



Gender Differences in Rural Education in China

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Abstract. In current China, rural women face more barriers to education than men. To achieve gender equity in education, this study reviews the differences in educational expectations, school opportunities, and educational attainment between rural men and women in China from both perspectives of family and society. The educational expectations of women are low, including their personal academic expectations and those of their parents and society. Moreover, women also possess fewer educational opportunities than men. Last but not least, from compulsory education to high school education and higher education, women are at a disadvantage in educational attainment.

Keywords: Education equity · Gender inequality · Rural education

1 Introduction

Education equity is a crucial issue that both the international community and the Chinese government are concerned about. In China, although the illiteracy rate of rural women has continued to decrease since the implementation of reform and opening policies, the educational attainment gap between rural women and men is tremendous. Gender discriminations are formed in the process of acquired socialization. Societal definitions of men and women create inequities in educational settings. As a result, men enjoy more educational privileges than women, putting women at a distinct disadvantage in individual development and preventing rural progress out of poverty. Promoting rural education is a matter of great significance for gender equality in education and rural revitalization. Therefore, many scholars have conducted in-depth research on gender inequality in rural education, including its causes, consequences, and impacts. Studies show that the conventional preference for sons over daughters and financial strain deprived girls of educational opportunities. Furthermore, the dropout rate of rural women is significantly higher than that of men, and the poor academic performance of girls has trapped them in a vicious cycle of ignorance and poverty. However, these findings are separated. The topic lacks a systematic review. Analysing gender inequality in rural education from one aspect has limited people's comprehensive understanding of the problem, making it difficult to identify its most severe problems and breakthroughs in solving them. By contrast, sorting out and analysing the current status of gender differences in rural education from all aspects allows people to make connections and thus facilitates the birth of effective strategies to promote the development of rural education and eliminate gender discrimination. The achievement of these two goals can make society more stable

and increase the skill level of the general workforce. From both perspectives of family and society, this study will review the differences in educational expectations, school opportunities, and educational attainment between rural boys and girls in China.

2 Gender Differences in Educational Expectations

2.1 Self-expectation of Education in Different Genders

The low status of women in rural families has led to low self-educational expectations among females. In China, there is an old saying: “Too much learning does not become a woman.” This proverb expresses that high educational achievement is redundant for women. To be a virtuous person, the intellectual horizons of a woman should stretch no further than needlework, room cleaning, cooking, and childcare. Thus, women do not need to attend school to learn and gain specialized skills. Otherwise, they cannot become a qualified wife in the family. According to a famous poet in Qing dynasty, “Educated women were more likely to be unfaithful in the marriage.” Knowledgeable women will be too shrewd and aggressive to be oppressed and controlled, which would threaten the dominant position of men in the family. “Such traditional cultural values and the accompanying thoughts of “men are superior to women” are deeply rooted in the consciousness of people in poor rural areas” [1]. From their perspective, illiterate women are more likely to be proper homemakers because they are more obedient and loyal. Their ignorance has limited their ability to think critically, making women obey and serve their husbands without complaint. The emphasis on being an innocent wife to be a moral person has made many women in rural areas unaware of the idea that it is unfair to be deprived of the right to receive an education and believe that taking care of their husbands and kids is the primary job in their lives. Hence, they have a low self-expectation in education because they don’t think education is necessary for themselves.

For working rural women, they tend to believe that “Marrying a wealthy and successful man is more practical than working hard”. This idea demonstrates that women have meagre expectations of themselves in personal development. Due to gender discrimination in the workplace, women are prevented from getting decent salaries or well-deserved promotions. So, they are more willing to depend on their husbands than study and work hard on their own. Conversely, men in the workplace can quickly get the corresponding rewards. For instance, in 2020, a survey in China found that on average, women earn 31.8% less than men [2]. This issue is still existing in current China, especially in rural regions. The gender-based wage stratification forced many rural women to drop out of school, as they could not see rewards for their education. Marrying a reliable man can fulfil more of their needs. Therefore, they have a low self-expectation of schooling.

