

Research on the Educational Gender Inequality and Affirmative Action in China

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Abstract: Since the 1970s, driven by economic growth, a number of laws and regulations have been passed in China to guarantee women's right to equal access to education and advance gender equality in the field. Higher education attainment in China has dramatically increased during the last few decades. However, girls still cannot have the equal opportunity for education compare to the boys due to the traditional attitude of preference for sons and limited educational resources. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the reasons for educational inequality in China from historical and economic perspectives, and compare educational equality in different countries, as well as the affirmative action implemented in China so far. This paper emphasizes the impact of historical reasons and son preference on gender inequality in education by collecting and analyzing data. What is more, this paper also compares affirmative action between China and other countries in order to come up with a better solution to eliminate educational gender inequality. The results show that the educational gender gap in China differs significantly between urban and rural areas. Moreover, the legislation in China lacks specific punishment and supervisory agencies, which makes it difficult to protect women's rights.

Keywords: gender, education, inequality, China, affirmative action

1. Introduction

It is well known that employment rates and career success for women are directly correlated with their access to education and academic achievement. Enhancing women's education can benefit their social status and, in the long run, promote gender equality in society, which means that social justice and economy development will both be facilitated by gender equality eventually. The Human Development Report 2003 illustrates that achieving gender equality in education is extremely significant for achieving all the other goals. Nonetheless, as one of the most populated countries, gender inequality in education has long persisted in China, especially in girls' educational attainment.

Much research in recent years has focused on gender inequality in education and sexual preference. However, few studies have addressed the problems of the relationship between gender inequality, sexual preference, and other historical reasons. This paper mainly focuses on the discussion of these issues in recent China and the factors that can possibly cause gender inequality for the purpose of improving affirmative actions and social educational egalitarianism. Moreover, it also analyses international affirmative actions and the coeducation system in other countries in

order to compare and analyze the drawbacks of affirmative action in China. This research adopts analyzing data and literature research as the primary method, and the data is collected from the Chinese General Social Survey. The importance and originality of this study are that it explores a deeper insight into the relationship between gender inequality in education and historical social reasons such as sexual preference.

2. Educational Gender Inequality in China

In China, both the economy and higher education access have experienced a rapid development during the past five decades. Nonetheless, according to the data from Chinese General Social Survey 2008 (CGSS 2008), there has long been a serious academic disparity between male and female. Figure 1 indicates that with the development of the social economy, the average years of education for both sexes have increased to a greater degree. Moreover, the gender difference in the average years of education is smaller for the later born cohort. However, Figure 1 also shows that although gender inequality in educational attainment tends to decrease gradually, the average years of education is consistently higher for men than for women, and the decrease is not significant.

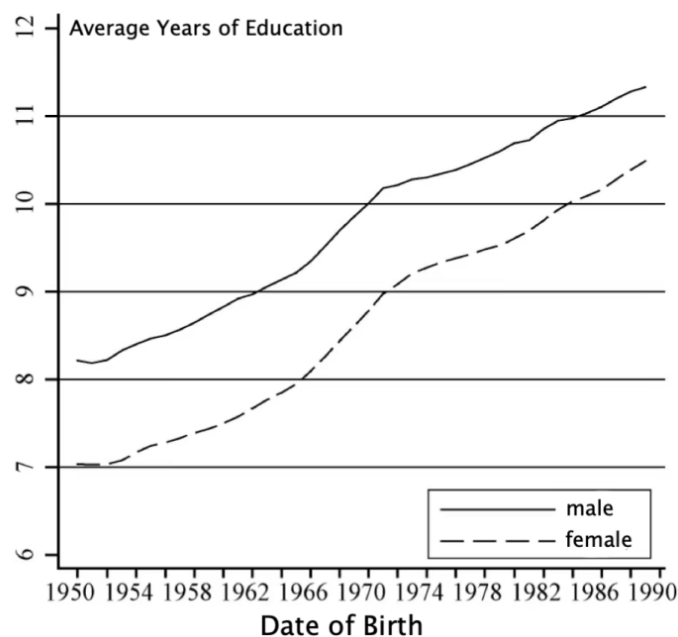


Figure 1: Gender inequality of educational attainment [1].

