



# Gender Inequality in Rural Education in China and its Policy Development

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**Abstract.** Gender inequality in education has always been a problem in Chinese society. Although education has been widely popularized in rural areas, there are significant differences in the access to educational resources for students of different genders. This paper investigates the educational gender inequality in rural China and the relevant policies to improve this phenomenon by collecting reliable literature and raising our viewpoints. This paper concludes that gender inequality in rural education is shown in rural females having less access to education, the educational resources are not evenly distributed in families, and females have higher dropout and illiteracy rates in education. The leading causes of gender inequality in rural education are families having lower educational expectations for females, the returns to education for females are low, and the lack of gender awareness in school. Law and programs related to female education, such as “The Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests” “The Educating Girls of Rural China” and “The Spring Buds Program” have been introduced to improve this phenomenon, and rural females are gradually receiving support in education.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality · Rural education · China · Policy

## 1 Introduction

In 2019, the National Bureau of Statistics released a statistical monitoring report on the outline for women’s development in China, which focused on closing the gender gap in education. Leading scholar Emily Hannum’s research focuses on how the economic conditions of poverty in rural Chinese families affect girls’ access to school [1]. Danke Li and Mun C. Tsang used questionnaires to explore household education decisions and their implications for gender inequality in education in rural China [2]. Many scholars in China have also conducted research on gender inequality in rural education in China. Weijuan Cao and Yuan Liu’s article focus on exploring gender perspectives on equity in rural education in China [3]. Thus, it is apparent that both the Chinese government and domestic and foreign scholars have been very concerned about the issue of equality

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in education in rural areas. However, according to the research data in recent years, the problem of gender inequality in rural education still exists. The problems in rural female education still deserve attention. Although there are studies that address the causes of rural education equality, there is a lack of systematic investigation of the issue. Fewer studies have focused on the comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon and discussion of corresponding improvement policies. Further research is still needed on how to better improve gender inequity in education. The purpose of this article is to analyze the current situation of gender inequality in rural education to point out the difficulties faced by rural school-aged girls and then to further analyze the causes of this phenomenon so that the problem can be better solved. The paper also analyzes the current support policies for rural girls to help improve the policies. This article examines three aspects of gender inequity in rural education in China: its manifestations, causes, and policies to improve the problem.

## 2 Manifestations of Gender Inequality in Education

It is clear that women have been suffering from unfair treatment in education in rural China. Women in rural education have a challenging situation, with fewer educational options, fewer educational resources supplied by families, and greater dropout rates.

### 2.1 Gender Inequality in Educational Opportunities

Women in rural China have fewer educational possibilities than men, which is one manifestation of educational inequality. Due to distinct geographic, family, economic, and cultural reasons, the enrollment rate of students of different genders in rural schools is not balanced. According to the fifth population census, there are 840,000 children aged 10 to 14 who have not attended school in rural China, with 330,000 boys and 510,000 girls aged 10 to 14 [3]. Girls are 1.55 times more likely than boys to be out of school, indicating that the problem of out-of-school girls is particularly prevalent in rural areas. According to data collected by Dong Qiang, Li Xiaoyun, Yang Hongping, and Zhang Keyun in six villages in Gansu, Sichuan, and Jiangxi provinces, each village surveyed had more male pupils than female ones, regardless of whether there were more school-age boys or school-age girls [4]. Danke Li and Mun C. Tsang's finding from surveys in Hebei and Gansu, China, supports this tendency. They interviewed 400 families in Gansu and Hebei's poor rural regions and discovered that just 25% of the girls in the poor counties enrolled in elementary school [2]. Similarly, According to the report "Men and Women in Chinese Society" published by the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2015, 71.7% of those who did not attend school were women, compared to only 28.9% of men [5].

These data reflect the reality that in China's rural areas, women have lower enrollment not only in compulsory education but also in high school. Although the issue of educational inequality for rural disadvantaged groups has received appropriate attention, the education of rural women remains a concern. Girls who suffer from this unfair treatment are locked in a vicious cycle. Less access to education makes it more difficult for women to improve their knowledge and thus to find reasonably paid jobs to improve their survival.

## 2.2 Gender Differences in the Distribution of Family Education Resources

Many families in China's rural areas are poor, and educational resources are scarce. Simultaneously, the idea of rearing children for old age has prompted many rural households to have more than one child. Many families find it challenging to provide financial support for all of their children to attend school. In this circumstance, many families motivated by economic and cultural factors will choose to compromise their daughters' interests in order to ensure that their sons can complete their schooling. In 2004, Gong Jihong and Zhong Zhangbao used a questionnaire to interview 400 families in rural Suizhou, Hubei, and found that there was a significant gender preference in rural families' education investment, with families without sons significantly lagging behind those with sons in terms of education investment. Children from homes with more sons begin school earlier than children from families with more daughters [6].

