



# The Equality of Higher Education in Rural Areas of China

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**Abstract.** Education is the foundation of social development, which has also been a common concern of various countries and societies. Since 1999, the Chinese government has been expanding the number of colleges and universities and providing new resources for higher education to reduce its difficulty for people to receive higher education. However, due to the imbalance of regional development and various other factors, students in rural areas have been affected by their desire to receive higher education. In addition to family factors, gender issues, the lack of educational resources and low teaching standards in rural areas are also factors that hinder students' access to higher education. This paper examines the situation of higher education in rural areas of China from three aspects: family environment, gender inequality, and education and teaching, by reviewing a large amount of literature and combining previous research results. After reviewing previous work, this paper will inspire future researchers to pay more attention to the equality of higher education in rural areas of China.

**Keywords:** Higher education · Family environment · Gender inequality · Teaching

## 1 Introduction

From the perspective of the higher education enrolment rate, China's higher education has been popularized. However, this kind of popularization is only in urban popularization, and higher education has not extended to the vast rural areas of China [1]. Higher education in rural China still faces many problems.

The rural area is a dynamic concept with historical, transitional, and unbalanced characters. As a regional concept, the rural area is a natural ecological phenomenon with a specific natural landscape and spatial form. As a social concept, it is a social and economic phenomenon, which is mainly manifested in areas where agricultural production is given priority and more people are engaged in agricultural production activities [2]. China's rural areas mentioned in this paper generally refer to the areas with relatively backward

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economic and cultural levels. Higher education is also called “education” and a kind of “education,” but it is not simply a continuation and further extension of the previous stage of education. However, it has gone beyond the usual meaning of “education.” It goes beyond the usual meaning of education. Higher education can be seen as a process. It encompasses multiple educational processes, which takes the personal development of each student to a professional level [3].

While higher education is constantly meeting people’s needs, its equality problem is increasingly prominent. Equality in higher education is a topic that researchers need to focus on. Therefore, based on the rural areas of China, this paper will analyze the causes of equality in higher education from three aspects: family background, gender, teaching, and discuss how to solve this problem.

## 2 Family Background

Family environments largely influence parents’ attitudes towards students’ learning aspects, which would have an impact on students’ access to higher education. One study suggests that “the origin of student dropout phenomenon may be subjective beliefs, which are formed in the family environment” [4]. According to the origin of a child’s education, the home environment can shape beliefs that can be constructive or destructive to a student’s access to higher education. Meanwhile, some scholars even argue that family background plays a decisive role in the educational achievement of individuals [5]. It is noticeable that family background has an important influence on a child’s education, and naturally, on the child’s studies in higher education.

Higher education is not compulsory in China, therefore students who wish to pursue higher education need to pay tuition fees and be prepared to pay for housing and living expenses. This is a big burden for families living in rural areas with low incomes. The dropout rate of children from poor families is three times higher than that of the average family that low family income, which not only affects children’s investment in education but also their educational performance [6]. Families with low financial incomes may not be able to afford the cost of enrolling their children in higher education. As a result, some students, even if they get accepted to a good university with excellent grades, may drop out because they are worried about the cost. Some students may be able to attend a college or university but need to work part-time to save money in their free time while studying. These students are under tremendous physical and psychological stress, which undoubtedly makes their learning less effective and does not help them to learn. Students from low socioeconomic family backgrounds are more likely to perform poorly academically compared to students from families with high socioeconomic status [7]. Students from high socio-economic status families have fewer factors that can affect them, their material and spiritual lives are more affluent, and their parents will provide their children with all the resources they can to help them complete their education. In contrast, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have to worry about making ends meet and sometimes need to work for their parents or work part-time to reduce their parents’ stress, and they have limited resources available to them, which can limit their progress to a great extent. In addition, parents from low income families tend to focus on increasing their income. Therefore, they pay little attention to their

children's academic problems [4]. Moreover, parents from low socioeconomic status families believe that educating their children is solely the responsibility of teachers. Therefore, they are less involved in the learning process of their children [8].

Conversely, children from high socioeconomic status backgrounds receive full support from their parents [9]. Therefore, children living in families with high social status and economic income have better access to higher education than children from families with low economic income. Moreover, studies have found that because each family has different economic resources, some families are in difficulty neglecting to invest in and support their children's education, which becomes one of the reasons that affect their children's access to education [10]. This shows the importance of the family's economic background in the student's education. When students are preparing to enter higher education, the family economic background becomes a greater limiting factor for rural students to go further.

In addition, the family economic background has a greater impact on students' access to higher education in rural areas. However, the influence of the family's cultural background cannot be ignored. Cultural background plays an important role in the process of students' access to education. The culture of the more backward and poor areas is characterized by rusticity, closedness, homogeneity, and ecology. However, these backward things restrict the development of spiritual civilization to a certain extent and can have a greater impact on children's educational problems [11].

