

Chinese Rural Female Students' Access to Higher Education

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Abstract: *The extent of women's educational rights does not depend entirely on political, economic and social factors, but is also closely related to sociocultural traditions. In China, the rights to education are not only the basis for women's life, but also the symbol of women's liberation as the level of education and culture represent the ability of women and the driving force that helps with improving women's educational destination. The educational level of rural women and the overall development of the whole society, however, are of vital importance. Rural education is the foundation and key to solve Chinese equal education in the future, and the development and improvement of rural women's access to higher education is more related to rural gender equity, education harmony and new rural construction. Firstly, the paper will review the background of Chinese rural female students in accessing to higher education and why it's important for rural women to achieve academic and personal development. Second, it will expound the status quo of rural women's higher education in China at three levels of entity, consciousness and policy. Finally, the paper will critically analyze international and national policies and practices that assigned to address Chinese rural female students' enrollment in higher education and give corresponding recommendations.*

Keywords: *Chinese rural women, higher education; "gaokao", "hukou" policy, gender equality; gender ideology, intra-household relations, basic education, life-long learning*

1. Background

According to China's State Statistical Bureau, there are three distinct concepts when defining China's rural population and these have been translated into "rural", "agricultural" and "countryside" definitions, (Martin, 1992). A further complication exists because the people included in each of these definitions has changed over time. In this paper, the definition of "rural" is based on the criterion made by the State Statistical Bureau that used after 1984: (1) a small population contains less than 20,000 people; (2) residences scatter in villages; (3) family normally live in one house; (4) annual income is primarily from agricultural production; (5) lower industrial, commercial, financial, cultural, educational, and health care development level; and (6) strong local customs and underdeveloped traffic.

China is a country with Confucian traditional culture as its core, thus the feudal concept of "male and female" has been in Chinese history for thousands of years. Although most people no longer support the traditional Chinese notion that that "women are talented without academic knowledge", the national mentality associated with traditional culture has not been completely transformed, so some feudal remnants are still hidden in the depths of people's minds. Specifically, the unfairness of Chinese rural female students' access to higher education manifested in the following two aspects: from the perspective of the city, only a small percentage of women who receive education can achieve the same achievements as men in politics, employment and compensation because there are still physical differences existing between women and men. Chinese society in 21st century, however, is still not able to completely deny the role of women as housewives and "baby factories", thus women's access to higher education which is non-compulsory might be regarded as a waste of resources when education resources are extremely limited and educational outcomes are unequal regarding to occupational segregation, educational inequality, gender discrimination and etc. In Chinese rural areas, the traditional concept of "married daughters, splashed water" hinders a large part of parents from taking on the obligation to let their daughters receive formal education. Since most of Chinese higher education institutions are located in urban cities, rural parents are more likely refuse their daughters to access to universities because rural daughters are responsible for taking care of the household, parents, parents in law and children at home after marriage. What's more, Chinese traditional rural custom and

certain religious norms such as early marriage also make the prospect of rural women's enrollment in higher education dim. For instance, when procreating can increase a rural area's population of adults and stem the hollowing out that takes place when young adults especially rural men leave home for job seeking in the cities, early marriages becomes very popular in rural China where birth rates are relatively low in an aging society. (Xiao, 2016). According to the China Statistical Yearbook (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013), the rate of childbearing among Chinese women between the ages of 15 and 19 climbed from 3.8 percent to 7.8 percent between 2007 and 2013, and from 2008 to 2011 the childbearing rate among rural women of the same age cohort rose from 7.3 percent to 9.6 percent.

According to Liu (2005), women's social status has been continuously improved since 1949 with the development of China's social economy, the prosperity of culture, and enhance of educational awareness, and one of its hallmarks is the growing educational opportunities available for women. Under the premise that China's nine-year compulsory education is basically achieved and the enrollment rate in higher school is as high as 59.8%, higher education has become one of the important indicators for measuring the status of women. As far as the scale is concerned, Chinese women's higher education has indeed made great progress. Before 1947, the proportion of female college students in colleges never exceeded 20%. After the Civil War and founding of New China, Chinese government attached great attention on improving women's enrollment in higher education. The outcome was the proportion of female undergraduate students in ordinary higher education institutions rose from 19.77% to 52.64% between 1949-2005. Liu's survey also indicated that there was a difference in the entrance opportunities of higher education between Chinese rural women and urban women. In general, female college students from rural areas accounted for only 40.70% while urban female students reached 59.30%, and there is a difference of nearly 20%. It can be seen that compared with the rural female students, the female students from urban areas still occupy the main resources in Chinese higher education institutions, and there is an obvious urban-rural difference in the field of higher education that is supposed to be available for all women in China.

2. Why Important?

Education determines life? Although now, accessing to higher education is no longer a watershed that determines the fate of a person's future as it was many years ago, but for female students who come from a less rich family in rural areas in China, enrolling in universities is still one of the most important paths where they may achieve social growth once they step on. No one could deny that education especially higher education still has a very large and decisive influence on improving personal quality and capability. Education as one of a human-specific purpose oriented social activity is the reflection of people's pursuit of certain benefits which are either direct or indirect. The benefits of investing in rural female students' access to higher education in China, both material and non-material, can be divided into private and social benefits.

