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## Now I Have Something That Is Mine: Women's Higher Education Gains as Feminist Standpoint

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## SEVEN

“NOW I HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS MINE”: WOMEN’S  
HIGHER EDUCATION GAINS AS FEMINIST STANDPOINT**Barbara LeSavoy and Jamie Bergeron<sup>i</sup>**

**Abstract:** Whose legacies of resistance are remembered? Whose are not? What meaning can we extract from feminist standpoints uncovered? Dominant societal structures record women’s lives in institutional memory where traditional scientific empiricism validates this as truth. Corrective in measure, this paper uses feminist standpoint to see and analyze five stories detailing segments of women’s higher education life challenges. Subject-positions within these stories counter distorted realities.

A European woman raises a family then penetrates the ivied walls of the academy. An Argentinean national discovers her autonomy through furthering her ex-husband’s career. A mid-westerner moves through the upper echelons of male-dominated academia with little social capital paving her way. These descriptions highlight women’s educational gains, yet the legacies within these stories remain largely invisible to others. Memory serves as an important device of public record. Women’s lives recalled in public memory, when documented via traditional scientific empiricism, chronicle stories lacking depth and nuance. These flattened misrepresentations produce what becomes faulty andocentric-based knowledge that goes on to occupy a dominant space of institutional knowledge. Largely reflective of national memory, this dominance tells a societal version of truth narrowly informed through male-centered scientific method. Personal standpoint corrects misrepresentations by giving voice to women’s standpoints. Subject-positions within the standpoints here counter distorted realities produced through male-centered scientific method, thus exposing the often glossed over challenges to

women’s educational path frequently lost in data-driven study. Moving voices of female subversion into public view distinguishes ways in which women’s personal acts become operational but overlooked variables essential to advancing educational equity outcomes. Informed through feminist standpoint theory (Collins, 2004; Harding, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 1986; Hartsock, 2004; Hekman, 2004; hooks, 2004, 1984; Smith, 2004; Weeks, 2004; Wylie, 2004) this paper maps excerpts from five women’s higher education stories. Beginning with a discussion of narrative analysis, readers can understand objective dimensions of subjective practices and consider ways positioned standpoint validates and advances feminist thought.

### **Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST)**

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) provides a theoretical response to overcoming instances of marginalized, ignored voice within the context of a culturally accepted dominant, authoritative voice. FST also seeks to establish a feminist research model that operates free from patriarchal bias. Much of conventional science produces knowledge understood through male-oriented language and worldviews that isolate women from their own realities (Smith, 2004). Tagged as “bad science,” these Western, affluent, masculine doctrines frequently constrain rather than emancipate women’s knowledge (Harding, 1986; Minnich, 2005). Counter in measure, FST does not add women into research; rather, it initiates discovery in women’s perspective, accessing standpoints which then reformulate our social order understandings (Harding, 2004a; Letherby, 2003). Woman as the research fulcrum challenges the presumption that conventional scientific empiricism is a homogeneous fit-all-method (Harding, 2004a, 1986). The contention that women fall outside this dominant research overlay makes the relationship between FST and knowledge production and practices of power fundamental to its origins, purpose, and use.

Feminist scholars advocate FST as means to see and authenticate women's lived experiences by exposing the colonized spaces of tension and resistance in which they evolve (Collins, 2004, 2000; Harding, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 1986; hooks, 2004; Hartsock, 2004; Jaggar, 2004; Minnich, 2005; Smith, 2004; Weeks, 2004; Wylie, 2004). Strategic in purpose, FST teeters between a science-to-politics dynamic, functioning as a scientific tool to uncover situated knowledge otherwise obscured by patriarchal dominance, and as a political leverage to free women's voices otherwise read discursively through male controlled knowledge systems (Jaggar, 2004, 1983). This duality makes FST "explanatory" in discerning the positionality of women-centered experiences and "prescriptive" in validating women's insights into patriarchal distortions ascribed to their realities (Harding, 2004a). As a recalibration of male produced knowledge then, FST destabilizes male truths, which inadvertently destabilizes subjectivities that constitute male power structures. The epistemological thread recognizes women's marginality as both a site of political struggle and a site of feminist accomplishment (Harding, 2004a; Smith, 2004). This science/politics interplay, a disciplinary conflation contested under andocentric scientific empiricism, is an essential pivot to FST's research strategy and a requisite bridge that operationally links feminist theory with praxis, particularly, its activist arm (Harding, 2004a). That FST deems the discovery of feminist-produced knowledge as inherently linked with the discovery of feminist resistance movements within this subject-produced knowledge is paramount to unraveling the many concealed realities women's educational stories hold.