Analyzing data from the 2000 Urban Household Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, the study finds that the effect of family cultural background on children's access to higher education and children's access to secondary education is significantly or slightly greater than that of family economic background, thus presenting a relative advantage [12]. This leads to the conclusion that children's access to higher education is mainly influenced by the family's cultural capital rather than the family's economic capital. This also explains the fact that family cultural background is more influential than the family's economic background, while rural areas are backward due to various factors, and most families are concerned with how to earn money. Some young people drop out of school and go out to work from secondary school, and this is a similar experience in every era, which leads to the phenomenon that most people in rural areas are not well educated. Parents are less educated and less educated, plus the rural areas are remote and backward in terms of resources. It is difficult for students to have a good learning environment, let alone have a better family and cultural background. This has a direct impact on students' access to education and also on their opportunities for higher education.

However, it has also been confirmed that the better the educational system of a society, the lower the impact of family background on children's educational attainment and the more equitable the education received by children [13]. Therefore, further improvement of the education system is crucial for students in rural areas to receive a better education.

### **3 Gender Inequality**

There are a lot of factors that caused gender inequality in higher education in rural areas of China. All of the factors and economic conditions might be a very serious problem

to cause a gender bias in education which leads to gender inequality in education in the rural area. Research shows that although most of the family can send their kids to primary school, most of them cannot also send them to tertiary schools [14]. Also, as a result, half of the people in rural areas have more than one kid, and they are not able to send all their kids to school, so girls are always the ones who are not able to receive education in such circumstances [15]. Hence, from this situation, it is noticeable a huge gender bias toward girls, especially in education, since most of the girls in such families cannot receive a higher education level. Instead, the analysis points out that since some of the places in rural areas did not increase their education level, it raises their gender inequality in education [15]. And because of this, the influence of gender bias which causes gender inequality in education has a further and deeper influence on females in rural areas, whatever their income or their chances of work.

Instead of the influence of economic factors which caused gender bias in education on people's thoughts in China, according to an analysis of a 1994 survey of women in a rural county in southwest China who bore children between 1991 and 1994, Li and Lavelly show that a lot of women in the family express a strong belief in traditional ancestor worship which also means the traditional thoughts of preferring boys to girls [16]. Since people prefer boys more than girls, there will be differences in the expectation between males and females. Hence, impoverished families usually might be lacking in resources. Therefore, under this circumstance, the distribution of the resources might be unequal, how will the resources usually be distributed? Research in rural Gansu points out that the vast majority of mothers still expected to rely on sons for old-age support. And compared to boys, girls faced somewhat lower (though still very high) maternal educational expectations and a greater likelihood of being called on for household chores than boys [16].

Therefore, it can be concluded that a lot of families in rural areas in China always put males in a higher place and also give higher expectations to males. In this circumstance, if the family does have not enough resources, they will give more resources to their male kids and ignore female kids. According to gender inequality and poverty in rural education, "The gender difference of family education expectation directly leads to family limited asset allocation. It is skewed towards boys and deprives girls of educational opportunities" [16].

Also, the gender inequality and poverty in rural education provide an example that a man named Wang in the Gansu province has the education level of high school, and his wife has no education background. They have three kids, their biggest kid is a girl, she did not go to the school after primary school year 4. Their second daughter is studying in middle school, but Wang would only allow her to receive education no more than middle school. However, Wang's son was also studying in middle school. But the difference is that Wang would allow him to receive education levels higher than middle school. And the reason why Wang did this is that he thinks he needs people to help him to do the housework. But Wang has lower expectations of his two daughters and also gives heavier housework to two daughters. On the contrary, his son only gets an easy one. Therefore, it can be referred that because of the prefer boys to girls have a huge influence on people's thoughts of putting two different level thus impacting people's different expectation of male and female.

## 4 Teaching

The equality of higher education involves a wide range of issues, including the equality of higher education starting point, the equality of higher education process, and the equality of higher education outcome. Equality in the process of higher education means that the educated enjoy equal learning conditions and educational effects in the process of schooling [17]. Teaching is an important factor in process equity. Teaching mentioned in this paper is a macro concept, which includes teaching resources, teaching conditions, and teaching quality.

At present, the teaching resources and teaching conditions in rural China are still at a relatively deficient level. The talents of higher education are cultivated and transported by basic education. At present, the distribution of educational resources in the stage of basic education in China is extremely uneven, which is not only reflected between urban and rural schools, but also between key and non-key schools. One of the surveys of high school students found 68.7% of key high schools in counties and 35.6% of ordinary high schools in counties. From the source of students, most of the high schools in counties and towns are students from rural areas [18]. The data also show that students in rural areas do not have many opportunities to enter higher education. High schools located in rural areas are generally non-key high schools, and their education quality is relatively impoverished, with few students able to enter colleges and universities every year. Only by entering a key senior high school located in the county seat can rural students have the hope of entering higher education.

