

How can education be used to reduce gender inequality in China?

Gender inequality is a pressing and relevant issue in China and could be detrimental to China's rise. This is for several reasons, on both a global and national scale. Globally, given China's strength and sphere of influence, there could be negative consequences for gender inequality if China does not begin to reduce their own level of gender inequality (Chharbra, 2020). It could also be detrimental to China's rise as a global superpower as other global powers may be hesitant to cooperate with China given their level of gender inequality as they would not wish to be seen supporting this. Coupled with current global deteriorating views of China, this could result in a disruption of potential future trade deals and military alliances, which could hinder China's growth (UCIL22062 6.1). Therefore, a reduction in gender inequality in China is vital for their rise and future. Education plays a key role in increasing gender equality and I will examine possible routes that this can be achieved in China (Jha, 2020).

The documentary, 'Sparrow Village' by Christine Choy, from 2003 shows young girls from Sparrow Village wishing for an education. The families featured are farmers from a mountainous region in south-west China who earn only a few dollars each month in cash so often the daughters are unable to finish their education due to financial restraints. It goes on to show that even if a family can afford the school fees then there is an opportunity cost of education as it means that the daughters will be unable to work at home and support their parents. It is common practice, however, to send the sons to be educated if they can afford it. Due to traditional practices the sons would grow up and support their parents, but it is thought that the daughters would marry and then work to support their in-laws. The documentary highlights the pressing issue that the daughters need an education otherwise their future options are limited, and as the parents are unable to read or write then school is the only chance they have to learn these skills. The documentary also emphasises the fact

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that the featured girls long for an education with one girl saying 'I want to stay in school, graduate, and become a doctor. Then I want to invent the best medicine'.

This documentary 'Sparrow Village' revealed some important truths that I was previously ignorant to. Coming from the UK where education is not only compulsory but also free, I found it difficult to imagine a place in which education is a dream for so many children. I was also slightly surprised with how much the young girls yearned for an education, and this surprise comes from a place of great privilege growing up in the UK. It was also sad to see that the parents were left with no choice but to take their children out of education in many cases, knowing the detrimental impact it would have on their future. The documentary definitely made me more conscious of the great privilege that we have here to be able to have access to free education and how it has benefited our lives.

The documentary demonstrated the overarching issue that education is not easily accessible in many regions of south west China and highlighted that it was girls who were struggling the most to gain an education and often were side-lined for their male counterparts. It also made it very apparent that the most significant barrier to education is financial constraints. In the village that the documentary looked at there was a nearby school, however, the school required both a 'book fee' and a 'teaching fee'. They mentioned that in special circumstances, such as an exceptional student who was unable to afford this education, the school may be able to wave the 'book fee' however the other fee was non-negotiable. This shows that there is an available solution to increasing secondary education both in this region of China and across the country (Education Destination Asia, 2023). It has been established that an increase in secondary education for women can vastly improve their quality of life, as it results in both higher income and life expectancy, as well as being more independent (Powdthavee, 2014). It can also lead to an increase in opportunity and equality,

and the solution of removing financial constraints to increase access to schooling should be a simple one (Action Aid, 2023). In addition, a UN senior advisor has stated that 'education for girls and women is particularly important, especially in attempting to reverse gendered patterns of discrimination' (Karam 2015). China needs to rebalance their views on gender and create a more equal society if it is to become a global partner of the western world, and this is not just about increasing women's liberties but also protecting them as it has been suggested that 'a growth of violence against women may also be a consequence of the gender imbalance' (UCIL22062 7.4).

This is based off the assumption that China would want to become more interlinked with the Western world, in order to better establish themselves. However, there is talk from all sides of a decoupling of the Chinese economy from the world, as seen during the US-China trade war under Trump and Xi, and this could suggest the China are currently uninterested in improving their global image and work towards reducing gender inequality in China (UCIL22602 3.4).

Education can lead women to become more self-reliant and independent and a lack of education is a key contribution to gender inequality worldwide (UNESCO, 2023). In China there are no laws which prohibit a full education for women, and it is clear that the main reason that they do not gain a full education, meaning both primary and secondary, is due to financial constraints (China Education Centre, 2023). There are fees for preschool however this blog will focus on primary and secondary education. Primary education is largely free, with only miscellaneous fees such as school supplies and uniform, however even this is a barrier to many families, especially in rural China, as highlighted by the documentary. For senior secondary education there is a tuition fee and many families do not have the resources to fund this, regardless of their desire too. For families who can only afford to send one child to school then in many Chinese families they will choose to send their son to school, instead of their daughter (Branigan, 2011). It is clear that by abolishing school fees

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there would be a significant increase in the number of women who are able to attain an education, therefore promoting gender equality in China. An alternative solution would be to introduce a means-tested system whereby those families who cannot afford to send all of their children to school can either have the fees waived for them or they can be given grants in order to be able to pay the required fees. In China's 2023 budget they had spending of \$227.6 billion on defence but only \$22.8 billion on education which is nearly 10 times less (China Power, 2023). This shows that it would be fiscally possible for China to reallocate some additional funding into education in order to allow for more women to be educated. This in turn is likely to give a greater return for China as it will create a better educated workforce which will benefit the prosperity of the country and help lead to a higher tax revenue (Economic Policy Institute, 2013). A potential issue with a means tested grant is that families may decide to use the money elsewhere, for example to buy a new piece of technology to benefit their farming practices. Overall, this shows that by creating a system where more women could be educated there would be numerous benefits and China may struggle in the future without this,

I have examined how education can be used to reduce gender inequality in China and how this would benefit China and what changes need to be made in order for this to happen. There is conclusive evidence that an increase in education can reduce gender inequality with the UN senior advisor stating that 'it is impossible to achieve gender equality without education' (Karam, 2015). The effect that this would have on China would be monumental, as it would become a more attractive global partner and there could also be internal benefits to their economy. With tensions between the western world and China on the rise, this would be an intelligent time for China to address the issue of gender inequality as it would help to decrease tensions and lead to a more peaceful future, if that is what their goal is (UCIL22602 5.2).

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