2.2 Parents’ Different Educational Expectations of Sons and Daughters

The conventional thoughts in Chinese rural areas encourage parents to have higher educational expectations for their sons than their daughters. In ancient times, China was a patriarchal nation. Men have been seen as the core of the family, resulting in women

being degraded and disenfranchised. Although the problem of gender inequality has been improved nowadays, it is still prevailing in the impoverished, remote areas of China, where people depend on farming to make a living. Gender discrimination reinforces the role of men in rural family and conceals the contributions women can bring and the abilities women possess. Many rural parents, especially those from destitute families, believe that it is unworthy for daughters to receive an education because they bring nothing in return for the family. The main reason is that daughters in rural areas usually end up marrying into other families to work for them, whereas sons are always part of the family. Daughters will be outsiders, and sons will be the pillar of the family. Therefore, to receive a more valuable return on their investment in their children's education, parents have higher educational expectations for their sons, as they can financially support families in the future. When parents are too old to work, they can rely on their male children. This deep-rooted prejudiced notion has made girls have a lower chance to receive equal education support from families. For instance, in Shanxi, China, "A teacher said that a girl in her class dropped out of school in the second grade because her parents were too busy to take care of her younger brother, so she dropped out of school for a year to help her parents. Later, the girl continued to go to school, but she did not study after graduating from the fifth grade of primary school" [3]. In the opinion of the girl's parents, whether she goes to school or not was unimportant. Dropping out of school for a year will make the student miss out on much knowledge, but her parents did not see it as a loss. Her parents felt it was more necessary to stay at home and look after her little brother, a boy who could potentially bring rewards to the family. This girl represents the plights faced by many other girls in rural China. Different fates for boys and girls caused by gender discrimination impelled parents to develop completely different educational expectations of sons and daughters. Without government intervention, such phenomenon will be passed down from generation to generation.

2.3 Educational Expectations of Different Genders in the Social Division of Labour

Rural women's low academic achievement makes them have got low educational expectations in the social division of labour. Due to the scarcity of educational resources and the low educational expectations of the self and parents, "The illiteracy rates of rural men and women are 29.04% and 70.96% respectively, which shows that the illiteracy rate of men is much lower than that of women" [4]. This data reveals that there are very few educational opportunities for women in rural areas, and the academic attainment that they can achieve may only stay at the primary level. Therefore, the jobs rural women can do in society have become very limited. Their status in the social division of labour is significantly lower than that of men, as they only make up for a tiny proportion in industries that require high knowledge and skills. In China (including labour from urban and rural areas), "Women only account for 36.98% of the employees in the scientific and technological industry; in the financial and insurance industry, women only account for 39.53%; the number of women working in the government agencies and social organizations is even less, only accounted for 22.65%" [5]. However, in careers with no or low knowledge and skills requirements, women have almost dominated the labour market. These data are for all women in society, suggesting fewer rural women

are employed in professions with high scholastic attainment. In fact, gender gaps in education and employment are closely related. Employment gaps of different genders would make rural parents more reluctant to educate their daughters and make women even less motivated to learn. Firms, on the other hand, want to hire educated employees rather than ignorant ones. Rural women would thus encounter more barriers in seeking high-quality jobs and possess higher chances to become unemployed. This cycle would continue, and the gaps in education and employment will be enlarged. Consequently, the number of uneducated women would proliferate. They might lose the chance to work and stay at home to cultivate farmlands, look after kids, and aid their husbands. Their educational expectations in the social division of labour would thus be lower.

3 Gender Differences in Educational Opportunities

3.1 Gender Inequality in the Distribution of Family Educational Opportunities

Parents' low expectations for their daughter's education deprive girls of educational opportunities. According to an interview with the principal of a rural school, "The higher parents' expectations for their children's education, the more they use their savings to invest in their children's education" [6]. Vice versa, if parents have meagre expectations of their children's education, they will not spend money to support their children to attend school. Due to the fact that rural parents have lower expectations of girls, as mentioned before, many girls have no access to educational opportunities from family. For instance, facing financial pressure, Mrs. Liu (the mother of two rural children) offered more learning opportunities to her son rather than her daughter. She said, "My daughter went to work when she was in junior high school. She studies better than her brother, but I have no money. Textbooks are costly. If I were to pay this fee, the standard of living for my husband and my son would drop. My son deserves this hard-earned money. Also, the money my daughter earned from work can be used for her brother's college tuition fee. So, it is not bad for her to work" [6]. Such a phenomenon happens in all rural families. Although the academic performance of daughters was better than that of sons, parents still refused to invest money in their daughters' education. Tuition fee, including the cost of textbooks, is not affordable for a poor rural family, but rural parents were willing to spend money on their sons.