2.1. Personal Benefits

The private economic benefits gained by Chinese rural women through attending universities refer to the obtaining of self-cultivation and improvement of their quality of life and income. Rural women's educational economic benefits are mainly reflected in wage income. With a unique investment perspective, higher education for rural women has made a new interpretation of driving force of economic development. (Schultz, 1988). In other words, as a production capacity, human resources have far surpassed all other forms of capital production capacity because people's investment in themselves has normally been huge. Higher Education investment on Chinese rural women can thus not only improve personal ability in academic and career field, but also explore the potential capability of rural women. For example, after China's Reform and Opening up, more and more rural women pay attention to their own education investment to improve their labor efficiency, to enter a better working environment, to get a better salary level, and ultimately to achieve social mobility. Through enrolling in higher education and getting high academic degree, rural women may find it easy to get good jobs in urban areas in China, where salary level and working environment are much better than in rural. In China, the individual wage level of university group is significantly higher than the wage level of tertiary group, and the salary level of the graduate group is also higher than the individual wage level of the undergraduate students. (Li & Xing, 2010). The comparison has indicated that the level of personal income is relatively higher while the level of education is improved from the perspective of the vertical development trend of individuals.

The non-economic benefits of Chinese rural women's enrolling in higher education are reflected in the family: to a certain extent, the educational level of mothers determines the overall quality of the family in terms of investment on kids' education and family members' health. "Educating a boy only educates one person, while educating a girl is to educate a generation", said by Indian female educator Karunakaran, (Gillard & Blanchett, 2014). indicates that parents with high educational level will generate far-reaching intergenerational benefits. Especially for mothers in rural China, they are playing important role in the family because they need to pay attention to their individual and family members' infant mortality, safety, health and sanitation status. Mothers who have higher education experiences are more inclined to put educational investment on their children and provide them better living environment. On the other hand, rural female women who attended or are currently attending universities may be easily achieve social mobility, which means urban areas in China where are about to be the new settled location for them and their families.

2.2. Social Benefits

Education is not only the acquisition of knowledge, it is also an important way to pursue social equality. Schultz (1988) believes that a large part of the differences in income distribution is actually caused by different educational levels obtained by individuals. The socioeconomic benefits for Chinese rural women by accessing to higher education are reflected in the improvement of laborers, personal labor efficiency and income which will make social income distribution fair in terms of promoting social productivity and social development. In China, the income inequality started rising when the country's former leader Deng Xiaoping launched market-oriented reforms and opened the economy in 1978. For instance, the top 5% of the country's households took home 23% of the total household income in 2012 while the bottom 5% earned just 0.1%. Also, playing the multiple roles under Chinese traditional norms as the houseworker and care-giver, rural women's earning power might be largely interfered if they were left-behind as agricultural worker instead of attending universities. (Wong, 2013). Therefore in the process of promoting economic development, enlarging accessibility for Chinese rural women to higher education can not only improve the quality of future generations, but also reserve more high-quality human resources for further economic development.

The concept of women's fertility will be greatly influenced by education regarding to the obtaining of social non-economic benefits. When rural women have high level of education, marriage time will be relatively delayed regardless of the early marriage in some rural areas, and integrational intervals will thus increase which have a subtle influence on slowing population growth and improving population quality. (China Daily, 2018). What's more, the old patriarchy thoughts such as "Male work outside, female stay at home" that used to imprison Chinese people's perspectives on gender equality will be gradually diminished through increasing rural women's opportunities to be in universities and improving their working competencies not only in agricultural work. In China's socialized democratic process, higher education for rural women also plays an important role because it not only helps to improve their self-awareness and social status, but also provides more opportunities for gender equality and promotes the development of social democratization.

3. Barriers in Enrollment

Human society has had different social classes since the division of labor, but the wish of eliminating class division to change the injustice of education seems like a Utopian substance. Even though the emergence of education has allowed reformers to see the hope of change, the success of schooling should be evaluated by its impact on reducing socioeconomic and cultural stratification in terms of promoting students' learning outcomes. (Coleman, 1966). Studies have shown that higher education in China has the function of promoting social mobility and class solidification; however in reality, due to vulnerable groups' inborn disadvantages such as gender and social class and the profit maintenance in educational resources utilization from vested interests, higher education has become a tool that reversely maintains and reproduces the inequality in Chinese social structure. Rural women as one of such vulnerable groups, however, has faced difficulty in higher education enrolling and schooling because of contradictions existing in Chinese social structure and the function of education.

3.1. Social and Personal Economic Factors

From the perspective of the country's per capita GDP and educational resources, economic factors play a decisive role in many factors that affect rural women's higher education enrollment. Since

China's productivity level is still at the stage of underdevelopment and poverty commonly exists in rural China, rural students' learning length is much shorter than urban students'. For example, according to the Provincial Data provided by the Ministry of Education of China (2002), the retention rate of the students at fifth grade in several western provinces is below 80%, including Tibet (75.88%), Gansu (77.67%), Qinghai (79.11%) and Ningxia (73.96%). These numbers meant that in these areas, more than 20% of primary school students fail to complete their studies and leave the school to enter the society in advance. For the junior high schools, the national junior high school retention rate is only 89.58%, and the provinces with the lowest retention rate are mostly distributed in the western region of China such as Tibet, Guangxi, Hainan, Chongqing, Sichuan and Qinghai. Such a high dropout rate means that the lack and waste of resources in the education system in Rural China is very prominent, and the quality of education to rural children is also worthy of serious attention. When discussing the factors that pose negative impacts on rural female students' access to higher education, it has become an urgent necessity to concern the accessibility of the pre-college education for them.

Most of rural areas are relatively poor, so they have to invest limited education funds in primary and secondary education which make rural female students who want to enroll in higher education less competitive regarding to high standards and requirements in national college entrance exam. In addition, insufficient budgets and poor educational resources also incur deficient teacher trainings and infrastructural construction, and the failure of teachers' salaries to be paid in full and on time makes many outstanding rural teachers have flowed to cities and graduates from universities are reluctant to teach in the countryside. The shortage of funds, therefore, makes it difficult for rural female students to race against urban students on the starting line which will inevitably bury the equality in accessing to higher education.

