

What are the Causes of Gender Inequality in Education in China?

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Abstract: Inequality in education occurs in many countries and regions, and it has not been addressed strongly and effectively. In China, education faces many challenges, particularly in relation to gender inequality. Firstly, the article analyses and summarises the current state of gender inequality, pointing out that women in China have significantly fewer years of education than men, and that the contrast between urban and rural areas of China is more pronounced. Secondly, the paper will also find that women have lower enrolment rates and less access to further education, both at the compulsory primary level and at the tertiary level. Thirdly, the article will try to explore three potential causes of this phenomenon in light of the existing inequalities in China. The potential causes of these inequalities are explored in depth from the influence of the Confucian culture's notion of male superiority over females found in historical and cultural contexts, from family factors such as parents' perceptions of educational investment and family composition structures that exert an unequal effect on girls' education, and from age and educational attainment biases against women found in traditional Chinese concepts of marriage, respectively. The issue of gender inequality in education needs to be given attention and the potential influencing factors need to be analysed, especially with regard to the unfair treatment of female education.

Keywords: education, gender, inequality.

1. Introduction

Equality in education has always been a major concern in the field of education. Inequalities in education are manifested in many ways, mainly between regions, rural and urban areas and gender. Yao and You [1] find that from a worldwide perspective, almost half of all girls of primary school age do not get the opportunity to attend school. From this perspective, inequality exists in Chinese education in general. In China, traditional thinking and culture have influenced the status of men over women since ancient times, and this has largely contributed to the gender inequality in education between men and women in China. What are the historical causes and realities of the inequality between men and women in education in China?

Addressing the issue of equity in education has the importance of promoting social justice, and addressing gender inequality in education is an important step in reducing gender inequality in the whole society. Women's equal access to education can improve their socio-economic status and liberate women's minds. Hao, Zhang and Yu [2] state that women's educational attainment is a

critical component of social development and a key indicator. This, in turn, is critical for society's long-term growth. In addition, Yao and You [1] also find that improving women's educational equality helps to increase women's contribution to the economy and also has externalities, such as improving children's health and promoting families' commitment to their children. Therefore, it seems to be beneficial if society uncovers the causes of gender inequality and attempts to improve the dysfunctional position of women in education.

This paper will examine the current state of gender inequality in education in China and the reasons for it. Firstly, the paper will examine the manifestations of gender inequality in education in China. The causes of gender inequality will then be highlighted in three main areas: the influence of traditional culture, the role of parental attitudes and female marital factors.

2. Status of Inequality

Firstly, there is still a significant disparity in the development of education between men and women in China. For example, Yao and You [1] suggest that "Some researchers say that there are still significant disparities in access to education between males and females". This phenomenon is prevalent in both urban and rural areas of China, which is only manifested in varying degrees, with the gender gap in access to education being wider for males and females in rural areas on average. A survey of households in urban areas showed that "on average, men have 0.345 years more education than women and the difference is significant" [3], meaning that men on average have more years of education than women. Similarly, the same problem exists in rural areas, and the impact is even more pronounced. Hao et al. [2] find that rural girls are less likely to have access to education, while boys are significantly less likely to lose out on education. Boys are more likely to be enrolled in school than girls, at an earlier age, while at the same time being at lower risk of dropping out of school than girls. In addition, there is a difference in dropout rates between boys and girls in rural areas during secondary school, with boys at "8.96%" and girls at a higher rate of "11.63%" [2]. This data reflects the fact that in rural areas, girls have less access to a school than boys and are at greater risk of dropping out at the same age, making it impossible for them to continue their education.

Turning to the stage of education received, in the early years of Chinese society, illiteracy rates were high due to the low level of access to education. Among the illiterate, the rate of female illiteracy is much higher than that of males. For example, Yao and You [1] point out that "historical records of Ting Hsien (now Ding Xian county) in Hebei province show that in 1927 among young people between 12 and 25 years of age, the male illiteracy rate was 56 percent while the female illiteracy rate was 94 percent". This is a reflection of the long history of gender inequality in education in China, with men having more access to education than women. Secondly, if the modern dimension of compulsory education is considered, there is also a wide gap in the rate of access to compulsory education between men and women. For instance, it is mentioned that "using a 0.95 per thousand micro sample from the 2000 China population census, fewer girls were enrolled in compulsory education in 2000" [1]. Such inequality gaps also persist in slightly more economically developed cities. Bauer, Wang, Riley and Zhao [4] state that in the 1980s, the proportion of girls continuing to lower secondary education is "77%", while the proportion of boys remaining in school after primary school is "82%". Apparently, men are more likely to have compulsory education, and they have a better chance of completing primary and initial education than women. It will come as no surprise that the same gender gap exists in higher education and that such inequalities are even greater. It is found that "The ratio of men to women with university degrees has become smaller, but among the youngest age group, it is still 1.65" [4]. Accordingly, it is easy to see that even though the problem of inequality between men and women has improved to