FST's origins have historical roots in Marxian thought which recognizes women's alienation to male controlled empiricism parallel to theorizing proletarian alienation to bourgeoisie controlled materialism (Delphy, 1984, 1975; Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Hartsock, 2004; Jaggar, 2004, 1983; Pels, 2004; Smith, 2004; Weeks, 2004). Borrowing Jaggar's (1983) thinking here, capitalism creates class-based oppressions and patriarchy exacerbates this for women. FST relies on this Marxian orientation

where stratifications across person and place determine living and learning options. FST levels these locations of power, affording researchers multi-functioning applications. Women as a marginalized group have intimate knowledge of social power dynamics often absent in prevailing knowledge experiences familiar to dominant groups (Wylie, 2004; Minnich, 2005). FST extends a sensitized lens into these margins, understood as a place of cultural significance that is a piece of, but outside the whole (hooks, 2004, 1984). Here, margin as a social location exposes pain and struggle juxtaposed against ways and truth of the dominant body. Both the peripheral and majority elements of society are understood by the margin; thus, the margin stands as an ideal site for opposition to those in “colonizing” positions (hooks, 2004, 1984). Critics of FST regard its reliance on the margin as both contested and celebrated, a contradiction to Marxian homogeneity (Hekman, 2004). Yet FST’s research effectiveness is largely attributed to recognizing the margin’s experiential range, a factor credited to Marxian insights into class oppression (Hartsock, 2004; Pels, 2004). This multiplicity of “place” allows us to consider women’s educational stories within established hierarchies and to understand identity based exclusions experienced by women at both the person and population levels (Collins, 2004). FST does not deem these feminist standpoints “true” over other standpoints; rather, it seeks out alternate social descriptions that contribute to seeing a new whole (Harding, 2004a). This insider look into knowledge production within a group helps us grasp meaning in women’s educational stories in ways that are unobtainable when relying on the rigidity of scientific empiricism (Collins, 2004).

Knowledge mediated in feminist standpoint raises some controversy about its empirical accuracy (Harding, 2004b; Haraway, 2004; Hekman, 2004; Pels, 2004). Situated knowledge is at the center of this credibility debate and a site of contestation and progression in FST’s epistemology reach. Strategically, in authenticating women’s voices, FST decenters man as ideal knower (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Haraway, 2004; Smith, 2004;

Pels, 2004). This destabilizing maneuver raises anxieties about FST's reliance on situated knowledge, which skeptics claim, emerges under variable versus static research parameters, and which falls victim to subjectivities that potentially cloud truth (Hekman, 2004, Pels, 2004). Haraway (2004) counters this, arguing that under patriarchal dominance, situated knowledge is not compromised truth, but rather, objectivity itself, particularly, objectivity in oppressed "vision." This positionality in sight gives FST a critical edge in bringing voice and validity to women's educational stories. Empirical science as hierarchical obscures positional freedoms among the oppressed where systems that dictate privilege establish boundaries that create illusions of complacency. Situated knowledge as knowing in vision realigns misappropriated complacency, providing representations of dissonance and solidarity that expose the limits and divisions common to self (Haraway, 2004). That self is indeed fluid, imperfect, and socially inscribed reveals a dynamic side of lived knowledge that eludes conventional empiricism (Haraway, 2004; Pels, 2004). FTS's insight into these human flaws, informed by those inside and intimate with these enacted variables, is not a hindrance to objectivity and truth, but rather a strategic means to detect nuances and imperfections invisible to and/or discarded by those dominating situated spaces (Harding 2004b; Haraway, 2004). This closeness to versus distance from a subordinated known links critical discovery to multiplicities of person and place, which then functions as an FST reliability measure (Harding, 2004c; Haraway, 2004). Research that originates in women's stories enables both voice and positioned vision, allowing women to articulate their experiences using their own lens and language (Harding, 2004a, 2004c; Smith, 2004). The objectivity to situated knowledge then resides in uncovering standpoints that are authenticated in voice by subjects who are in fact located in and who see these subjugated realities best.

