

Disparities in Primary and Secondary Education for Girls in Rural China

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Abstract: *Since its reform and opening up initiated in the late 20th century, China has actively aligned itself with global trends in prioritizing women's status and ensuring gender equality in education. However, girls in rural China have long suffered from educational inequality. This article reveals key factors contributing to this inequality, including deep-seated gender biases such as son preference, a scarcity of educational resources in rural areas, and the financial strain caused by China's rapid economic development. Through literature review, this article discusses the historical background of Chinese female education, which has been subordinated and excluded from formal education for a long time, and the current situation that China has made progress but there is still a huge gap in rural areas. The article further highlights the profound challenge of rural girls and women being systematically excluded from educational opportunities and analyses the underlying causes of this continued neglect, namely, gender tradition and stereotypes as well as China's economic reform. The article lastly assesses the effectiveness of three existing Chinese government policies at the national and regional levels in addressing gender bias in education, and proposes strategic recommendations and the need for efforts to strengthen inclusive education in China.*

Keywords: *Education Inequality, Gender Inequality, Gender Exclusion, Gender Tradition, Gender Stereotypes, Inclusive Education, Education Policy, Rural Education Gender Inequality, Son Preference Culture*

1. Introduction

In the wake of its reform and opening-up policies initiated in the late 20th century, China has actively aligned itself with global trends in prioritizing women's status and ensuring gender equality in education. Notably, the United Nations' 2021 report placed China at an impressive 39th position on the Gender Inequality Index globally. This report highlighted a significant achievement for China: the completion rates of secondary education among both boys (78.3%) and girls (85.4%) are above the global average, reflecting the nation's commitment to gender equality in education.[25]

However, beneath this veneer of progress lies a less-discussed reality: the persistent educational inequality for girls in rural areas. This discrepancy poses a significant challenge to China's aim of keeping pace with global advancements and fulfilling the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, which strongly advocates for gender equality in education.

This article narrows its focus to the rural regions of China, where data scarcity has necessitated expanding the research scope to include both primary and secondary educational levels. It is structured into five comprehensive sections. The first delves into the historical context of female education in China. The second uncovers the systematic exclusion of rural girls from educational opportunities. The third section investigates the underlying reasons for this ongoing neglect. The fourth evaluates the effectiveness of the Chinese government's current policies in addressing this gender bias in education. Finally, the article concludes by offering strategic recommendations for enhancing China's approach to inclusive education.

2. Background

Throughout China's extensive educational history, the pervasive influence of Confucian ideology

has long relegated women to a subordinate status, effectively barring them from the realm of formal education. This deep-seated bias was encapsulated in the longstanding proverb, "A woman without talent is a virtue," [28] which underscored the belief that ignorance was a desirable trait in women.

The landscape of female education in China began to shift in 1844, with the advent of Catholic missionaries who established the first religious school for women in Ningbo [14]. This marked the beginning of a gradual erosion of traditional educational barriers for women. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a significant influx of Western cultural influences, which played a pivotal role in awakening the Chinese populace to the realities of gender inequality and spurred a series of reforms aimed at elevating the status of women and establishing schools for their education [23].

The May 4th Movement of 1919 stands out as a watershed moment in this journey, symbolizing the first major cultural upheaval against traditional Confucian ethics. Women actively participated in this movement, vocalizing their opposition to the feudal constraints and educational exclusion they had long endured. Their demands for gender equality resonated across the nation [14].

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party enacted a groundbreaking mandate, stipulating that both men and women should receive a minimum of five years of education. This legislation, the first of its kind in the history of the People's Republic of China, not only accorded women equal educational rights but also laid a solid foundation for the vigorous promotion of gender equality in education [28]. Recent decades have seen a significant balancing in the average educational attainment of men and women in China, with a near-equal distribution (51.9% men to 48.1% women) [2].

However, a personal teaching experience in a rural area of Guizhou in 2018 presented a stark contrast to these developments. In these rural classrooms, boys significantly outnumbered girls, who were conspicuously absent and instead seen engaged in domestic duties. This observation triggered a deeper inquiry into the persistence of educational inequality, revealing that despite national progress, substantial disparities remain in rural settings [11].

3. The Gender Exclusion in Rural Education in China

In rural China, educational inequality manifests starkly in the form of gender exclusion, primarily affecting girls. This exclusion encompasses several aspects, starting with a noticeable imbalance in school enrollment. As observed in a mountain village in Guizhou in 2018, girls are significantly less likely than boys to participate in systematic learning. This trend persists despite China extending compulsory education to nine years in 1980, aiming for equal educational opportunities for both genders. In primary education, a critical stage covered by this policy, the number of girls not attending school was over twice that of boys [25].