some extent with the development of the times, more men are still obtaining university degrees and women are at a disadvantage in higher education.

3. Causes of Inequality

This unequal access to education and the disparity between the levels of education received by men and women in China is a problem that exists in many ways. There are significant gender differences and inequalities in education in China, both in urban and rural areas, in terms of compulsory education and in comparison with the higher education dimension, so what are the causes of this inequality in education? This article will explore the causes through three perspectives: historical factors caused by traditional culture, family factors influenced by parental attitudes, and women's own marriage factors.

3.1. Historical Factors

First of all, if we look at the issue of gender equality in China from the perspective of traditional culture, we will find that Chinese people's mindset is generally influenced by the "male superiority over women" mentality promoted by Confucianism. This means that women have a lower status than men and are even subordinate to them, existing only as subordinates to men. Bauer et al. [4] suggest that Confucian thinking and concepts have shaped a hierarchy "based on gender and age" that very strictly delineates the different roles of men and women in the conduct of affairs within and outside the family. And within this hierarchy, it is the young women who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, "subordinate to the men", with no real status to speak of. Based on this, it can be seen that the status of women is very low in traditional culture, which leads to the root of gender inequality. Sheng [5] takes the position that "Confucianism prescribes a set of expected behaviours for men and women and had strong and direct impacts on the reproduction of Chinese patriarchal system".

Besides, "the hierarchy between men and women is described in a concept 'exalting males and demeaning females', which is a gendered culture that perceives men to be superior to women". The traditional Confucian culture has influenced patriarchy and the idea has emerged that women are inferior to men and that men are inherently superior to women. In fact, the unequal status between men and women is the root cause of gender inequality in education. Because women do not have independent rights, they do not have absolute decision-making power within the family and are only subservient to men. In family matters, women are considered to be more responsible for domestic duties, while men are responsible for earning money. In external affairs, women do not have equal opportunities to work and provide for their families, and therefore women are considered useless for education. In fact, this stereotype is reflected in Chinese teaching textbooks. Chinese textbooks are stereotypical and gender-biased in their attitudes and descriptions of gender. For example, Lee [6] points out that females appear in textbooks at a lower rate than males, in addition, "in social studies texts, men are portrayed as scientists and soldiers, but women as teachers". A possibility that cannot be ignored is that men are often considered to be in a position of major and far-reaching influence in the public sphere, while women are responsible for private occupations or things [6]. The content of the textbooks reflects the Confucian concept of "the man being the head of the family and the woman being the head of the family", with men having more access to education, social status and decent jobs, and being responsible for supporting the family financially. Women, on the other hand, are considered to be more responsible for raising children and devoting their time and energy to the family. Raising children, caring for the elderly and looking after their husbands' daily lives are treated as women's responsibilities and duties, which undoubtedly leaves women without opportunities and recognition to receive an education.

The traditional culture of gender inequality affects all aspects of life, and indeed there is gender discrimination in the workplace, where women are not as well placed to work as men, and men are more likely to get a job. However, women's access to work has an inspiring and role-modelling effect on girls' education. For example, in schools, female teachers have the role of educational role models. Xu and Meier [7] contend that when female teachers act as role models to guide their students, girls' performance in mathematics tends to improve significantly. Gender inequality in the workplace also affects the educational attainment of the younger generation of girls. Only when more and more women are educated and involved in society will female students and groups of women continue to be motivated to increase their educational aspirations, thus contributing to the progress and transformation of society as a whole.