Female parents even believed that providing educational resources for daughters would negatively affect the men in the family. In rural areas, men are the backbone of the family, and their feelings should be the priority. It would be improper to make the life of men miserable because of the daughter's education. Thus, daughters in rural areas cannot receive educational opportunities from family. In addition, daughters in the family needed to sacrifice their learning time in exchange for the accumulation of family livelihood assets. They needed to work when they were still teenagers to support their brother's education and thus take some of the weight off their parents' shoulders. Women were supposed to learn in the classroom, not doing some tiring-unskilled jobs. However, the status of sons is always higher than daughters in regions where preferences for sons are deep-rooted. Therefore, in the case of limited family resources, daughters' educational rights are often robbed of in order to maximize sons' educational investment. The unequal distribution of family educational opportunities in impoverished rural areas

is significant and needs to be addressed. Otherwise, a vicious cycle will occur. When boys receive more family opportunities, they can have more chances to develop and thus get more support, which will inevitably enhance their capability in subsidizing family and solidify the family decision of “boy priority.”

3.2 Gender Differences in Out-of-School Risk

Apart from the conventional idea that women are unworthy of education, family poverty, and school settings without gender awareness have increased the out-of-school risk of girls in rural areas. According to the data, in 2014, “38.1% of girls drop out of school, compared to 18.2% of boys” [7]. These two distinctive data demonstrate that female students’ dropout rate is much higher than male students. As mentioned above, girls rarely get family educational opportunities and even need to sacrifice them to support the family. Since childhood, they have to do plenty of chores, such as “carrying water, cooking, taking care of younger siblings, and cultivating the land” [3]. These tedious works are toilsome and time-consuming, which occupied the school hours of female students and forced them to drop out of school. Moreover, poverty is the leading cause of rural women dropping out of school. Poverty has compelled many households to reduce spending on women in all aspects, with the most significant reduction in spending on education. For example, the dropout rate of girls in Guangxi Longsheng Autonomous County, an impoverished rural area in China, is extremely high. “The per capita annual income of local families is about 3000 RMB, and the lowest is only about 1000 RMB” [7]. Such low wages mean that people have an abysmal standard of living. They can barely make ends meet, let alone get their daughter through high school. Hence, Miss Li, for example, dropped out of middle school due to poverty. “She was born in a low-income family. Unfortunately, her mother developed a strange disease. The medical expenses owed overwhelmed her father. Therefore, Miss Li often went to school without living expenses. In the second year of junior high school, she could no longer make up her tuition fees and travel expenses to school and thus was introduced to work as a nanny in the county seat” [7]. Miss Li is not the only poor individual in rural areas. Many girls gave up going to school and started to earn meagre salaries because their families were penniless. If they do not start working, their whole family could face famine. Economic problems faced by rural areas have increased dropout rates among female students significantly.

The lack of gender-conscious school settings in rural areas also proliferates the dropout rate of girls. The location of the school and the dropout rate of girls are closely related. Due to the lack of educational resources in rural areas, it is difficult for schools to be established in areas with appropriate distances. Students’ homes and schools are usually far away. They need to climb several steep hills to reach the school. However, because their bodies are not as strong as boys’, as many are malnourished, girls face more risks in trekking to school, especially when the weather is terrible and when parents are too busy to pick them up. For example, in a village in Sichuan, “Many girls dropped out of school when they are in primary school, because the nearest school is 7 kms away from where they live, and it takes more than an hour to walk. They need to be picked up to travel between school and home safely. But their parents are all working in the city,

and their grandparents are feeble” [3]. As a result, girls dropped out of school because of inconvenient transportation.