Regarding to personal economic factors that avoids rural women enrolling in higher education, if parents sent their daughters to universities where mostly located in urban China, the family would lose partial of the income earned by the daughters through doing agricultural work or marrying men. In other words, since female students' access to education is more affected by the family's economic situation, they are more likely to be victims when education cost and living expense are high. The opportunity cost of education is increasing under marketization especially for the poor, as they may need more manpower and labor to earn money. On the other hand, for rural female students who has families that are able to afford tuitions and living expense in universities, they still often give up their initiatives to enroll in higher education because of weak self-awareness that incurred by social and personal economic factors.

3.2. Gender Ideology and Self-awareness

The low individual quality of rural residents, backward patriarchy concepts and male-dominated intra-house relations are the soil for unequal opportunities for Chinese rural women to enroll in higher education. Compared to urban residents, people from rural China accept lower level of education and have lower literacy rate, therefore they couldn't see the importance and long-term benefits from sending their children to universities. Moreover, gender bias in the family and rural society that females are not as good as men makes rural women are considered to have no need in receiving education. Rural women's life is attributed to the family by relying on husbands and have no large decision-making power, and their primary mission is to take care of family members and be a good wife or mother, thus female character is fixed as husbands' subsidiary. In modern China, rural families still have higher expectations on men than women. This refers to that if there were multiple children in the family, the priority is to send boys to school. To a large context, it's highly common for most of rural women in poor areas to drop out from school at early ages, to do agricultural work when they are still teenagers, and then to get married and give birth to kids after growing up. Additionally, serious gender stereotype also exists in the textbooks used by students not only in Rural China. According to Shi's (2002) research, the female image in primary and secondary school textbooks in the national scale only averagely account for 19%, while the male images account for 81%. In the occupational division of labor and role stereotypes, the gender stereotype displayed in children's books is shown obviously. For instance, 100% of the scientists are men, 100% of workers and soldiers are men, and 100% of teachers or nurses are women. Even in the middle school textbooks, men still appear as leaders, scientists and entrepreneurs that symbolize the dominance of men in Chinese society. Female images in the textbooks suggest that women are weak and subordinate to men no matter in family or workplace. Hence such gender stereotype in students' textbook will negatively affect women's identification and attribution to their gender roles, and rationalize gender bias in society.

In terms of Chinese rural women's self-awareness of enrolling in higher education, besides most of rural parents' biased gender ideology and poverty that directly affect and reduce the opportunities and enthusiasm of rural women for higher education, difficulties in the employment faced by college students have also a negative impact on the initiatives of rural women to enroll in higher education. Jumping out of the rural areas, meeting better potential husbands in schools, achieving social mobility to upper class can all be regarded as primary motivations of rural women to attend universities. However, with the constant growing number of Chinese population, finding a job has become extremely difficult for college graduates because competition among talents is still fierce. The employment situation is not optimistic especially for rural women who have fewer social connections in urban cities, also with the occupational segregation in Chinese society that women normally occupy the positions with less decision-making power, rural women may find it difficult to get a satisfying job. Many college students who come from rural China pay tuitions by causing debt-ridden situation for their families, and such situation can easily generate rural parents as well as female students' thoughts that education is useless. The best way to escape from poverty and get successful social mobility, however, is marrying rich men instead of attending in universities. From the perspective that society helps with maintaining the gender segregation, social control theory believes that men and women have different options in the choice of education and occupation by internalizing different values and tendency of existing social discrimination. The theory also emphasizes that men and women are restricted by strong social constraints when considering the choice of education and occupation that doesn't fit the setting of their gender roles. (Charles & Grusky, 2004). Therefore, people may give up their choices when thinking of making ones that are inconsistent with their gender roles as Chinese rural women may reject to enroll in higher education, taking into account external pressures from economic status, social structure, gender ideology, traditional norms and the possibility of being marginalized.

3.3. "Hukou" Policy and Higher Education Admission Quota

The internal residence system in China, known as "hukou" policy, monitors and controls the movement of people as well as their access to education, medical care, employment, social security and migration, (Chan & Zhang, 1999); however, rural students cannot have equal access to city public schooling because of their rural hukou. The first inequality refers to unequal distribution of educational resources. In urban China, there are many public schools only recruit students with local urban hukou, and even though there are some city schools have a limited quota for rural students, they require rural students to get higher scores in school entrance exam than local urban students. Therefore, rural students who want to study in urban public schools become very hard regarding to the limited quota and rigid score requirement. This institutionalized discrimination also prevents rural students from entering urban public schools or forces them to study either in rural public schools or in urban schools that are typically established for rural migrants, which are generally not funded and equipped as well as urban schools. (Hannum & Wang, 2006). In other words, better educational resources and infrastructure construction belong to urban public cities, thus rural students are gradually becoming less competitive when taking the national college entrance exam.

Moreover, such discrimination also exists when rural students apply for universities. Higher education institutions assign different quotas to each region in China each year through following guidance and instruction of the central government, and students' scores of national college entrance exam (gaokao) and their regional hukou status determine whether they will be accepted by the institutions or not. However, the distribution of universities in general and selective universities in particular are actually far from equal geographically because the most of prestigious institutions prefer to recruit students who come from major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and southeastern coastal areas. (Wang, 2017). Therefore, rural students without urban hukou will be left behind even though their scores in national college entrance exam may be same as or even higher than urban students'. Rural students going back to where their hukou located to attend "gaokao", as the other negative influence of rigid hukou policy, prevents rural students from attending prestigious universities likewise. Even though rural students might be able to study in urban public schools or city schools for rural migrants in major cities, they still have to go back to their hukou locations to take exam. Therefore, it's challenging for rural students to adapt into a new studying environment and learning different knowledge before "gaokao" because each region in China uses different textbooks and questions in national college entrance exam are varied.