On the contrary, if they fail to enter a key senior high school, they have no hope of entering a university. Rural students enjoy far fewer educational resources in terms of equipment and courses than urban students [19]. In front of the national or provincial unified college entrance examination, students with different foundations are required to accept challenges of the same difficulty due to objective conditions. This kind of competition itself loses fairness, and the results of the competition are self-evident. Distance education resources are not fully or basically matched with textbooks through the investigation of teaching resources in rural schools [20]. Teachers generally reflect that there are few excellent resources that can be directly used in class, and many resources need to be modified to be used, which increases the difficulty of resource application.

The number of teachers, the level of teachers, and the expectation of teachers are several important factors affecting the quality of teaching, and also the key to achieving the educational effect. There is a serious shortage of teachers in rural areas. The number of teachers in rural areas is decreasing and leaving. Many teachers have to take multiple jobs, and some schools cannot even operate many subjects normally [21]. The number of teachers needs to meet the requirements of educational development, only in this way can the continuous improvement of education level be promoted. Every teacher has his own strengths and should teach students knowledge according to his corresponding major. It is painful for teachers and unfair for students to ask some teachers to teach subjects they are not good at. Without the cultivation of professional knowledge, students' learning ability is not strong, their professional quality is low, and their competitiveness is weak, which also leads to the reduction of the opportunity to study in higher education. In this case, the ideal educational effect has not been achieved.

At present, the level of rural teachers in China is not high. In a field survey of rural schools in eight counties in southwestern Hunan, the proportion of teachers with less than high school, high school, and college degrees was 5.4%, 27.8%, and 47.4% respectively [22]. In the survey part of the teachers frankly, some teachers have a poor sense of responsibility, did not receive regular normal education, and even not full-time school graduation, teaching thoughts are not correct, holding the idea of dawdling, where can cultivate a good student. The quality of teachers reflects the ability of teachers. Only competent teachers can help students in learning. Teachers' sense of responsibility has a direct impact on the effect of education and teaching. Responsible teachers put students first and are more considerate of their thoughts and feelings. It is not easy for students in rural areas to obtain learning resources, so it is more necessary for teachers with strong professional ability and responsibility to guide them on the path of learning and help them get rid of the dilemma of learning.

Teachers' different expectations of students affect teachers' attitudes and behaviors towards students, which, intentionally or unintentionally, affect students' achievement motivation and attribution mode, thus affecting students' enthusiasm and academic performance [23]. Generally speaking, teachers will pay special attention to students with good grades or students they like and have high expectations for these students. On the contrary, teachers may pay less attention to or even do not have expectations for students with poor grades or who they don't like. Students in rural areas tend to go to school at the right age and do not have the same opportunities to learn or even develop interests as students in urban areas do before entering school. Since students in rural areas have not received any educational accumulation before, they often show a kind of maladjustment to classroom learning. This requires teachers to pay more attention to them in class, give them the most help, and be patient to answer their questions. If some teachers ignore them because of their temporary poor grades, it can lead to a vicious circle in the long run. Teachers will have low expectations of them and pay less attention to them. Without the teacher's attention, students will gradually lose their interest in learning, and their academic performance will be lower and lower. As a result, some rural students do not have a strong desire to learn and lose the opportunity to study in higher education, which should be paid attention to in the future.

## 5 Conclusion

According to the above review, it can be seen that cultural background, gender inequality, and teaching are indeed the three main causes of higher education inequality in rural areas of China. To improve or solve this phenomenon, everyone from the government to the family should attach importance to this problem.

The government needs to increase support for rural China and increase household income in rural areas. The means of support can be various, for example, through e-commerce platforms, specialties from rural areas can be sold to other places to generate income for farmers. The income of rural residents has increased, so they do not need to worry about living problems. Under this circumstance, parents can take time out to care for and be with their children. Growing up and studying in such a family environment, the probability of children dropping out of school for family reasons will be greatly reduced.

In more remote rural areas, ideological isolation and gender inequality are still very serious, and students' education is greatly hindered. The government should hold regular education lectures in these places to popularize the importance of education. For some families with gender inequality, the government can send people to do ideological work. Family should also establish the correct value and treat equally without discrimination for all boys and girls.

The government also needs to invest more in education in rural areas. In terms of teaching resources, some key schools can be planned in rural areas to ensure that students from rural families can have good schools at their doorstep. At the same time, the matching degree of classroom learning resources should be improved to ensure that rural students can also obtain excellent learning resources in class. Talent policies can also be formulated to attract excellent teachers to teach in rural areas and continue to improve the number and quality of teachers in rural areas. Teachers in rural areas also need to receive regular training and audits to ensure that they do their best to treat every student.

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