3.3 Intergenerational Transmission of WOMen’s Educational Opportunities Disadvantages

Low educational opportunities for mothers lead to inadequate educational opportunities for daughters. As the first teachers of children, maternal education have a significant influence on their children’s education. Due to environmental constraints, children in rural areas cannot receive information through multiple channels as children in cities. Their perception of the world mainly depends on the information taught by their mothers. According to the survey of the rural population, “Women who went to school for a longer time will be less affected by stereotypes of men and women. Hence, daughters with highly educated mothers will have more educational opportunities than those with less-educated mothers” [8]. Education can broaden women’s horizons beyond just rural chores, motivating them to leave the backward rural areas, get rid of gender discrimination and poverty, and seek a better quality of life. Education can also make them more confident that they too can earn money. These changes encourage women to re-establish their values, believing that they should be treated the same as men, especially in education. As a result, they will be more willing to support their daughters to receive an education. Educational approaches employed by women with different educational attainment in the role of mother vary widely. In terms of financial resources, educated mothers view education as a long-term investment and thus are more inclined to spend money on their daughters’ education. In terms of human resources, they give the right to their daughters to arrange their own vacation time or encourage them to attend cram schools and interest classes. They also talk to teachers to solve problems when their daughters have poor academic performance. However, if the mother dropped out of school when she was twelve, it is unlikely that she would offer money to her daughter to attend school, as she did not realize the importance of education and gender equality. They also make their daughters do housework during the vacations and verbally abuse them when they get bad scores, as they only focus on the report card. Therefore, rural women’s access to education is disadvantaged by the existence of the problem of intergenerational transmission.

4 Gender Differences in Educational Attainment

4.1 Gender Differences in Compulsory Education Attainment

Although the Chinese government has attached great importance to gender equality in education since the “reform and opening-up policy” implemented in 1978, there are still deficiencies in rural women’s Nine-Year Compulsory Education, a policy that stipulates all school-age children and adolescents in China to fulfil the obligation to receive elementary and secondary school education. According to the data in 2000, “Men and women with secondary education in rural areas to the total population were 58.54% and 41.46% respectively” [4], demonstrating that the proportion of women

receiving and completing compulsory education is lower than that of men. Imperfect social policies mainly cause this imbalance. First, the low educational expenditure in China has decreased the opportunities for girls in rural areas to receive the Nine-Year Compulsory Education. “The average investment in education in all countries accounts for about 4% of GDP, while the proportion of investment in education in China is only around 2.5%” [9]. It can be inferred that the government spending on compulsory education is smaller. Low investment in education would not lead to improvement in educational quality. Moreover, the allocation of educational resources in urban areas is better than that in rural areas, including teaching facilities, teaching environment, and treatment of teachers. These two factors have resulted in a limited distribution of schools and a significantly lower school enrolment opportunity in rural areas than in cities. Due to the low educational expectations of rural women, they have become the most severe and direct victims of this imbalance.

In addition, the educational laws and regulations are not effective in helping rural girls get access to the Nine-Year Compulsory Education. For instance, the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women stipulates that parent must fulfil their obligations to ensure school-age females receive compulsory education. However, the penalties for violating this clause are not clearly stated. Parents can still easily deprive their daughters of the right to study. Thus, this legal provision is useless in helping rural girls to receive an education. Another stipulation is that schools should take measures in education, management, and facilities according to the characteristics of female adolescents to ensure their physical and mental health. Although this Law can help rural girls study more smoothly, it lacks supporting detailed rules and methods for implementation. Regulations are so abstract that schools need to enact their own schemes. Schools might achieve some useless results or even ignore this Law outright. Women would not receive special care in schools. Therefore, girls in rural areas have encountered many obstacles in the Nine-Year Compulsory Education.

4.2 Gender Differences in High School Education Attainment

The popularization of the idea that learning is useless in rural areas has limited the educational attainment of many women. High school is a link between Nine-Year Compulsory Education and higher education. There is also a critical point that determines an individual’s future development. Rural students were so reliant on high school studies and the final exams, hoping it could lay a solid foundation for their future studies and careers—however, many abandoned examinations and dropouts in rural high schools, especially women. Even though educational opportunities are rare for rural women, they firmly believe school learning is redundant. For instance, “Ms. Min ran a mah-jong parlour after finishing junior high school. She earned much money. Her neighbours envied her and said that Ms. Min was living a good life, as she could buy expensive bags and clothes” [10]. Many women believe that money is the only measure of achievement in rural areas. They think that as long as they have money, they do not have to rely on studying to change their fate. The example of reading failure has had a considerable impact on the formation of the concept that reading is useless in rural areas. Rural women are treated unfairly by teachers, not getting sufficient attention and support from teachers. They are also verbally humiliated by male students due to their superiority. Moreover,