"Hukou" policy is not a barrier that negatively influence rural women's enrollment in higher education typically, however, such policy has brought restrictions and challenges to all rural students

who are struggling with their “hukou” status. Even though “hukou” system could efficiently establish a reasonable public order while the power of Chinese government is penetrating into society to ensure public security and stability, the equality in education has been unfortunately ignored.

4. The Solutions and Limitations:

4.1. Global Commitments

To help with rural women obtain more educational opportunities and enlarging access to higher education, Chinese government have followed the following global commitments since last century. The primary objectives of below commitments were to eliminate gender disparities between men and women, promote gender equality in education as well as in the workplace, development quality education for girls and women, reduce occupational segregation, eliminate poverty, urge governmental involvement in women's and girls' full and equal access to all levels of quality education and vocational training, and enhance the participation of women in development in the fields of education, health and work. (See specific objectives for each commitment in Appendix section):

- “The Beijing Platform for Action, 1995”
- “Educational for All, 2000”
- “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”
- “The Millennium Development Goals, 2005”
- “The Commission on the Status of Women, 2006”
- “The Sustainable Development Goals”

The global commitments, playing as a leading role, provided Chinese government with the information about the overall situation and prospect of women in education in the global scale, and also inspired Chinese government in the making process of national policies and laws as well as interventions implementation. Through following global commitments, the overall prospect of women in education have been gradually positive because each country as involver has made a certain amount of contributions to achieve the ultimate goal that globally set and primarily aims to solve gender-related issues existing in the global context, however, gender issues are largely varied based on different national conditions, religions, social norms and etc. Therefore, having national policies and laws initiated based on the situation at micro level becomes extremely important for a country to conduct top-to-bottom educational development, thus the following section will focus on Chinese national policies, laws and corresponding interventions that have been conducted to improve Chinese rural women's access to higher education as students.

4.2. National Policies/Laws and Limitations

Through following the pre-mentioned global commitments, Chinese government has initiated below five primary national policies and laws that make certain efforts in enlarging rural female students' access to higher education by promoting gender equality in education and workplace, enhancing women's rights in education, facilitating educational reforms, steadily developing higher education, ensuring compulsory education for rural students, diminishing occupational segregation, helping rural female college students in seeking employment in urban cities upon to graduation and etc. (See specific objectives for each in Appendix section).

- “Action Scheme for Invigorating Education Towards the 21st Century”
- “Education Law of China”
- “Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights Interests”
- “White Paper: Gender Equality and Women's Development in China”
- “The Modernizing Chinese Education 2030”

In terms of the Sustainable Development Goals, Chinese government initiated “*The Modernizing Chinese Education 2030*” in 2015 which specifically corresponded to the SDG for Education. Regarding to enlarging accessibility and opportunity for Chinese female students to enroll in higher education, Chinese government primarily focuses on “4.1: ensuring that all girls and boys complete

free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030”, “4.3: *ensuring equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university by 2030*” and “4.4: *substantially increasing the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship*” among all SDG targets, (UNESCO, 2016). Therefore in “The Modernizing Chinese Education 2030”, Chinese government has clear declaration and guidance on ensuring access to compulsory education for all children especially those in rural China, establishing a synchronous development mechanism for vocational education, economic and social development and industrial development, gradually eliminating tuition and fees for secondary vocational education and flexibly adjusting financial aids for rural students, promoting cooperation between higher education institutions and enterprises, and also strengthening the discipline construction of higher education to meet the needs of emerging technological industries and people’s expectations to better livelihood through increasing quality of education. As a political measure and political act, national policies and laws can only be attached to the political system and does not have an “independent life”. The formation, operation and development of policies and laws are subject to various factors such as politics, economy, culture and even the individual will of the leaders. The formation of contemporary China’s policies and laws on enlarging rural female students’ access to compulsory and higher education has undergone a process of change, choice, adjustment, reform and innovation under the acceptance and following toward the global commitments and the changing of China’s national condition along with its rapid development in the global scale, (China Education and Research Network, 2001). Such process is not a self-transformation, but a process of combining multiple factors, a process of continuous learning and practice to reflect the subjective will of Chinese government and Chinese citizens.