This enrollment disparity places rural girls in China alongside the three-quarters of girls globally who have not attended school, effectively marginalizing them socially and hindering inclusive education efforts within the country [20]. Furthermore, rural Chinese girls who do manage to enroll in school face a 39% higher likelihood of dropping out compared to boys [10]. This alarming dropout rate contributes to a widening chasm in educational achievement, with rural women receiving, on average, 1.3 years less education than their male counterparts [4].

The gap widens further at higher educational levels, as evidenced by the significant disparities in high school education [12]. In rural areas, the number of high school degrees earned by males is more than double that of females [25]. This discrepancy in educational attainment and degree acquisition underscores the profound challenges rural Chinese women face in accessing and completing education, evidencing the deep-rooted nature of gender-based exclusion and oppression in these communities.

4. The Possible Causes of Education Gender Inequality

4.1. Gender Tradition

In rural China, the gender disparity in education is intricately linked to deep-rooted cultural traditions and stereotypes. One of the most significant contributing factors is the entrenched patriarchal culture that emphasizes son preference. This ideology dictates that boys, viewed as future labor providers and caretakers of the family, are more deserving of educational resources [8]. In stark contrast, girls are traditionally destined for marriage, transferring their allegiance and contributions to another family upon marriage. This patrilocal tradition significantly influences rural parents' decisions,

leading them to prioritize educational investments for boys, who are perceived as future pillars of their own family [16].

Compounding this issue is a prevalent stereotype in Chinese culture that views girls as inherently academically weaker and less capable of achieving success compared to boys. This stereotype perpetuates the belief that even with equal educational resources, girls cannot match the accomplishments of boys [9]. Consequently, rural parents often consider investing in girls' education as an inefficient allocation of resources [16].

In families with multiple children, where educational resources are limited, competition is common, and girls frequently find themselves at a disadvantage. The low expectations set by gender characteristic stereotypes and the competitive family environment often result in girls being deprived of educational opportunities in favor of their male siblings [17]. This dynamic was starkly illustrated in a case study from Shanxi province, where a rural girl was forced to suspend her schooling in primary school to care for her younger brother, eventually dropping out entirely to cede educational resources to him. Her parents believed her brother would achieve more with these resources [18].

These deeply ingrained stereotypes and cultural norms position girls in rural multi-child families as sacrificial figures in terms of educational opportunities, thereby obstructing their access to higher degrees and educational success. As a result, the gap in educational attainment between genders in rural China continues to widen, perpetuating a cycle of inequality [19].

4.2. Economic Reform

China's economic reform, initiated in 1978, led to remarkable national development and poverty reduction [26]. However, this rapid progress has had unintended consequences on gender equality in education, particularly in rural areas. During the 1980s and 1990s, economic development prompted a significant migration of rural men to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities, leaving women to manage agricultural work in the countryside [10]. This shift resulted in the feminization of agriculture and widened the wage gap between men and women [1]. The prevalent belief that women are only capable of low-wage agricultural labor, in contrast to men's ability to secure higher-paying industrial jobs, has devalued the importance of educating women to the same extent as men.

This disparity is exemplified in the case of Mr. Wang's family in Gansu Province. Mr. Wang discontinued his daughter's education after the fourth grade, believing that basic literacy, enough to navigate daily tasks as a future farmer, was sufficient for her. In contrast, he invested in his son's high school education, anticipating his son's urban development and financial contributions to the family. This decision, influenced by the feminization of agriculture, reflects the perception that a daughter's potential and future prospects are inferior to those of a son [24].

Concurrently, educational reforms aligned with market reforms have significantly increased the cost of education. The financial burden of education, which comprises a large portion of household expenditures, has presented a tough choice for economically constrained rural families. In the context of such financial pressures, coupled with entrenched gender biases, parents often opt to invest in their sons' education while sacrificing that of their daughters [7]. As a result, the participation of rural girls in education has declined, with many being forced to discontinue their studies due to family economic circumstances, exacerbating gender educational disparities.