Furthermore, the educational gender gap in China also differs significantly between urban and rural areas due to differences in levels of economic development. In China, gender gaps primarily occur in rural areas, particularly in impoverished areas where families often have more than one child and children must compete with additional siblings for scarce educational resources. Since the 1980s, researchers have frequently pointed to traditional beliefs about women's and girls' abilities and roles, as well as different expectations regarding the financial benefits to the family of educating sons versus daughters, as potential reasons why girls' education may be at a disadvantage [2]. Moreover, families always expect more returns from sons than from daughters since they believe that sons will anticipate old-age support. These traditional attitudes might turn into inequalities in educational investments for children based on their gender, which will eventually lead to educational gender inequality. In contrast, urban areas, where education facilities are better completed and children compete with fewer or even no siblings, have fewer gender differences in

basic educational attainments. Figure 2 and Figure 3 reveal the gender inequality in education access and its trend between urban and rural residents respectively. Figure 2 shows that the gender difference in years of schooling among urban residents has become smaller over time. Until 1990, the average years of education for women was approximately the same as for men in urban areas. However, Figure 3 shows that despite the fact that the average years of education for women in rural areas have increased sharply over a 40-year period, the educational gender differences in rural areas remain significant. When comparing the gender disparity in education between urban and rural areas, it is obvious that the average years of education of rural residents are much less than those of urban residents, while the gender difference in education is significantly larger in rural areas than in urban areas.

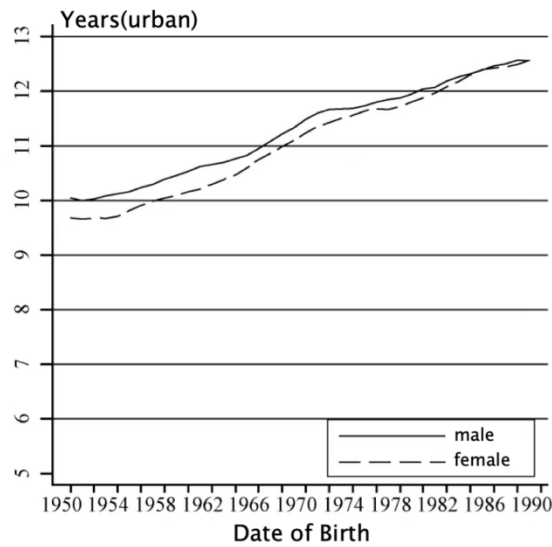


Figure 2: Average Years of education of urban residents [1].

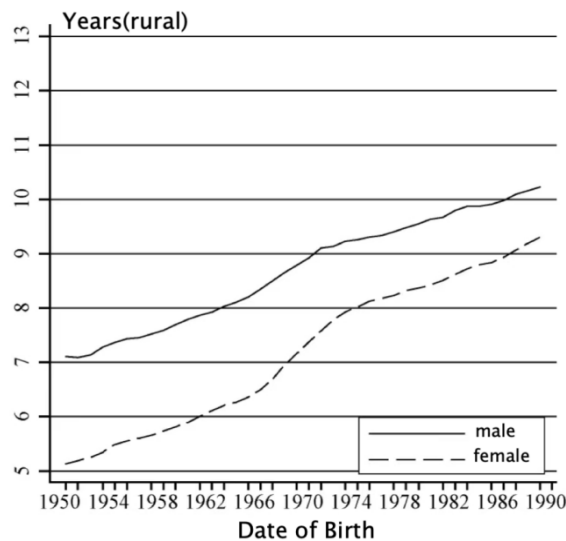


Figure 3: Average Years of education of rural residents [1].

3. Historical Reasons of Gender Inequality

Back in ancient China, there was a significant gender discrimination in education in ancient society due to the serious inequality in political and social status between men and women based on the patriarchal social background. A historical legacy of Confucianism that disadvantages women exists in China, the nation with the largest population in the world. Women were expected to submit to men, obeying their fathers while they were young, their husbands when they were married, and their adult sons when they became widows [2]. Ancient China also believed that a woman's lack of talent was a virtue. Such misconceptions limited women's access to educational resources and prevented women from receiving equal rights to education.