Going through the objectives of national policies and laws, the most obvious drawbacks could be seen as lacking concentration on **rural women’s access** to higher education as students even though gender equality and women’s rights in education and workplace have been stressed. For example, in “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Rights Interests”, (China Education and Research Network, 2001), women’s equal rights with men with respect to culture and education as well as job assignment; however, the specific and potential barriers faced by rural women and corresponding strategies have not been addressed in the law, instead women’s rights are considered too generally. In addition, even though rural female college graduates are provided assistance in starting business and employment in urban cities based on the regulations listed in “*White Paper: gender equality and women’s development in China*”, there are too few instructions on how to practically improve their access, (China Education and Research Network, 2001). The other limitation of Chinese national laws and policies can be shown in stressing too much on vocational trainings for women. Compulsory education, as the other major concentration of Chinese government in educational reforms, is acceptable to be heavily stressed because it does help with eliminating illiteracy rate and having rural students prepared for further education. Vocational education, as an alternative choice for rural women who are not able to get good scores in national college entrance exams or are not able to attend in universities because of objective factors such as poverty or health status, could be beneficial for rural women because it does provide them with opportunities to get technological and technical skills. Currently in China, talents with specific skills are highly required because Chinese government focuses on economic growth through developing industries, thus vocational education could improve rural women’s employment in China urban to some extent. However, investing too much on vocational education just because the demands of knowledge-economy as well as China’s developmental tendency may be unfair for rural women especially for those who want to have personal rights enhanced by national policies and laws to study in universities. In other words, current China’s national policies and laws used to enlarge rural female students’ access to higher education too heavily focus on political will of a country instead personal will of rural women who want to pursue academic improvement through getting higher education. Last, even though financial supports are promised to give students from low family income in “*Education Law of China*”, (China Education and Research Network, 2001), the regulation on financial supports assurance and accreditation is largely lacking in these national laws and policies. Without monitoring and regulating financial supports especially top-to-bottom budgets and funds used to help poor rural students, issues such as corruption can still avoid rural women from accessing to higher education.

4.3. National Practices and Limitations

On the point of Chinese government, there are two primary practices to solve the issues that Chinese rural women are facing with currently in terms of accessing to higher education. First of all,

Chinese government conduct “Rural Revitalization Strategy” in rural China. The strategy stresses the importance of maintaining the priority of rural development through establishing a sound urban-rural integration development system and policy system in order to build a well-to-do society and an all-round construction of modern socialist country. Also, the strategy leads Chinese government invest more physical, financial, and human resources to rural areas to improve rural medical system and educational infrastructure to further strengthen compulsory education for farmers in rural China, (Wang & Zhuo, 2018); however, one of the limitations in the strategy is that too much emphasizing on the decline in the number of people living in poverty instead of improving life quality of the poor, and corruption stills plays a role in reducing life quality of rural people because central government’s monitoring on top-to-bottom budgets and funds cannot easily penetrate into each power level especially in the poor areas where residents have no initiative or ability to report corruption. The life quality of the poor, on the other hand, is highly relevant with whether educational infrastructural construction could be created to generate high education quality to match rural students’ academic demands and expectations. Therefore, ignoring rural people’s life quality may decrease students’ personal motivations to study in school because they may be lack of happiness due to low life quality. The second limitation of this strategy is that peasant college students are encouraged to go back to rural China to help famers with developing agriculture and they could obtain research funds and extra awards from Chinese government. Such practice could motivate more rural students to access to higher education and major in agricultural-related subjects in order to get better job opportunities after graduation with governmental supports; however, it may unbalance the population of rural students in different majors. Additionally, even though national policies and laws have stressed the importance of promoting equality in job assignment, occupational segregation is still a serious problem in Chinese society. Therefore, female peasant college students may find it difficult to find a job that allows them to help with developing agriculture in rural China, but the problem, still, is that how many peasant college students are willing to go back to rural China again after graduation when considering the efficiency of such strategy.

The second practice of the government is promoting quality-oriented education system for Chinese students in both urban and rural areas. Shifting from exam-oriented system, quality-oriented one focuses on intellectual education plus physical education, skills teaching and social practices, (Jian, 2013). Through assimilating Western notions of well-roundness and quality education, Chinese government has gradually started to encourage quality-oriented educational system in the nationwide especially in middle and high schools because it enhances the comprehensiveness, integrity, and sustainability of knowledge that students could learn from schools, and students’ creativity and critical thinking skills can be also fostered. However, conducting quality-oriented education is difficult in rural China because of poverty, weak teacher resources, poor schooling conditions, shortage of educational resources and single educational structure. The current increasingly serious urban-rural differences especially in economic aspects create difficulties for rural China to follow quality-oriented educational system which has been largely accepted and developed in major cities in China such as Beijing and Shanghai. For some of rural female students who have already attended in universities, they may even be discriminated by urban students because they lacked quality-oriented education in their middle or high schools if they didn’t study in urban public schools or urban schools for rural migrants. Since the way the rural female students behave and speak may be too rural to be accepted by urban students, they have been laughed at or discriminated as they are regarded as a group of people who don’t have good quality, (Xie, et al, 2014). Therefore, to some extent, rural students still cannot majorly benefit from quality-oriented education at this moment when poverty has not been thoroughly solved in rural China, and such national practice actually don’t contribute too much on improving rural female students’ access to higher education because there is no direct relationship between quality-oriented education and national college entrance exam. In other words, national college entrance exam is still the only channel for rural female students to change their fates, and quality-oriented education is not an urgent necessity or priority for them in terms of attending to universities.

Since 1999, Chinese higher education has also made efforts to improve rural female students’ access to higher education under the instruction of Chinese government through expanding higher education admission. The expansion of higher education does increase the probability of go to universities and induce gender equality in higher education opportunities. According to Zhang and Chen’s research (2014) about seeking to identify the factors that contribute most to gender equalization, they found that through the expansion, the gender structure has undergone a significant change with female enrollment at around 50% in 2010, and the difference in distribution between genders is thus reduced. On the other hand, Zhang and Chen summarized the limitations of higher education expansion in China in their research by doing experimental research through following the LATE framework

developed by Imbens and Angrist. First, different populations benefit from the expansion differently, and minority female who from central-western region and from rural areas are less likely to benefit it because patriarchy and social norms still play important roles in poor rural areas where daughters are not preferred to obtain higher level education. Second, one-child families are more responsive to this practice, but most of rural families have more than one kid. Therefore, Chinese rural female students are less likely to be the major beneficiary in higher education expansion since 1999. Based on Zhang and Chen's research, the expansion actually generate more gender inequality in the field of education. Besides this, there is still no clear regulation on adjusting higher education institutions' admission quota and universities in China have absolute right to determine the quota without governmental interventions. Therefore, such unfair admission quota still prevents more rural female students from entering in universities in China even though they may get good grades in national college entrance exam.