FST's interrogation of masculinized empiricism allows us to consider women as political actors within a knowledge frame punctuated by life. To study spaces lived outside the lines through

those who transgress the boundaries is a FST discourse that unnerves scientific processes. Yet it is this FST science-to-politics fluidity and its resistance/power dynamic that we find most compelling in seeking out women’s higher education stories. These standpoints, understood through FST, expose how different, even opposing individuals interact with one another in new ways, advancing personal and collective knowledge understudied in scholarly contexts (Harding, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 1986). As a contribution to the field, we see how self-identity evolves to produce self-awareness among women as individuals and as academics within larger social and scholastic settings (Harding, 2004a, 2004b). These discoveries further knowledge on women’s means to and use of educational entitlement and they evidence ways FST reifies women’s higher educational agency as a descriptive of feminist lives enacted in opposition to academic hegemony.

### **Methodology**

Two researchers at a northeastern college solicited women’s stories from students and faculty over two academic semesters. Participants who volunteered stories self-identified in response to electronic solicitation sent to affiliates at the research site, surrounding colleges, and regional institutions. We also collected stories from attendees at the ’08 Seneca Falls Dialogues (SFD) Conference.<sup>ii</sup> Participants responded via writing, audiotape, or videotape to the following research prompt.<sup>iii</sup>

Please think about and recall a life challenge that you as a woman (or your mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, friend etc.) experienced on your life’s journey and how, if at all, this challenge was overcome? Please include in your story the approximate year in which the ‘challenge’ occurred.

At the project’s close, we collected twenty-one stories spanning generations, countries, ethnicities, and professions. Employing FST in research approach and analysis, we sorted the story narratives into four descriptive themes: “interpersonal relations,” “self expression,” “unexpected journeys,” and “educational

challenges,” with five stories firmly grounded in “educational challenges.” While we deemed all the stories disarming, women’s formative, often inadvertent steps into male-dominated spaces of academia drew us into the fold of the five scholastic-themed narratives. Particularly compelling is that these educational stories locate FST analysis at the site of its contestation, both in a political struggle in asserting feminist rights to knowledge, and in a science struggle in reshaping what we see and legitimize as women’s higher education realities. Authenticated in voice, we unravel these storied segments in lived sequence, beginning with the marginal ideology in which women conceived of education, moving to sites of tension and resistance women faced within educational pursuits, concluding with acts of intentionality women exercised in acquiring educational gain.<sup>iv</sup> We analyze this situated knowledge using an FST lens.

### **“Never in my Wildest Dreams”**

“Here I am, Chair of the English Department, ...never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined sitting in this office.” Dr. Margaret Roche,<sup>v</sup> a seventy year-old British academic, describes her surprise at her current career stature, an early discovery in women’s educational stories. Similar to many women of her generation, Roche spent the majority of her life in traditional roles of wife and mother. While eventually deliberate in her academic success, Roche realized her later career as scholar, professor, and administrator more by accident rather than intention. Chance as a variable linked to education revealed instability in women’s opportunity for college study and career mobility, both in reaching for that objective and conceiving of this prospect. Despite the academic capital that she had acquired, Roche confirms this uncertain schematic:

I really didn’t know how I was going to have a career. I really never had a career because I was married for twenty years to an international businessman, and we moved frequently. When I got to the end of the Masters, I found it



really difficult to think about stopping. So that’s why, I didn’t. I thought, ‘well, I’ll just try.’ One of the interesting things is that I could have done this a long time ago, but it never occurred to me that I could.