Until 1900s, with the deeper insight into the enlightenment and egalitarianism from western countries, Chinese people's awareness of gender equality was awakened. The government of the Qing dynasty began to set up schools for girls, and scholars began to advocate for the improvement of women's social status and education, which led to an effective improvement in education for women. Moreover, the establishment of girls' high schools and higher education for women, as well as co-education in elementary school, strongly indicates that the cognition of gender equality in education has been further improved. Not until the establishment of the People's Republic of China, co-education has been basically occurred at all stages of education, and correlative legislation have been introduced to emphasize the importance of gender equality. Also, it increases the possibility that female students will have equal access to high-quality education. Son preference, which refers to the phenomenon that parents prefer sons to daughters, is also one of the most significant factors of educational gender inequality. This phenomenon usually exists in many developing countries, especially in Asia and the Middle East and has long existed in Chinese society and culture due to the patriarchal social background. In that context, daughters are considered less valued and capable than sons. Folk religion is also experiencing a resurgence, as well as the Confucian gender philosophy, which places an emphasis on women's traditional duties as wives, mothers, and household providers. The value of sons may have increased in light of these circumstance [3]. For centuries, China has maintained son preference and discrimination against daughters [4]. The patriarchal culture that led directly to this phenomenon in which men continue the family name, inherit the family wealth, and are in charge of ancestor worship, is frequently aggravated by unstable social and economic circumstances. Moreover, sons always provide financial supports to parents when they are old [5]. Thus, son preference may eventually lead to unequal allocation of family educational resources, such as parents' energy, time and money, and parents are more likely to invest more in sons compared to daughters.

What is more complicated is that the one-child policy implemented in the 1980s prevented parents from having both sons and daughters [6]. In this circumstance, some parents have chosen sex-selective abortion to keep the boys because of their son preference. More importantly, such discrimination often leads to abuse of and abandonment of daughters.

However, gender discrimination, as well as son preference, have been declining due to the great social change. Nowadays, people pay more attention to women's rights and social status, but gender inequality still exists. Some inherent prejudices against women and men continue to affect women's educational attainment and literacy. According to Chinese General Social Survey 2013 (CGSS 2013), a total of 11438 people were interviewed and asked whether they agreed, disagreed, or had no opinion with the following questions: Males should prioritize their careers while women should prioritize their families; Men are inherently more skilled and competent than women; Women married to a good husband is more important than having a good job; Couples should share household chores equally. Table 1 shows different attitudes about the questions above between males and females. Strikingly, a majority of people believed that males should prioritize their

careers while women should prioritize their families, and only slightly less than 27% disagreed with that. As for the capability differences between male and female, almost half of people - 42%- agreed that men are born to be more capable than women. Moreover, most of the interviewers also suggested that marrying a good husband is much more important than women's own careers and working abilities. However, the vast majority - more than 66%- believed that couples should share household chores equally.

Table 1: Men and women's attitudes about gender differences.

Attitudes(N=11438)		Male	Female
Men put their careers first, women put their families first	Agree	30.70%	29.10%
	Disagree	12.40%	14.27%
	No Opinion	7.26%	6.26%
Men are inherently more capable than women	Agree	21.15%	20.32%
	Disagree	19.80%	21.94%
	No Opinion	9.37%	7.41%
Women married to a good husband is more important than having a good job	Agree	19.92%	22.53%
	Disagree	17.66%	16.38%
	No Opinion	12.75%	10.77%
Couples should share household chores equally	Agree	31.41%	35.05%
	Disagree	8.03%	5.74%
	No Opinion	10.88%	8.88%

These results suggest that discriminatory attitudes about women's capabilities and worthiness still exist, especially about the traditional role of women, in which women are prescribed to take care of families and submit to men. Furthermore, some recent studies show that sexist stereotypes in the school environment, such as boys being better at science and math than women, will limit women's choices of scientific and engineering majors and curb their potential and interest in study.

As for all the reasons that have been mentioned above, educational gender inequality in China is mainly due to traditional attitudes towards women, such as son preference and traditional maternal roles as mother and wife. The persistence of these traditional attitudes in modern society has led to an inequitable distribution of educational resources based on children's gender. Subsequently, a lack of educational resources and economic poverty can also lead to gender inequality in education.

4. International and China's Affirmative Action

Researchers suggest that the persistence of sexist stereotypes in school reinforces gender roles between male and female through the language and textbooks that are used in the schools and the different treatment between boys and girls based on their gender [7]. In order to eliminate gender discrimination in education around the world, members of the United Nations established the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September, 2019. Achieving gender equality and strengthening all women and girls are among the 17 objectives that compose the SDGs. Specifically, in its Goal 4 target 4.5, the SDGs place a strong emphasis on eradicating all gender gaps in education and guaranteeing that all vulnerable groups, such as individuals with disabilities and

children in risky circumstances, have equitable access to all levels of education by 2030. The SDGs are fully convinced that a future that is peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable must be established on the basis of gender equality, which is not simply a basic human right. Additionally, education can influence girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are living in rural areas, are disabled, or are from ethnic minorities.