3.2. Family Factors

Family factors include parental perceptions and the gender of the children being raised in the family. Firstly, with regard to parental perceptions, traditional cultural factors have influenced Chinese parents' perceptions and implicitly shaped the different attitudes of Chinese parents towards investing in their children's education in terms of gender. Parents' perceptions are influenced by the traditional culture of sons supporting the elderly, which has changed their attitudes towards supporting their daughters, and this mentality further leads them to invest less in their daughters' education than in boys. Specifically, traditional attitudes view girls as having very limited support obligations for their own parents after marriage, and they will rely on their older sons to provide for their own old age and pay for their obligations [3]. As a result, Chinese parents are more likely to invest in the education of boys, and the possibilities for girls to receive educational support, as a result, are more limited. The Chinese proverb "married daughters are like poured water" [3] describes the traditional view that reflects the widespread belief that girls are part of someone else's family when they marry, leading to a greater reluctance to invest in higher education for girls. This, in part, hinders girls' access to higher education and affects their qualifications. Liu and Morgan [8] claim that working-class parents with lower incomes had more negative attitudes towards girls attending university because they were not willing to pay tuition fees and living costs to support girls, which did not immediately benefit them. Conversely, these lower-income parents were more likely to expect their girls to work early, as their daughters would not belong to their current families when they married. In addition, there is an important reason here that influences the issue of attitudes towards raising daughters.

It is worth mentioning that the culture promoted by Confucius believed that only men could carry on the family line and that parents had a particular obsession with the continuation of the family line, which led them to favour investing in boys [3] who could carry on the family line in the future. Issues based on parents' attitudes towards the upbringing of sons and daughters in the family have led to a serious skewing of investment in the education of their children as well. In general, parents' perceptions are more skewed towards investing in boys, which is somewhat linked to their misconceptions about the return on investment in girls' education. Hao et al. [2] propose that "cultural norms" dividing men and women led to a greater value being placed on men, and therefore rural households were willing to invest more resources in the education of boys. Besides, Yao and You [1] also mention the undermining of investment in girls' education under the influence of parents' perceptions that place more value on boys.

In the nature of the problem, parents' negative attitudes toward investment in girls' education are due to their perception that girls receive lower returns to education than boys and their belief that girls may not be as intellectually gifted as boys to achieve higher levels of academic achievement. However, girls' achievement is influenced by gender discriminatory factors in the workplace, which also exacerbates parents' greater reluctance to have positive attitudes towards girls' schooling,

making them subject to family discrimination against women's access to education [4]. It is stressed that this discriminatory mentality of parents is particularly reflected in their ability to support only the investment in a child, and they show more caution and bet their hopes on boys [4].

However, this seems to be not always valid; girls are not intellectually inferior to boys. Girls are likely to achieve higher academic success in education than boys, even in the field of mathematics [3]. The main reason why girls have been less educated than boys is that they do not have equal access to education. For example, a survey showed that women in the United States have a much higher level of academic excellence than boys in education, from kindergarten through high school [3]. This suggests that this patriarchal ideology, which stems from the traditional agrarian economy, has contributed heavily to gender inequality stereotypes and discrimination against women. In this sense, therefore, the return on investment in education for women is not lower than that for men. In essence, parents' approach to their children's education is heavily influenced by traditional patriarchal attitudes, and the reason they generally believe that investing in their sons is worth more in return is also related to economic factors. Guo et al. [3] state that the preference for sons is particularly pronounced in rural areas, as men can take on heavier tasks in agriculture due to their natural biological structure. In this sense, this concept of gender inequality in the family still exists in many countries around the world.

More importantly, the father factor also has a unique effect when it comes to the influence of parental perceptions on girls' education. Yao and You [1] contend that fathers' educational attainment and occupation influenced the enrolment of rural girls and that this effect was reinforced by higher levels of fathers' education. Bauer et al. [4] point out that "having a more educated father substantially increases the chances that a 15 to 18 year old is enrolled". Furthermore, the father's right to decide on the education of his children continues until it is reflected in the higher education of his children. For instance, in their study of postgraduate qualifications, Liu and Morgan [8] argue that fathers still played a major role. The greater gender influence that fathers play on the education of their children in fact stems from the fact that fathers have greater decision-making power in the family and they may play an important role in influencing the education of their children [2]. Consequently, from this perspective, the level of their qualifications and education has a profound impact on their daughters' access to equal education.