Dr. Sharon Avery,<sup>vi</sup> sixty-four, married with no children, a grant director and Psychology professor at a midsize college, also voiced an absence of educational vision, characterizing her “uncertain” academic pursuits as pushing against conflicting societal expectations:

Here it is a women’s college and we are being primed to get married and have as many children as possible, and to use our education to make sure our children are happy and our husbands are happy. I think that the biggest challenge was to find my own voice and listen to it. I don’t recall any men or women talking to me about a career path. Nobody ever did that for me and so I kind of went bumbling and stumbling.

Avery longed for mentors to guide her scholarly aspirations, but instead, felt confined to 1960s canons that valued women’s private over public function, clouding her educational vision.

While ambiguity seeded these beginning excerpts, stories remembered as more purposeful lacked prospective scope. Dr. Jane Hanna,<sup>vii</sup> fifty-eight, single, and Provost at a Midwestern college, reached for education as a means to financial security. Yet even with this more pronounced intentionality, Hanna qualified her educational journey as “indiscriminant” and “random,” factors she attributed to her first generation college status:

If I could do it over again, I would have gotten my degree in one of the Humanities or a Science and really taken advantage of the notion of a broad liberal education. Because I went into a professional degree track... with the notion of getting a job when I graduated, which is in fact what I did. I went to work for the [Medical Center], in their clinical laboratory. [But] no one ever talked to me when I

was in college about going to graduate school, aspirations, potential, what did I really want to do with my life. It was just the assumption that you'd go to work, you'd make a living, and then the corollary assumption that you match up with somebody, get married, have children. All of which are laudable things for a person to do, but not the thing Jane Hanna wanted to do.

Opposing roles of wife and mother, Hanna reasoned education as a means to independence, a labor-focused standpoint that reconstitutes subject-order positions of place (Hartsock, 2004; Weeks, 2004). Although Hanna's work focus challenges gender norms, patriarchal mechanisms prescribing women's life-station, situated here as job-need over career-progression, obscure her disciplinary options (Weeks, 2004). These restrictions in educational foresight automate Hanna's graduate level choices:

I decided to go back to school and get my Master's degree, and again, not really having anybody to talk it over with, I just got my Master's degree in what I got my undergraduate degree in, which again, in retrospect, didn't really move me very far along the chain of broadening my educational experience... I think one of the things that is true when I was a kid, women don't tend very much to think about, 'if my goal is to get to Z, what are the things I have to do to get to Z?' It is really an ignorance about the kind of planning you need to do to get the kind of jobs I wanted to get.

For Hanna, life as an academic leader was not a visible or viable direction, despite conceiving higher education as a gateway to professional security.

The conceptual void regarding educational entitlement experienced by Avery, Roche and Hanna, often misread as complacency, captures women's constrained place within hierarchical structures that dictate expected social-order standing (Haraway, 2004). This is analogous to class neutralities within Marxian thought where collectivity for the larger good overrides personal vision and gain

(Delphy, 1984; Harding, 2004a; Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997; Smith, 2004). The invisibility of options beyond spaces of work or domesticity, internalized by the standpoints here, exposes this misconstrued male reality secured against a backdrop of dominance (Harding, 2004a, 2004b). Women’s alienation to education as their own right is systematic despite differences in women’s positionality: British, American; mothers, non-mothers; married, single. These agents for standpoint are multiple and heterogeneous, potentially united yet also divergent, which grounds situated knowledge as informing the many pieces that constitute the whole (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Weeks, 2004). Standpoints from diverse actors coming into vision from manifold platforms, identities, and commitments contribute to knowledge production that is broad in its application to women as the margin and to reshaping a larger worldview. This situated reach enacts FSTs politics-to-science dynamic, where feminist standpoint corrects faulty empirical knowledge, and where corrected knowledge in an activist context potentially frees women from structural oppressions instituted around these faulty assumptions (Harding, 2004a). Resisting gendered colonization (hooks, 1984) expected in roles of wife, mother, or passive student, the standpoints here transgress societal norms to forge new and diverse educational realities.