This finding is also consistent with the findings of Dong Qiang et al. in five provinces in the central and western regions of China [4]. One of the interviewees, Zhu, has two daughters and a son. Her oldest daughter dropped out of school after only her second year of middle school to help with household tasks, but her son is taking advantage of resources provided by the family to attend college. Another interviewee, Zhang's daughter, attempted suicide by ingesting pesticide after her mother refused to pay for her next semester's books. Despite her good fortune in being saved, she was forced to drop out of school due to the after-effects. And there are a lot more families like these two in China's rural districts. Women who are forced to drop out of school are forced to take low-end jobs or wait for their parents to marry them off for a bride price. The tragedy of women's sacrifice due to the inequality in family education resources distribution is still unfolding.

## 2.3 Higher Female Dropout Rates and Shorter Years of Schooling

Rural women had fewer years of schooling, greater dropout rates, and higher illiteracy rates than rural men. Although literacy education and technical training for women in rural areas have been strengthened in recent years, the situation has not fundamentally improved for rural women who lack access to education and training. The heavy burden of household chores and limited economic conditions make many women drop out of school even when they have the opportunity to start to be educated. As Danke Li and Mun C. Tsang's findings in four cities in Hebei and Gansu show, many girls initially do not attend classes occasionally and gradually drop out of school to work or marry for higher financial gains [2]. In the four cities, girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school. Data released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2015 showed that the average number of years of education for rural Chinese women was 7.3 years, compared to 8.1 years for men [5]. Men in Gansu Province have 3.7 times of years of schooling as women. Rural women's knowledge levels are lower due to a high dropout rate and shorter years of education. Dong, Li et al. discovered that rural males have a considerably lower illiteracy rate than rural females in all five provinces interviewed. In Sichuan and Gansu, female illiteracy was about 50 percent greater than male illiteracy [4]. In rural areas, according to the fifth national census in 2000, the proportion of illiterate girls among the population aged 15 and above in rural areas was as high as 16.89%, much higher than the

proportion of illiterate boys at 6.45%. This problem also did not improve significantly in 2017. From the data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, there were 73.6% of illiterate women in rural areas in China in 2017, while men only accounted for 26.4% [5].

### **3 Causes of Gender Inequality in Rural Education**

#### **3.1 Gender Inequality in Family Expectations for Children's Education**

In rural China society, families generally have lower educational expectations for girls than for boys. Due to the harsh natural conditions and underdeveloped transportation in rural China, people's access and transmission of information are hindered [7]. The lack of access to new information and ideas has led to people in the rural area being bound and influenced by traditional concepts for a long time. The representative traditional gender role concepts of "Men take care of the external affairs, while the women handle the domestic ones" and "Sons are responsible for parents' old-age care-giving" are still widespread in rural areas [8]. It emphasizes the vital role of men in the family [8]. Hence, these concepts lead to the priority usually given to men rather than women regarding family and social resources and access to opportunities. In education, the gender inequality in the family directly contributes to the allocation of educational opportunities in favor of boys. Families would hold higher social and educational expectations for boys than for girls.

Girls' marriages also affect families' expectations for their education. Girls will eventually marry into other people's families, resulting in lower returns and an outflow of family benefits [8]. The old Chinese saying "a daughter who marries out is like water that spills out" indicates that after a daughter gets married and has her own family with more responsibilities, she will have little time to return home to visit and take care of her parents. As a result, parents may feel a sense of loss and see their daughter's marriage as a loss of family benefits, and the rewards are not proportional to the work and time they took to raise their daughter. Therefore, families would not put many educational expectations on their daughters and are less likely to spend scarce resources on their daughters' education [2].

#### **3.2 Low Returns to Education for Women**

The low female employment rates and job returns discourage rural parents from sending their daughters to school. In today's society, sex discrimination in the job market prevents females from finding satisfying jobs. Even though men and women have the same level of education, men are more likely to find a job [9]. The stereotypes of females prevent people from handing heavy, skilled, and responsible work to women. Females who live in rural areas are at a more significant disadvantage than urban females regarding job search and salary.

Leaving the rural areas to find a job in the city, rural women can feel insecure and fearful because of their nonlocal status and unfamiliarity with city life. It is difficult for them to integrate into the urban culture [10]. Some workplaces may also discriminate

against rural women in the workplace because of their nonlocal and rural status. At last, rural women can only work in jobs with low thresholds and income [10]. The precarious jobs, low wages, unfamiliar environments, and high consumption of urban life can force rural women to consider returning to rural areas. The pressure that urban life puts on rural women can cause their families to believe that women are still at a disadvantage even with higher education. Ultimately, they believe that education does not benefit women and that there is no need for women to pursue higher education.