The most well-known NGO that devotes to help Chinese rural women with getting different levels of education is called Educating Girls of Rural China. (Roxburgh, 2017). Ching Tien, the founder of EGRC, aims to give young women and girls in rural China the gift of education because she believes that educated women have educated children. Since 2005, EGRC has supported 692 girls, and boasts a 100 percent graduation rate. Also, it provides up to around 1000 dollars per girl toward annual university fees and living costs to encourage more rural female students to study in universities without large concern on financial difficulty. The primary source of financial supports given to Chinese rural students from EGRC are from donors such as Bank of Montreal Country, American Chamber of Commerce, Canada China Business Council and etc., even though financial supports can help poor Chinese rural female students to get education in an immediate way, the unfair admission quota still limits the function of NGOs such as EGRC. In other words, no matter how much money or resources charities or donors could give to support Chinese rural women, the outcomes couldn't be mostly positive if Chinese government didn't change policy in admission quota.

5. Recommendations

The issues in education equity and gender equality in China is mainly reflected in the significant gap between urban and rural areas, regions, ethnic groups and genders, and the huge urban-rural gap is also the most important and basic educational condition in China. In the pyramid of higher education, rural students especially females are still mainly distributed in the middle and lower levels, and the rural colleges or vocational colleges with the weak educational resources. Therefore, facing with the huge rural-urban gap and gender inequality, pre-mentioned national policies, laws and practices could be better modified in future days based on the corresponding limitations.

5.1. Reducing Poverty

Since global commitments plays an important role in guiding the making process of national policies and laws and the intervention of national practices, keeping being one of the followers in global commitments is necessary for Chinese government. To improve rural female students' access to higher education, reducing poverty which is one of the most significant factors that prevent them from attending universities should be the priority of Chinese government when considering enlarging the accessibility. Therefore, accelerating rural economic development through promoting agricultural or innovative industries to increase famers' income could be an efficient way to solve the economic difficulties of rural female students in receiving higher education because it's not compulsory in China. Due to various reason such as weak human and technological resources, rural economic development is relatively slower than urban China, and famers' income thus becomes relatively small. This is an important constraint for rural children to receive education because they are not able to afford university tuitions. Therefore, Chinese government should first strategically flow financial supports to rural China to promote rural economic construction and make sure rural families have abilities to afford tuitions after their children finish compulsory education. Reducing rural children's dropout rate is important for rural women to further attend in universities. Second, helping farmers improve the technical level of agricultural production and sending experts/technologies to rural China can both increase agricultural income and enhance farmers' awareness of making money by themselves instead of heavily rely on governmental financial supports. Third, to change the industrial structure and increase farmers' income through various channels, Chinese government should also encourage farmers to start personal businesses and industries and develop towns and villages' infrastructure construction to ensure quality of life. To ensure governmental financial supports could thoroughly

penetrate to the bottom level of the country, Chinese government needs to conduct monitoring and regulation to eliminate corruptions. Through increasing the income of farmers and increasing governmental funding, rural families may provide equal opportunities for their children to receive education instead of only investing on boys and leaving daughters at home to be care giver.

To enlarge financial supports to rural China, Chinese government should welcome more international institutions, donors and charities to help rural students. However, vetting helpers and supporters is highly necessary for Chinese government before rural areas accept financial supports in case of some of helpers have specific political preferences that may incur national conflicts. In addition, to better financially help rural female students who have already studied in universities, Chinese government should also keep issuing scholarships and grants for them especially for those who have great academic performance to cover partial of their tuitions as well as living expense. Higher education institutions, moreover, need to be responsible for advising and instructing rural female students how to apply for those scholarships in an efficient way.

5.2. The Changing of Conservative Social Norms and Community Involvement

In pre-mentioned barriers that prevent rural female students from receiving higher education, traditional social norms in rural China such as patriarchy directly reduces the number of rural women who can attend in universities and decreases rural women's motivations. Gender injustice and gender inequality in China's education have a long history and is more obvious in rural areas. To positively change the conservation social norms in rural China, the involvement of Chinese government should be brought to the policy level. Specifically speaking, the government should incorporate awareness of education for women at the level of educational legislations and laws to highlight gender equality. The key to put awareness of gender equality in national legislations is that strengthening awareness of women's education while damaging the rights of men and causing gender conflicts.

In terms of early marriages that commonly happen in rural China, even though there is a regulation from Chinese government about the legal ages of men and women to get married, it's difficult for Chinese government to monitor each couple's ages especially in rural areas where monitoring mechanism and system are ineffective. To reduce early marriages and enhance women's equal rights to receive higher education at the ages when they are supposed to get married due to parents' expectations, the community should take the main responsibility. The involvement of community is extremely important in improving rural women's access to higher education because communities in rural China sometimes are more "influential" than central government because farmers may regard Chinese government as a place where is too far away from their homes, thus they are more inclined to follow instructions from community leaders. The communities should not only be responsible for monitoring early marriages, but also need to conduct quality assurance and accreditation mechanism on rural schools' infrastructural construction to improve schools' quality and teaching quality by appropriately using governmental funding. To ensure community involvement is effective, Chinese government should recruit community leaders with high-level education attainment to work in rural China, and female leaders are strongly encouraged because female community leaders can motivate more rural women to receive education. Recruiting good leaders will also reduce corruptions.