### **“Now I Have Something that is Mine”**

Prominent to these women’s stories are the tangential tensions bearing on women’s higher education actions. Although “unanticipated” in origin, women seized their educational circumstances, transitioning a once tentative prospect into a defining career platform. Dr. Milagro Campos,<sup>viii</sup> fifty-one, Argentinean, humanities professor, and mother, came to the US with her now ex-husband, so he could pursue graduate studies. In Campos’ early academic vision, she subverts her educational reach, conceiving it as secondary to her ex-husband’s ambitions:

We were at this family therapy institute in Austria, and he got an invitation to go to California to study with this huge cognitive psychologist, so I followed, and I was babysitting, with an F2 Visa, which is a student's wife Visa. I was finishing my Master's degree, and although I had studied psychology and then I studied literature in UCAL, I always thought well Luis will be the main bread winner. You know I can have a job, but it won't be, I won't be the main bread winner in my family.

While enrolled in UCAL, Campos divorced, a power/opposition frame where personal conflict externalizes potential (Weeks, 2004):

We divorced while in California, and then he went back to Austria....Being man-less, or father-less or husband-less....were incredible challenges ...very important in becoming who I became as a teacher and a professor and an independent woman. I had never lived alone, ever, you know you live in Argentina with your family, and you marry. So I remember being in an apartment in California and thinking this is the first time I've ever been alone in an apartment, that was kind of scary. And then I finished the PhD and I felt very strong and accomplished, you know, now I have something that is mine, it's my education and I can choose to go back to Argentina or to stay in this country.

In finding her own way, Campos recalled how societal codes inhibited her self-agency:

I always thought the brain in my marriage was him, and that I followed him to Austria and then I followed him to California, and I remember this crucial moment when we were going through the separation, because Luis always made me feel ... that I was so lucky to be exposed to all of these things because of him. But thinking back I realized that without him I could become a person in my own right.

As the knower moving within this situated knowledge, Campos exposes the ways that tensions in self autonomy smack up against expected role ascribed to wife, a subordinate identity constructed around a prefabricated worldview positioning women as “for-men” (Harding, 2004a, 2004b). Divorce, read through Campos’ standpoint, voices an FST resistance/freeing dynamic where we see the margin, initially characterized by self-doubt, invert into a site of rising self-affirmation and empowerment (hooks, 2004).

In a parallel education-to-career outcome, Hanna narrated a by-chance mentor relationship that became a defining career direction:

It happened fortuitously that I ended up going to [University], where I met a man who was, is in fact the most significant mentor of my life. We have known each other for almost 30 years. He really got me to the next level...thinking about what I want to do. He was the first person that ever really took an interest in my career as a career, with the notion that I was going to go on to get my PhD. I never would have imagined it in a million years when I was a kid at [undergraduate University] in the 70’s. I mean it just was totally unreachable.

Visible in standpoint, mentoring transposed the marginalized dimension to what Hanna conceived as an “unreachable” PhD goal (Harding, 2004a; hooks, 2004). Patricia Brill, <sup>ix</sup> fifty-four, French, married with no children, holding an American-earned Master’s degree in the humanities, never considered herself college worthy, citing a friend as the impetus in shifting her academic self-doubts.

I had a friend, who said ‘you need to go to college.’ I was like, ‘I don’t understand what professors say, that’s a whole different language, and I couldn’t possibly understand that.’ But my friend put me in her car, drove me to [community college], put me in one of the counselor’s offices.

