diligently typing the final letters. She abruptly rose upon hearing her baby, Jane, crying, and swiftly proceeded to Jane's room,

where she tended to her. With Jane on her back, she returned to the living room, briefly glimpsed Martin asleep, and then made her way back to the kitchen, all while still holding Jane. Subsequently, she took a moment to sip her coffee, removed the completed page from the typewriter, stacked it with others, and placed it into Martin's folder. Following this,

she opened her own folder, fed a partially typed page into the typewriter, and continued her work in the tranquil darkness.

This scene clearly depicts women's multitasking abilities. In this case, Ginsburg efficiently balanced her roles in various spheres and timeframes. As a mother and wife, she

Ruth as Heroine

Ruth Bader Ginsburg became Columbia's first tenured woman law professor in 1972 (Kay, 2004). After many years of hard work, she succeeded to be the second woman judge and the first female who worked for the Jewish Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Her struggle as a brilliant lawyer has also marked the increasing number of lawyers in the United States year by year. The Statista Research Department reports that the number of female lawyers increased 37,4% in 2020. After a decade ago, the number of practising lawyers has increased significantly. The increase sequentially has occurred since 1950. The United States Census reported that the number of female attorneys in 1940 was only 4.447. However, it rose almost 50% in 1950, so the total number was 6.348, with 3.5% of lawyers generally (Hylton, 2013). In addition, the American Bar Association stated that 690 female students entered law schools in 1940. It increased double in 1950, so the number was

Conclusion

Based on the discussion, the movie *On the Basis of Sex* contains the patriarchal system that leads to gender inequality, a condition American women experienced in the 1950s as the setting of place and time. The system positioned men as more dominant than women. The domination institutionally stemmed from the idea of the "Perfect Women" that entrapped women in domestic confinement. In the most controversial case, women did not have educational privilege though they were dogmatised to educate children. However, Ginsburg, as the main

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fulfilled her family duties while, as a woman, she actively endeavoured to enhance her strength and contribute to her environment. This resonates with the core tenets of liberal feminism, which encourage women to assert their rights and individuality with courage and determination.

1.364 students (Hylton, 2013). Ruth successfully inspired women to pursue higher education and become what they want to be, as shown by the data above. She becomes a role model for women to empower themselves and contribute more to society.

Her success has depowered men's power. Previously, women were stigmatised as emotional and less capable of self-control. Moreover, the stigma was indoctrinated lawfully by the United Nations Human Rights (2014) for decades and had become the most harmful issue. It is destructive when violating human rights, and fundamental rights institutionally limit women's and men's capacity to develop their abilities, pursue their professional careers, and make choices about their lives. The connection between gender and emotion is a social construction. Social constructionists believe that women are emotionally expressive in general than men. In contrast, men are more emotional in physical-aggressive anger (Hess et al., 2000).

character, appeared to break the tyranny. With all of her intellectuality and power, she challenged men's authority by entering Harvard law school and successfully proved that women could be lawyers and did men's tasks even better, regardless of cynical male attitudes. She became a role model, inspiration, and heroine for other women. Her struggle insisted that being educated is critical for women to erase all stigma, discrimination, and or all kinds of occupations they experience.

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