On the other hand, shifting the focus within the family reveals that both the number of children in the family and their gender distribution have an impact on girls' access to education. Girls with brothers in the family are more likely to be reduced their chances of attending school [3, 4]. This means that if there are both sons and daughters in a household, the tendency for parents to invest in the education of boys is more pronounced. This is because, in the case of one-child families, parents may be forced to choose to invest in their only daughter. After all, they have no other children. In fact, in families where there are both boys and girls, the order in which the children are born also affects the educational opportunities of girls in the family. If the girl is born as the first child, then she has the opportunity to be more invested in education and to close the gender gap. This can be explained by the fact that Guo et al. [3] conclude that parents invariably exhibit behaviour that is more supportive of the education of the first child.

3.3. Marriage Factors

In addition to historical and family factors, men and women are also influenced by traditional culture when it comes to facing the issue of marriage. Women are always considered to be the only ones who can easily find a partner at a young age, and therefore they need to weigh up the relationship between education and marriage early on in their choice of education. In the case of rural areas, rural women will tend to marry early as their higher years of educational attainment may affect their chances of marriage. In contrast, men tend to prefer longer education because they

face less risk of marriage. Piotrowski, Tong, Zhang and Chao [9] argue that “for women, the chance of marriage declines with higher education”. This traditional cultural and public pressure on men and women to marry at an age leads women to take marriage more into account when they are educated.

In fact, such perceptions and factors of marriage are also affecting men and women in the city. The higher education of unmarried women creates a culture of prejudice and even discrimination in society, believing that the higher education of women will reduce their marriage rate. Such perceptions are an invisible reflection of gender inequality, as traditional Chinese attitudes favour men choosing younger women than themselves as a way of expecting women to take on more of a domestic role. Such a perception of marriage is likely to result in women being discouraged from pursuing further education, and they are more likely to have to weigh up the marriage factor as they face discrimination on the basis of age. For example, women are perceived as being unable to find a suitable partner after the age of 30, whereas men are not perceived as being older at the age of 30. Qian, Y. and Qian, Z. [10] argue that “highly educated women who have not yet married by age 30 are, indeed, faced with lower marriage likelihood”. Such traditional attitudes are always reflected in social opinion, especially the tendency to label women as “good at finding a suitable marriage partner”. University-educated women are considered to be married by the age of 30, and if they are not successful in finding a suitable man, they are labelled by the media as “women who have no one to choose from” [10]. The overwhelming voice of public opinion reflects society's discriminatory and unjust perception of marriage towards women and even tries to influence the equal right of women to education, suggesting that women should think more about marriage and sacrifice their years of education. This problem is in fact also reflected in continuing education after marriage. Women usually have more family responsibilities than men, which in practice also limits their potential for further education. Hao et al. [2] take the position that rural women have to juggle their family roles, which weakens their motivation to participate in further education as there is insufficient time and energy.

4. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that there is a gender inequity in education in China, not only between urban and rural areas, but also throughout compulsory education and higher education, and that the factors behind this gender disparity in education are mainly ideological. Besides, this paper argues that there are three main factors that influence the issue of gender equity in education; there are historical reasons, family factors, of which parental attitudes are key, and the marriage factor. Reviewing some key points, firstly, regarding the reality of gender disparities in education, both urban and rural, girls show lower enrolment rates and a tendency to drop out of school more easily. Besides, girls complete compulsory education at a much lower rate than boys, and they also have relatively less access to university than boys. Secondly, there are many intrinsic reasons for the inequalities. The first has to do with the fact that the traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, promotes the idea that men are superior to women, resulting in a fundamental inequality in the status of men and women. The lack of equal rights for men and women in society has also led to women being at a disadvantage in education. Next, inequality cannot be separated from the problems of the family, mainly because of the parents' perception of the value of investing in the education of boys and the belief that raising girls has a low return and will not play a role in supporting themselves in the future. Among other things, fatherhood can also play a central role in a child's schooling and education. A final factor is the issue of marriage, where the prevailing social belief that women need to marry men older than themselves forces women to make trade-offs between years of education and age at marriage. Secular attitudes also influence women's regions to forego post-marital educational opportunities in order to better balance family responsibilities.

In conclusion, gender disparity in education in China is still a tough problem in society and deserves awareness, especially as women are at a distinct disadvantage in education, and the causes of this inequity are more related to culture, ideology and perception. In the future exploration of educational equity, we should pay more attention to the root causes of the inequality and the various potential factors that may lead to it, in order to try to find possible solutions to narrow the gender gap and safeguard women's educational rights as well as expanding social equity.

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