Language as andocentric in origin reverberates in Brill's standpoint where she self-questions her academic credibility within an exclusionary scholastic discourse (Haraway, 2004). Analogous to worker/owner alienations, we see Brill's situated identity as both docile and dynamic (Harding, 2004b; Hartsock, 2004; Smith, 2004). Stepping within the spaces of dominance that alienate her, Brill begins to resist internalized ideologies that engender academia as a hegemonic site (Harding, 2004a; Hartsock, 2004; Jaggar, 2004). Peer intervention engages Brill's educational promise as does divorce for Campos and mentoring for Hanna, clarifying how these women, in opposition to prevailing norms, surmount their academic uncertainties (Weeks, 2004). Here and in a larger schematic, these auspicious intersections do not erase subordination or risk; rather, they further code the imperfections and subjectivities under which women negotiate their educational positionalities (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Haraway, 2004).

These collective standpoints embody FST's multiplicity, exposing an experiential range that reaches into the ontology of women's educational realities punctuated by male claims to thought construction and dissemination (Collins, 2004; Hartsock, 2004; hooks, 2004; Weeks, 2004; Wylie, 2004). Women's entitlement to this academic capital, now discernable in standpoint, destabilizes the one-sided male corner on scientific empiricism, both in discovery and objectivity of truth. Campos, Brill, and Hanna's located standpoints engage a vision of knowledge potentiality that transcends hierarchical structures of educational power (Hartsock, 2004; Weeks, 2004). Derived from Marxian insights into ruler/laborer class conflicts, this transcendence generalizes to subordinate identities as a whole where alienation to production, in this case knowledge, theoretically culminates in revolt (Delphy, 1975; Hartsock, 2004; Jaggar, 2004, 1983). Realized among the feminist standpoints voiced here, this transcendence validates ways women's educational drive, as insurgence against exclusion, functions to invert circumstances of marginality into positions of strength (Hartsock, 2004; hooks, 2004).

### **“That was my Moment of Revelation”**

As these women’s education progressed, their standpoints gained in vision and intentionality. Rather than question scholastic entitlement, women positioned academia and its knowledge output as transformative. Here women recasted interpersonal relationships and self-expression from impeding to functional. Avery’s standpoint captures this migration:

It was contradictory. I was trying to please people but I was trying to find myself through my education. It wasn’t until I accepted the fact that you can’t do both things at the same time, that I finally felt like, ‘okay!’ That was my moment of revelation.

Initially devoid of guidance, Avery recalled the importance of female friends in validating her educational pathway and in helping her locate her identity within that structure:

Somebody who guides your career? I never had anybody like that. But I have had groups of women who have been encouraging to me and share my interests. I have struggled to accept my own voice and accepting the fact that that voice is not necessarily a part of mainstream of society. But I thought ‘Oh well!’ there are enough people in my life that respect me.

Similarly, as Hanna climbed the ranks of college administration, intentionality became strategic to realizing her potential:

[As] Dean of the Graduate College there, I started thinking... ‘AmI going to see my career out as Dean of the Graduate College, or is there something more that I can do that adds value?’ What is significant about that is that it is the first time I ever consciously contemplated, ‘where do I want to be in some number of years, and what is a road that I need to take in order to get there and why do I want to get

there?’ So when I decided to leave the [public university] that was the first conscience career decision I ever made.

For the first time, Hanna deliberately questions the internal purpose driving her professional resolve:

The second time that I made a very conscience choice was the choice to come here to be Provost. I had several very good offers, and I made the choice based on fit for the community, the degree to which I felt that I could have a lasting impact on the place...I’m at the point in my career where I can be in the role that can achieve the things I’d like to achieve.

Women’s concluding standpoints evidenced ways self recognition and validation within and outside educational structures contributed to utilizing these structures more decisively. Avery characterized this as acts of resistance effected over time:

The challenge was to find my voice. It took me a long time to do that. I’ve been able to be true to my own voice in a bureaucratic non-feminist organization. I’ve been able to find the pockets, areas of space to be myself.