Meanwhile, the Nordic countries, which are among the first in the world to advance gender equality, focused on promoting gender equality in education in the 1970s. In 2016, with the initiative of Nordic gender researchers, the Nordic government and foundation have established Nordic Research on Gender in Teacher Education (GENTE). The overall goal of this program is to continuously promote gender research in education through the cooperation of all its members, which includes Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, and other Nordic countries.

Nonetheless, in accordance with the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, China ranked 102nd out of 146 countries and registered a lower parity score for secondary education enrolment [8]. Hence, it is essential for Chinese government to take affirmative action to reach gender parity. With the aim of eliminating gender inequality in education, China has adopted several pieces of legislation to guarantee women's right to education. For instance, the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China both emphasize that citizens of China have the right and duty to receive education. Moreover, women should have equitable rights with men in all aspects of politics, economics, culture, social work, and education. To be specific, according to the Education Law of China in 2021, equal educational opportunities should be available to all citizens, despite of their nationality, ethnicity, gender, occupation, social rank, or religion.

However, the legislation mentioned above is rather general and lacks relevant punishment for illegal violations, making it difficult to take effective action to impose a sanction on any breach of duty. Meanwhile, the absence of a supervisory agency, like the National Non - Discrimination and Equality Tribunal in Finland, cannot ensure the legal implementation and provide effective protection and access to courts when women's rights are violated. A research conducted by Yan Luo, Fei Guo and Ruilin Li in 2021 confirms that female in China can achieve gender equality in higher education and academic attainment through hard work by themselves, not by government's affirmative actions. This illustrates that affirmative action taken by the government plays a minimal role in education equality.

Another effective affirmative action is to establish an international platform of gender equality education for teachers and advocate teachers to conduct research on educational gender equality. According to a research, gender stereotypes of students' peers, parents and teachers may contribute to gender inequalities in students' motivation and feelings about academic areas [9]. Some researchers also reckon that teachers who lack awareness of gender equality will reinforce gender stereotype in their educating and influence students' self-judgement, for example, some teachers may assume that boys perform better than girls in science and mathematics while girls do better than boys in reading and art [10]. Therefore, teachers should raise their own awareness of gender equality and stop students stereotyping themselves and adopting gender norms and behaviors that they perceive to be inherent to their own gender.

It is also noteworthy that women's life security and mental health are also key factors in closing gender gap. According to UNESCO, gender violence in schools refers to sexual, physical and psychological abuse or threats that take place in a schooling environment, such as a classroom, as a result of sexual bias or stereotypes [11]. When women's safety and mental health are violated by sexual harassment and exploitation, it becomes even harder for them to pursue an education. Therefore, legislation against gender violence in schools should be implemented at government,

community and school and specific guidance and supervision should be provided to clarify school's obligations and responsibilities in preventing all kinds of violence [12].

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper began by collecting and analyzing data to reveal that academic disparity between male and female still exists despite of the developing of social economy. There is strong evidence that the average numbers of years of schooling for women has long been lower than for men. What is more, the educational gender gap in China also differs significantly between urban and rural areas because of the different levels of economic development and lack of educational resources.

It is interesting to note that the reasons of gender discrimination are either traditional beliefs about the skills and roles of women or different expectations for men and women's contributions to the family. For instance, son preference, which refers to the phenomenon that parents prefer sons to daughters, will lead to inequitable family resource allocation, and daughters will be considered less valued and capable than sons. In addition, according to the data from CGSS 2013, nowadays gender stereotypes about women's capabilities and worthiness still exist.

Last but not least, this study investigates different affirmative actions taken by international organizations and countries. Compared to the legislation and affirmative action of the Chinese government, it is obvious that the legislation is rather general and also lacks relevant punishment and supervisory agencies, making it difficult to actually eliminate gender discrimination. Although this paper includes several reasons for educational gender inequality in China, the issue cannot be fully addressed since it is difficult to explain the relationship between traditional attitudes and gender inequality based on detailed data. Therefore, further study should be performed to extend this research.

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