5.3. Improve the Quality of Rural Basic Education and Teaching

With governmental funding, accelerating the development and improving the quality of basic education in rural areas can be the other urgent necessity to enhance rural children's competitiveness in accessing to higher education because basic education provides students with fundamental knowledge that would promote students' attainment of higher-level education. The low quality of rural basic education incurred by weak educational resources and teaching quality is the direct cause of the unequal opportunities for rural children especially female students to receive higher education because students are lack of competitiveness and even personal motivations to get further educated. To catch up the trend of quality-oriented education that has been developed in urban cities, having basic education and teachers with high quality get rural students prepared to lie in quality-focused educational system.

To improve the quality of basic education in rural China, increasing the number of rural teachers to meet the needs of rural basic education development is important. In most of rural areas, the shortage of qualified teachers is very large. For instance, teachers in many schools are overloaded with weightbearing work because one person normally has several jobs: Chinese teachers may also be history teachers; math teachers are teaching chemistry courses and etc. Some of the subjects in rural

schools cannot be opened due to lack of teachers and even students. Also, most of these rural teachers are not up to standard and have had never receive any formal teacher trainings before. How can quality of education be guaranteed by having teachers without professional teaching experience? Hence, it's important to ensure the number of teachers and improve teaching quality to develop rural basic education and students' competitiveness. Chinese government should provide rural teachers with on-the-job teacher education because as what mentioned above, having rural teachers leaving classrooms is impossible due to the low number of teachers. By sending experts, professionals or college volunteers to rural schools or having online courses, rural teachers can participate in various types on on-the-job learning according to their actual needs. In terms of solving the shortage of rural teachers, Chinese government should improve the working conditions and salaries of teachers to meet their personal needs. At present, many rural areas are not liberated due to financial constraints thus education is regarded as an "effective investment", so rural leaders would like to spend less money on hiring a teacher from a lower-level school (some teachers graduated from vocational education and even have no teaching license), rather than recruiting college graduates to be teachers. Recruiting college graduates can not only solve the problems of teachers' shortage, but also solve the employment problem of college graduates. However, the most important thing for Chinese government is that, firstly improving living quality of rural China to attract more college graduates because currently most of them refuse to live in rural areas where infrastructural and living conditions are weak. What's more, Chinese government should balance the number of rural and urban teachers. For example, it can adopt preferential policies such as higher salaries compared to teaching in urban schools to encourage urban teachers to teach in rural areas. Teachers are important for rural students to get basic education with high quality because teaching quality directly determines students' learning outcomes, and both rural girls and boys can benefit from basic education which reduces their illiteracy rate and makes them more competitiveness in receiving higher education but also job seeking. Along with recruiting more professional teachers, textbooks without gender stereotypes and technology such as laptops should also be provided by utilizing governmental funding.

5.4. Adjust Admission Quota

Appropriately adjusting the enrollment policy to expand the proportion of rural students especially female students in higher education is urgently necessary as well. In order to reflect true fairness, higher education institutions should properly adjust the admission policy such as drawing two score lines for rural and urban students instead of having unfair admission quota and preferring students from urban cities. In terms of urban public schools, it's acceptable to require higher entrance exam scores from rural students who want to access to better educational resources through studying in urban cities, as students' academic achievement is also important for urban schools to get better reputation; however, paying higher tuitions than how much students with urban "hukou" should be better regulate by Chinese government. In other words, students who pass entrance exam of urban public schools because of high intellectual ability may not be supposed to pay more as urban-rural equality is expected to be promoted. On the other hand, for urban schools established typically for rural migrants, the educational resources need be considered to be improved as well, all students shall obtain same educational resources after all. For example, teacher education and peer coaching can be conducted between urban public schools and urban schools for rural migrants.

Adjusting admission quota and setting different score lines to get accepted by higher education institutions don't mean rural students are absolutely taking advantages of their rural identity. The adjustment should be flexible based on where rural students' high schools located. For example, rural students who graduated from very poor rural areas in China should be considered to have lower grades in national college entrance exam; however, for those who study in urban public high schools or public schools for rural migrants should be required relatively higher scores. Chinese government needs to set clear regulations on admission quota of Chinese higher education to ensure that balance of the number of rural and urban students.

5.5. "Hukou" Policy and Relocation

As previously mentioned, all high school students need to go back to where their "hukou" located to have national college entrance exams, but this is unfair for not only rural students who study in somewhere else because they need to be familiar with new studying materials in short time, but also for rural students who never leave their hometowns as they become less competitive in entrance college exam compared to those who obtain better educational resources through studying in urban schools for

couple of years and coming back to take the test. Therefore, having “hukou” policy determines where students are supposed to take national college entrance exam may not be wise, thus I suggest all students to take the test where their first year of high school initiates.

Regarding to “hukou” relocation, Chinese government nowadays is expecting to move 250 million rural inhabitants to cities and towns to rapidly achieve urbanization of China in recent years. (Weller, 2015). The current plan to establish urban centers and to encourage rural-urban migration is the most massive, centrally organized and deliberate to date. However, the biggest problem that will come up later is that such migration may quickly generate over-population in urban cities and intense employment opportunities. Even though urbanization is important for a country to achieve economic development, agricultural work definitely should not be left behind. Therefore, I suggest rural students who obtain higher education diploma could transfer their families and themselves’ “hukou” to urban cities, normally to where their universities at, and this may be a more strategic way to motivate and encourage more rural students to study hard and get accepted by universities to ultimately achieve upper social mobility.