Moreover, rural women have faced particular challenges with family responsibilities. Yu indicates that "Family burdens such as raising children and caring for the elderly severely constrain rural women from participating in the labor market" [10]. Family responsibilities have forced rural women to work in local farming. Only then can they take care of their families and find a paying job simultaneously. However, women are not always paid equally for some agricultural work [11]. As women are required to complete agricultural work and fulfill family responsibilities at the same time, their daily labor hours are reduced [11]. At last, the reduction in labor hours leads to a reduction in salary.

Since rural women have fewer job opportunities, lower salaries, and less social welfare after entering society, parents' high investment in their daughter's education has not achieved high returns later in life. Ultimately, parents do not see the need for girls to be educated and give up the educational opportunities of their daughters. This phenomenon negatively affects rural females' educational opportunities and exacerbates gender inequality in education.

### 3.3 Lack of Gender Awareness in Schools

The lack of gender awareness in rural schools results in girls not being concerned and supported. Ultimately, they would lose their interest in learning, resist going to school, and are more likely to drop out of school. In rural areas, educational resources are scarce. People are generally poorly educated, and traditional concepts of gender roles profoundly influence them. Therefore, their level of gender awareness is also low.

In rural schools, important positions such as school president and school leaders are held by men, who are seen as the dominant ones and have the central power [12]. As traditional gender role ideas continue to prevail and male teachers become increasingly dominant, gender awareness in schools can be weakened or vanish entirely. In the male-dominated school setting, females are often overlooked due to the lack of gender awareness. Male teachers are unable to pay attention to the special and sensitive physical and mental needs of girls. Also, low academic expectations for females lead male teachers not to pay attention to and help improve the academic performance of female students.

Moreover, women's weaker abilities and lower status in traditional perceptions lead to the subordination of female faculties. Female faculties are seen as lacking leadership skills, incompetent for higher positions, and suitable only for general teaching [12]. As a result of not being recognized in life and work for a long time, female teachers have gradually compromised the gender rules that society has given them [12]. This makes female teachers unable to provide good role models for female students, help them develop an image of independent women, and help them establish equal gender values.

Ultimately, since neither the school nor the teachers provide girls attention and help, girls can become distrustful and resistant to school and lose motivation to continue their education.

## **4 Law and Programs to Improve Gender Inequality in Rural Education**

### **4.1 Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests**

The Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests, which is enacted with the Constitution and the actual situation in China, aims to protect the legitimate rights and interests of women as well as promote gender equality. This law has become effective since October 1, 1992, and was secondly revised on October 26, 2018. The sections in Chap. 3 of this law have guaranteed the rights of women in aspects of culture and education, which assist in improving gender inequality in rural education.

According to section 16 of The Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests, “Schools and departments concerned shall, by implementing the relevant regulations of the state, guarantee that women enjoy equal rights with men in such aspects as enrolling in school, pursuing higher education, job assignment upon graduation, conferment of academic degrees and dispatch for study abroad” [13]. Connected with rural education in China, this section dedicates to helping remove gender discrimination as well as gender inequality in rural education. Since it’s common for the young women in rural areas to receive unequal treatment in aspects of achieving higher education, career development and traditional gender conceptions, section 16 also ensure the rights of young women in education by regulating schools and department.

In section 18, “Parents or other guardians must fulfill the obligation to ensure that female school-age children receive compulsory education” indicating that both the girls whether in urban or rural areas have the right to receive equal education with boys [13]. Some rural parents choose not to send young women to school due to traditional concepts of gender roles, they believe that girls have weaker academic skills and lower social status thus sending them to school is not necessary. This section binds the behaviour of parents and other guardians to a large degree since compulsory education is mandatory that parents or other guardians must send school-age children and adolescents to school.

The Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Interests is significant to improving the gender inequality in rural education in China since it has guaranteed women’s rights in various aspects as well as obliged schools, departments, and parents or guardians to protect the rights of young women.

### **4.2 Educating Girls of Rural China (EGRC)**

Educating Girls of Rural China (EGRC) is a registered charity established in 2005, Canada, which dedicates to empowering financially-challenged girls and young women in Gansu, Qinghai and Guizhou of China access to secondary and post-secondary education through financial sponsorship and emotional support. It includes diverse programs such as High School Sponsorship Program, University Sponsorship Program, Future

Leader Scholarship Program, and Personal and Career Development Program as well as online and in-personal training for young women with a specific focus on building confidence, mental health, career planning and personal development.