Avery locates her voice within crevices of a system that otherwise alienates her, making feminist inroads into dominant spaces of knowledge (Harding, 2004a).

Coming into themselves, women spoke cogently about externalizing their educational capital to further individual and collective teaching/learning causes. Avery affirmed, “Now I have people saying that I’m their mentor.” Hanna, Roche, and Campos, who each occupy senior leadership positions in their respective colleges, attested to utilizing their own success to guide others and impact educational utility. Roche, in addition to an array of scholarly contributions, has occupied several departmental and institutional leadership roles where she has been instrumental in shaping academic policy. Women’s Studies established at Westerly



College<sup>x</sup> is one of several prominent curricula gains attributed to Roche’s strategic efforts. That Roche’s academic career was pioneered later in life, beginning in increments as an adjunct instructor, adds credence to these deliberate outcomes. Along a similar vein, Hanna’s winding path to Provost now affords her influential reach in advancing faculty and student matters. And Avery, Campos, and Brill, who mediate knowledge in teaching and administrative arenas, rely on a feminist model of collaboration in reaching for and promoting educational gain.

Women’s closing standpoints link self-identity to personal inclination. This rising autonomy highlights FST’s politics-to-science confluence, validating women’s standpoints as situated knowledge, but also marking ways this positioned lens, fashioned within the academy, remains subject to a male contrived trajectory (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Jaggar, 2004). Tensioned symmetry teeters through women’s stories here, gaining discernability as women’s educational capital grows and their vision becomes more astute. Academia, originating as a system by and for men, becomes a historic-political representation of women’s lives within patriarchy (Jaggar, 2004, 1983). To remove the male lens altogether distorts this reality. Similarly, women’s integration within this male-invented structure shifts our natural and social order insights as women acquire educational vision, voice, and utility, (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Haraway, 2004). Using Haraway’s (2004) objectivity claims, this subjective lens authenticates feminist accommodations. As outsiders within (Collins, 2004), the women here forged new paths, stabilized uncertain ground, and championed educational causes for themselves and those around them. In method and prescription, these standpoints instigate a scientific reconstruction of women’s educational realities, which both privileges the margin and engages the whole (Harding, 2004a; Weeks, 2004). This does not inherently free these women or us from pervasive hierarchies that limit knowledge and dominate empiricism, but tapping into women’s educational realities recodes misread lives, which frees women’s

voices and the discretionary agency to reconceptualize women's educational truth.

### **Women's Voices, New Visions**

Education culminating in success conveys seemingly easy and stable passages. These surface signals -- college attendance, conferred degree, established career -- communicate generalized assumptions about educational journeys reflecting a linear paradigm of academic life. Many individuals, both women and men, experience education in this vertical progression whereas others encounter a range of educational challenges reflecting class, gender, and other identity-based inequalities.<sup>xi</sup> Variables of social location notwithstanding, women's stories scrutinized through FST detail women's acts leading to scholastic gain and the meaning women attribute to these lived events. By accessing these standpoints with genuine interest absent of exclusionary methods, we broaden our understanding of women's educational realities, which delineates the often conflated variables tagged to academic success and the agency that led to that success (Harding, 2004b; Letherby, 2003; Minnich, 2005). Reifying women's educational challenges then recenters the margin, which liberates subverted knowledge (hooks, 2004).