after graduating from high school, many women cannot continue studying at university or find high-paying jobs. Their lives have not improved significantly because of education. Working rural women also have to take care of their families, which makes them exhausted. By contrast, money is the most direct way to improve people's quality of life, as it can satisfy people's material needs and play a vital role in an accident. Over time, women started to drop out of school early. As a result, "The proportion of men and women in the total number of people with high school education in rural areas is 69.10% and 30.90% respectively, with a difference of 38.20%" [4]. Fallacies have not swayed men about the futility of reading because they are not despised in education or discriminated against in the workplace. Therefore, misconception caused by the society forces many women to drop their studies and leave them without high school educational attainment.

4.3 Gender Differences in Higher Education Attainment

Due to the backward economic development in rural areas, women have fewer possibilities than men in accessing higher education. Based on the data in 2000, "The percentage of males with higher education in rural areas is 0.70% of the total male population, and the percentage of females is 0.33%" [4]. Rural families are poor. It is difficult for them to afford the cost of preparing for and studying at the university. Typically, students need to attend cram schools to acquire a good score and outperform others in the college entrance examination. These cram schools are expensive and not available in rural areas. Therefore, failing the exam is common for rural students, as they are not as competitive as students in urban areas. Also, the tuition fee of the university and the cost of living can put a tremendous financial strain on rural families. Parents are thus cautious when choosing whether to invest in their children's higher education because they may spend all their deposits. When considering long-term rewards, sons tend to be the favoured ones. Vice versa, daughters' educational attainment will be overlooked. There is a positive correlation between rural economic development and rural women's possibility of receiving and completing higher education. "In 2000, the per capita wages of people in rural areas were about 780 RMB; in 2010, the per capita wages of people in rural areas increased substantially, to about 2431 RMB" [11]. Rural people's wages have almost tripled, suggesting that their life quality has been improved remarkably. The share of women in higher education has also increased. "In 2010, the rate of men going to college increased to 2.29% and the number of women to 1.78%" [4]. Families are willing to invest in their daughters' education when their wages are high enough to meet the basic needs of life. A daughter's education is valued while they are living in rich. However, while more women are in higher education, the gap between females and males remains. Families will still choose their sons for those who can only support one child for higher education. Thus, many women still do not have access to higher education. The maximum educational attainment they can reach is high school. The problem of gender differences in educational attainment in higher education still exists. Only by achieving absolute fairness can the social status of rural women be promoted.

5 Conclusion

Overall, this article reviews the existing literature on gender inequality in rural education in China from different perspectives. First of all, the educational expectations for rural women is lower than for men. In Chinese rural families, conventional thoughts make many women believe ignorance symbolizes virtue. Hence, they have a low educational expectations for themselves. Also, the balance of farmers promoting family interests tends to tilt in favour of boys. Thus, to receive more economic returns, families have low educational expectations for women. The poor academic performance of women makes their educational expectations in the social workplace low. Secondly, rural women have less access to educational opportunities than men. The low educational expectations for women makes many rural parents reluctant to invest in their daughters' education. The location of rural schools also prevents many girls from reaching school safely. Moreover, the intergenerational transmission of women's disadvantage in educational opportunities is prevalent in rural areas. All these factors increase the dropout rate of women significantly. Lastly, the educational attainment of women is lower than men. The government's inadequate spending on rural compulsory education and unclear academic regulation keeps many women from compulsory education. The spread of the idea that learning is useless in rural areas makes women believe that education cannot make them rich. Therefore, women have lower attainment in high school education than men. In addition, rural households have low incomes, which encourages many families to support their sons for higher education rather than their daughters. In short, females from rural areas face many obstacles to school enrolment. The elimination of gender differences in education is essential in achieving educational and gender equity. The government and education departments should continue to attach great importance to female rural education by increasing subsidies, raising people's awareness of the importance of female education, and improving educational policies aimed at helping rural girls.

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