First and foremost, EGRC has provided sponsorship to young women in rural China to attend high school and university. Since 2012, EGRC has sponsored more than 700 students to complete their high school education in rural areas of Gansu Province. And since 2005, EGRC has sponsored over 700 girls to attend university in China with a 100% graduation rate, and the annual sponsorship that EGRC has paid is around 3500 RMB and 8000 RMB for each student [14]. As of February 2022, EGRC has provided sponsorship to 535 high schools, and 126 university students in rural China [16]. The girls who received donations are either orphans, from single-parent families or whose parents are unable to earn money due to illness.

Next, EGRC involves a program that improves the leadership of rural women in China. In future leader scholarship program, rural young women have exercised leadership skills through specific online and face to face English courses. The outstanding students would be chosen to participate in the summer learning camp in Canada to further training. EGRC considers offering students with scholarship funding who are accepted into the postgraduate programme at foreign universities. The rural young women are allowed to accept new knowledge, broaden horizons and build self-confidence to further enhance their leadership skills in EGRC.

Additionally, giving young women emotional help and spiritual encouragement are also goals of EGRC. EGRC has built a strong community to support the young women who are orphans or victims of domestic abuse with mental health, confidence-building and personal career development.

The founder of EGRC, Tien Ching, believes “Educating women is the fundamental way to lift people out of poverty and build better societies”, and “Achieving gender equality is to create a healthier and better world for our collective future” [14]. It’s significant for this registered charity to provide rural young women with access to advanced learning or even study abroad to decrease gender discrimination and achieve education equality in rural education.

### **4.3 Spring Buds Program**

The Spring Buds Program is a charity program created in 1989 under the leadership of the China Children and Teenagers Foundation (CCTF) and All China Women’s Federation (ACWF), which purpose is to help the drop out girls return to school and improve the educational status of girls from poor families. The Spring Buds Program has shifted to focus on left-behind children and migrant children according to the current situation that a large number of laborers have moved to cities. Due to the lack of gender awareness in rural schools, the drop rate of rural girl students is very high, so it’s essential to enhance quality education in China by improving the education of girls, which also in strengthening and consolidating nine-year compulsory education and eliminating illiteracy the young people in China.

Spring Bud Project has carried out various forms of financial support services focusing on girls’ education, girls’ safety and girls’ health that help a large number of girls grow up and become successful. As of 2019, the program has raised a total of 2.1 billion

yuan in social donations and has sponsored more than 3.69 million Spring Bud girls nationwide [15].

The implementing projects include Study and Dream Action, The Spring Buds School, practical skills training, In the Study and Dream Action, people are welcomed to donate money freely from 1200 yuan to 6000 yuan to support a girl's study and living allowance from the elementary school level to college level [16]. The Spring Buds School can be donated to build using 500,000 yuan including teaching buildings and student dormitories [17]. As of October 2019, 1811 Spring Buds schools have been donated. By the end of 2003, the Spring Bud Program had trained more than 400,000 women and girls through various forms of practical skills training activities, which helped many girls and their families to get out of poverty, and had a great impact on implementing education assistance in rural areas [18].

The Spring Buds Program has become one of the most socially visible social welfare brands in China, and it has changed many girls' lives by guaranteeing girls' basic right to education to make them become outstanding female talents. It has enabled a large number of girls in poverty-stricken areas to return to school and help the girls who are about to drop out of school to continue their education. It also helps eliminate patriarchal views of women in rural areas to raise the attention of girls' education at all levels of government and society, which improve gender inequality in rural education to a large extent.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper examines three aspects in which gender inequality in rural education is presented: rural females have less access to education, and the enrolment rate of girls in rural areas is lower than boys; inequitable distribution of educational resources within families deprives the educational opportunities for girls; female have higher dropout rates, shorter years of schooling, and higher illiteracy rates in education. Based on the previous finding, this paper analyzes the leading causes of this phenomenon by indicating the lower academic expectations of females in rural families based on the traditional gender role concepts; the lower economic and job returns to education for females; and the lack of gender awareness in school settings. In the end, this paper concludes with a discussion of law and programs to support rural girls. The Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests stipulated that females are guaranteed to hold equal rights with the male in education, and parents or guardians must fulfill their obligation to ensure that girls of school age receive compulsory education. The Educating Girls of Rural China (EGRC) organizes events to help rural girls access educational resources and reduce gender discrimination to achieve educational equality. The Spring Buds Program has raised a total of 2.1 billion RMB in social donations and sponsored more than 3.69 million girls to go to school. Overall, this paper aims to draw social attention to gender inequality in rural education. In the future, it is hoped that the government and social organizations will introduce more laws, policies, and programs to help rural areas achieve educational equality and promote the development of the whole society.



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