5. Related Policies and Evaluation

5.1. National Rural Revitalization Program (2018–2035)

In 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education embarked on a 17-year journey to revitalize rural education through the National Rural Revitalization Program [6]. By 2023, the program's emphasis shifted to nurturing rural talent and bolstering educational resources in impoverished western provinces. This initiative involved comprehensive research, including on-site inspections and online meetings with educators from various rural regions, to understand and address the unique challenges of rural education [5]. The objective was to enhance the enrollment rates and educational achievements of students, particularly girls, by providing more targeted educational opportunities and funding.

Despite these efforts, traditional biases favoring sons over daughters persist in rural communities, impeding the program's effectiveness in fostering gender equality in education. Parents' reluctance to

allocate additional educational resources to girls means that government support often fails to reach those who need it most. Moreover, the program has struggled with uneven funding distribution across different regions. Due to disparities in the educational foundation and population size of various areas, government funds have not always translated into sufficient per capita resources [13]. Consequently, the cost of accessing educational resources remains prohibitive for many rural families. This financial strain often leads parents to prioritize boys' education over girls', resulting in girls being forced to discontinue their studies and widening the educational attainment gap between genders in rural areas.

5.2. The "Double Reduction" Policy

In 2021, the Chinese government initiated the "Double Reduction" Policy, a strategic move to address educational disparities, particularly in rural areas [27]. This policy focuses on two key areas: strict regulation of private tutoring outside of school and a concerted effort to improve the quality of education within schools. The overarching aim is to bridge the educational gap and uniformly elevate the standard of education in rural regions. By eliminating the need for after-school tutoring, the policy effectively reduces the financial burden of additional educational fees, a significant advantage for economically disadvantaged families in rural settings [21].

Theoretically, this reduction in educational expenditures could lead to a more equitable distribution of family educational resources, potentially favoring rural girls [22]. With improved educational quality in schools and less economic pressure from external tutoring costs, rural girls might have better access to education and opportunities for future academic achievements, thereby addressing some aspects of gender-based educational inequality.

However, the impact of this policy is a subject of ongoing debate. Critics like Chen argue that the root issues of gender inequality in rural education, deeply entrenched in sexist traditions, remain unaddressed by this policy [3]. The elimination of tutoring fees, while reducing overall education expenditure, may not significantly benefit rural children, as private tutoring was often beyond their financial reach to begin with. Consequently, rural girls continue to face educational discrimination, not only due to financial constraints but also due to longstanding cultural biases against women's education.

5.3. Hainan Heroine Class

In a commendable regional initiative in 2009, the Hainan Heroine Class was established at the Economic and Technical School of Hainan Province [5]. This innovative program is specifically designed for girls from impoverished rural households who have completed junior high school. It not only provides standard educational courses but also integrates inspirational youth education aimed at reshaping the students' perceptions of women's roles in society and the family. This ideological shift empowers female students, encouraging them to pursue higher education and career achievements.

Over eight years, the Hainan Heroine Class has enrolled approximately 8,000 students. Out of these, 5,000 have completed their secondary education, with many proceeding to universities or successfully securing jobs in various enterprises. The program's success highlights the potential of targeted educational initiatives in transforming the lives of rural girls.

However, challenges remain, as highlighted by Liu [15]. Changing the mindset of the girls alone is insufficient to overcome the broader issue of educational inequality. The control over educational resources typically rests in the hands of parents, many of whom still hold onto the deep-rooted preference for sons. This bias often results in underage girls in primary and secondary education being withheld from school or forced to drop out by their parents. To fundamentally address the problem of educational inequality among rural girls, it is imperative for the government to intervene at a societal level, promoting the concept of gender equality across all families and communities.

6. Conclusion

This article brings to light the on-going struggle of rural Chinese girls in accessing equal educational opportunities. Key factors contributing to this disparity include deep-seated gender biases such as son preference, a scarcity of educational resources in rural areas, and the financial strain caused by China's rapid economic development. These factors collectively hinder girls' access to education and academic achievements.

The analysis of recent Chinese policies, including the National Rural Revitalization Program and the Double Reduction Policy, reveals that while these initiatives have made strides, they are not without flaws. Furthermore, the Hainan Heroine Class, though a beacon of success, remains limited in its reach as a regional project. To bridge the educational gender gap effectively, the government should consider scaling up initiatives like the Heroine Class and promoting the concept of gender equality nationwide.

Achieving educational equality for rural Chinese girls necessitates a collaborative effort involving schools, parents, students, and the broader society. By fostering an environment that values and supports girls' education and challenging traditional gender norms, China can make significant progress towards its inclusive education objectives, ensuring that rural girls are not left behind in the quest for educational equity.

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