5.6. Increase Employment Opportunities

With the constant growing population, college graduates in China are encountered with severe difficulties in employment. Therefore, Chinese higher education institutions should first go through market research and argumentation to scientifically and reasonably in setting up their majors. For example, since China currently requires more STEM talents, STEM majors can be correspondingly increased, but rural students especially female students should have equal rights to apply for these majors as well as to be accepted. Higher education institutions can cooperate with some large enterprises to ensure graduates’ employment and internship opportunities because this can help with facilitating win-win situation for both schools and enterprises. Second, students should not be only taught theoretical knowledge, but also be provided opportunities for practical trainings such as being interns in cooperated enterprises. Third, rural female students and their parents should be rational when choosing a major, majors like nursing and teaching are not supposed to be dominated by female students anymore in today’s China. Forth, Chinese government should keep helping rural female college graduates with starting their personal business in urban cities, such as zero interest on their entrepreneurial loans. Last but not least, higher education institutions should give more females employment opportunities when hiring staffs and faculty, also job assignment needs to be fair and women with good working ability can fit in decision-making positions as well.

5.7. Promote Rural Women’s Life-long Learning

According to the global commitments, promoting rural women’s life-long learning is the other necessary national practice. In essence, women’s potential and ability should be fully exerted, and their values need to be fully reflected in all societal aspects as well. The content of the women’s life-long education system in the new era should involve the education on equality of love and gender awareness when rural women are infants and young children, the proper in-school education on gender knowledge and quality awareness during rural females’ adolescence period, and the vocational and technical trainings for middle-aged and older women. While making national efforts on ensuring equal rights in accessing to compulsory education, Chinese government needs concentrate on providing rural female students with more opportunities to get middle and high school education, as well as vocational trainings in case they are not able to attend in universities due to various factors such as poverty and low scores in national college entrance exam.

6. Implications for Future Research

In future research, the value of quality-oriented educational system needs to be better analyzed, and how to promote quality-oriented education in rural areas is always a big concern. Also, the relationship between Chinese national college entrance exam and quality-oriented education needs to be clearly clarified. Above national practices and recommendations used to enlarge rural students especially female students’ access to higher education may increase their privileges, but meanwhile, will urban students be thus hurt by these practices and in what way? Also, I found that most of statistics only indicated the overall percentage of rural students in higher education in China, few of them referred the difference between rural and urban women, or urban men and urban women; however, I have not seen any data used to clarify the difference between rural men and rural women; thus I am expecting to see

more official statistics that specifically indicate in recent years, how many rural female students accepted by higher education institutions each year, how many of them are currently studying in universities, what majors they mostly dominate, what's their employment rate and late marriage rate.

Appendix

Global Commitments	Objectives
"The Beijing Platform for Action, 1995"	Ensure equal access to education; Eradicate illiteracy among women; Improve women's access to vocational training, science and technology, and continuing education; Develop non-discriminatory education and training; Allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms; Promote lifelong education and training for girls and women.
"Educational for All, 2000"	Goal 2: Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality. Goal 5: Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality
"Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"	Calling for policies that guarantee equal access to education and the elimination of gender disparities in education, including vocational training, science and technology, and ensure quality education and improved enrolment and retention rates. It also called for accelerated action to meet the specific targets set out in the Beijing Platform for Action as well as highlighted the need to develop a gender-sensitive curriculum at all levels of education to address gender stereotyping as one of the root causes of segregation in working life.
"The Millennium Development Goals, 2005"	addressing gender equality and education in two of the eight goals, reflecting widespread agreement that progress in these areas is - 2 - critical to poverty reduction and development. MDG2 focuses on universal primary education, and restates the 2015 target for girls and boys alike to complete a full course of primary schooling
"The Commission on the Status of Women, 2006"	Emphasizing the need for continued efforts toward gender equality in education and training. In its agreed conclusions on enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia the fields of education, health and work
"The Sustainable Development Goals: Goal 4"	Focusing on universal education and commits countries to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Goal 4, which takes a lifelong learning perspective, represents the vision and aspirations of the global education community for 2030. Lifelong learning comprises all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies, within personal, civic, social and employment related perspectives

(UNESCO, 2007; United Nations, 2018)

National Policies/ Laws	Objectives
"Action Scheme for Invigorating Education Towards the 21st Century"	It is envisaged that by the year 2000 9-year compulsory education will be made basically universal throughout the country, and in the meantime, illiteracy will be basically eliminated among young and middle-aged adults, and significant advances will have been made in implementing. The system of vocational education and training and the system of continuing education are to be improved so that all new members of the urban and rural work force and all people in employment will have unhampered access to educational and training programs of all types and levels. Higher education will be actively and steadily developed.
"Education Law of China"	With a view to developing educational undertakings, improving the quality of the whole nationality, accelerating the construction of the socialist material and spiritual civilization and in accordance with the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the present Law is hereby formulated. The present Law shall be applicable to all kinds of education at all levels within the territory of the People's Republic of China.
"Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights Interests"	In accordance with the Constitution and the actual conditions of the country, this Law is formulated to protect women's lawful rights and interests, promote the equality between men and women and allow full play to women's role in socialist modernization.
"White Paper: Gender Equality and Women's Development in China"	China's national mechanism for promoting the status of women, fully utilizing government resources and effectively mobilizing social resources, lays an important foundation for promoting gender equality and women's development.
"The Modernizing Chinese Education 2030"	According to The Plan, by 2020 China is expected to rank among the leading countries in terms of human resources, progress in the modernization of education, overall robustness in education and international influence, laying solid foundations for realizing the 2030 vision of a fully modernized education system.

(China Education and Research Network, 2001)

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