Women's stories as a site of knowledge have application that transcends individual transformation (DeVault, 1999; Harding, 2004a, 2004b; hooks, 2004; Letherby, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). Authenticating others' experiences deepens our understanding of our own experiences and the worldviews these experiences construct (Letherby, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). The mediation and interpretation of standpoint by others illustrates the relationship between personal identity and the measure of this identity as realized in one's contributions to society. Identity development, as accrued confidence in oneself independent of and among others, is significant to overcoming personal obstacles with implications beyond individual growth (Erikson, 1959; Gilligan, 1982; McEwen, 2003). Women's stories, where self-identity evolves,

communicates knowledge of how interactive experiences merge to produce self-awareness that is realized among those in larger social settings (Harding, 2004a, 2004b). This intersection promises greater social change through accessing subjective standpoints and applying these to objective structures -- education in this example - - common to larger groups. In this way, women’s stories facilitate connections among women who, despite differences in age cohort and identity, share common goals and experiences in pursuing educational gain from circuitous versus primary locations. As knowledge seekers, the women highlighted here found support and purpose in educational attainment, an outcome both circumstantial and intentional, where intention correlates with self-awareness. The challenges and variations of women’s realities then are linked by individual measures of successes realized over time, which validates and furthers collective actions (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004).

Women diverse in person, place, and generation, reading or hearing this paper, recurrently tell us that these education standpoints replicate their own discursive college paths. This gender-subordinated pattern demands more stable means for women to actualize educational gains. Women’s stories affirm how positive identity sanctions scholastic potentiality within an andocentric paradigm. FST theorizes this as a “totality” of subject-positions who act in opposition to existing societal mores, but who channel this opposition into more promising alternatives, seen here in women’s evolving self-worth (Weeks, 2004). Yet women operating from the margins, even if spurred by antagonism, often seek out alternatives quietly and in segments rather than blatantly and in wholes (hooks, 2004, 1984; Tong, 2009). Subversion exercised in unassuming spurts easily falls off scientific radar or gets speciously coded in its lived dimension. The FST correction, instituting knowledge in women’s lives, brings greater objectivity to subject-driven positions where women’s educational voice originates (Harding, 2004a; Weeks, 2004). This coming into educational vision resonates in the standpoints here as women’s college trajectory begins as ambiguous, moves to opportunistic,

and lands as purposeful in personal and social consequence. For the women here, using an FST/Marxian frame, conflict facilitates struggle, struggle enables potential (Weeks, 2004).

We close on FST's power/ resistance intersection, a dynamic which compelled us into women's educational stories at the contested site in which they evolved. Countering scientific empiricism, FST treats women's standpoints as primary versus additive, grounding discovery in women's educational realities (Harding, 2004a; Letherby, 2003). Exerting political leverage, FST captures women's educational gains as larger representations of feminist lives enacted in opposition to academic colonization. Despite progressions toward deessentializing gender, women's educational reach remains titrated by dimensions of female identity and expected societal norms that complicate the circumstances under which that identity is actualized (Haraway, 2004). We see this operate as a structural ceiling in career advancement, confirmed in the standpoints here, where only one of five academic-minded women has risen above assistant or associate professor standing. This heightens FST's science/activist duality, particularly within feminist discourses where subjective and materialist stances converge as theory into praxis (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Weeks, 2004). Exposing women's academic realities does destabilize structures of educational dominance, yet these revised realities emerge as vulnerable to the very patriarchal inscriptions that constrained them (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Haraway, 2004). This vulnerability cycle emphatically underscores the need for standpoint project's endurance where resistance itself becomes essential to liberating feminist produced knowledge and furthering women's still compromised higher education gains.

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<sup>ii</sup> A biennial international conference marking the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Women's Rights Convention, the signing of the Declaration of Sentiments, and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>iii</sup> Participants could choose anonymity or self-disclosure with Informed Consents created to accommodate these identity options. A pseudonym is used for all participants here, who each selected anonymity.

<sup>iv</sup> Using member check as a measure of validity, three of the five women whose stories are excerpted here affirmed narrative and interpretative accuracy.

<sup>v</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>vi</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>vii</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>viii</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>ix</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>x</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>xi</sup> Class is a significant variable that impacts opportunities for educational gain. Importantly, the standpoints here largely reflect class privilege, which, although discursive in direction and vulnerable to external forces, facilitated women's educational outcomes.