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How does the "Compulsory Education Law" impact girls' education and opportunities in rural poverty-stricken regions of China?

China's rise and rapid population growth have led to China becoming a worldwide superpower. Despite an overall improvement in Chinese lives since the economic growth of the 1978 reform and opening, certain demographics in China have suffered none more so than rural dwellers, especially females. With the majority of employees residing in cities, due to special economic zones being adopted in the majority of cities by the 1980s, the previous agricultural based economy was undone leaving urban farmers with little to no income. As a result, urban families struggled to survive let alone pay school fees for the betterment of their offspring's lives. In 1986 the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China was introduced which promised 9 years of free school education. This sounded like a huge step forward for the families living in poverty stricken regions of China, however, how much did it impact children's and specifically girls' education and opportunities in rural China? This is hugely significant to China's rise as to sustain growth across the entirety of the country China must ensure all regions are contributing to development, by providing education to the 491 million Chinese urban dwellers, innovators and highly skilled workers who will rise and contribute to China's economy.

Sparrow Village (2003) is a short documentary directed by Christene Choy. The documentary focuses on a group of young girls in South Western China who long for an education, however, the harsh reality of rural life in China obstructs this wish. The girls love learning despite the squalor of their dorms and the long winded tough journeys from their villages. Their parents are ageing, illiterate and poverty stricken making it an everyday battle to pay for school fees. One parent mentions the need to sell a pig to pay the monthly school fee. The young girls have high aspirations and yearn to be more successful than their older counterparts. One teacher 'Miss Lei' is a great inspiration to the girls as she has acquired a job free from as one girl stated "back breaking labour", whilst also making it through education, which is a huge achievement for females in China due to the prioritisation of male education that saw one girl leave school to allow her brother the fees. The children also highlight their want to move to the city, due to the poverty of rural China that haunts their families daily.

The documentary highlights the sad reality for many Chinese families residing in rural China, it caused me to feel severe empathy for families living in these conditions not just in China but across the world. In addition, the effort and pain these young girls go through to survive, travelling to and from school and in the school dorms themselves, is a shocking reality. The adults become emotional when discussing their continued efforts and failed efforts to send their children to school, and love and care for their children in the best way they can, however, the economy and underdevelopment of their village make this nearly unachievable. Understanding how parents will do anything for the betterment of their children's lives, I feel agony for the parents in rural China that live taxing lives to do the best they can for their children, which in many cases still isn't enough to send them through education in the search of future prosperity for their family. Living in the UK people take compulsory education for granted and students in many cases don't appreciate the value of education, the young girls in the documentary yearn for education and make you realise its imperative nature.

Sparrow Village offered great insight into the lives of poverty stricken rural dwellers in China and the day to day battle they face with life. It portrayed to me a poignant message about the importance of education and the gender inequality that exists within. For example, one of the girls dropped out of school due to her parents not being able to afford her study to facilitate her less academic brother to attend. This highlights the culturally embedded bias towards the male gender in Chinese education. The conditions in which pupils that do afford to attend schooling endure are far below par and improvements in facilities as well as the education structure are imperative. The documentary is extremely relevant to the research question as it visualises life in a poor region of rural China and the imminent need for change to facilitate China's future growth across all fronts of society.

The Compulsory Education Law improved education in China but only to a small degree in the early introduction. The law introduced in 1986 "raised overall educational attainment in

China (by about 0.8 years of schooling) during the 1997-2006 period" (Fang et al., 2012) however the impact varied systematically by location and by gender. According to research (Fang et al., 2012) the law increased schooling before 2006 for all subgroups but most strongly for girls with 1.17 additional years of teaching rather than boys with 0.4 extra years. This is expected due to the plight girls faced in education before the law indicating its success. However, boys were still in school much longer than girls on average and rural and inland areas saw decreased effects in comparison to urban and coastal residents. An additional year of education reportedly increases annual income by 9% (Fang et al., 2012) reiterating the need for increased education in poverty stricken areas. However, "significant rural to urban migration was recorded by the official residents' registration system" (Shen, 1995) during the 1990's indicating the success of education. Yet this left an increasingly struggling ageing and gender imbalanced population in the rural communities as young men were preferred for employment.

The details of the law were clear and implemented in successful ways. The Compulsory Education Law required that "all children who have reached the age of six shall enrol in school and receive compulsory education for the prescribed number of years" (China.org.cn, 2019). This was a large promise to fulfil however the Fourth Session of the Sixth National People's Congress on April 12 1986, devised effective measures of instalment which allowed for success despite beginning the law in a time of an atrocious educational system that was disregarded in regimes previous, as well as the deep rooted sexism originating under Mao's reign. Under the law small scale projects emerged to test teachers' qualifications to teach and provide poorer students with a student loan programme (Xu, n.d.). The law was effective in beginning the improvement of education in China for all subgroups.

Women in rural China have unequal educational experiences compared to men in today's society. 'filial piety' (孝) is a term used in China whereby children are expected to care for the elderly however since the 'one child policy' has been introduced greater gender imbalances have arisen. This is because due to 'filial piety' sons have been prioritised by Chinese families to continue the family name. In 2021 the sex ratio in China was 110 men to 100 women. The gender imbalances have furthered the female stereotype given at birth and therefore society prioritises Male education. The

Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China promised to negate this inequality through 9 years of free education however According to research (Wang, 2022) Women in rural areas “have fewer opportunities to go to school than other people in China” this portrays how the sub population of rural women are discriminated against by the educational system. However, Wang goes on to denote that education for women in rural China has improved and China as a whole has “nearly equal” educational enrolments. Yet rural Chinese girls currently experience a much lower schooling rate than their male counterparts. This signifies the relevance of the issue and the need for improvement despite the many government policies that have produced profound improvements since the production of the Sparrow Village documentary.

The Compulsory Education Law of 1986 impacted education positively for all subgroups, however, education still prioritised urban dwellers and boys. Rural dwellers still faced issues in attending school due to the lack of facilities and the time it took to install the law. This is exemplified by the Sparrow Village documentary that was filmed some 17 years after the introduction of the law. The documentary evoked my compassion for children in poverty stricken areas of rural China due to the struggle to achieve education for the betterment of their lives. The documentary helped me answer the question as it gave me an insight into the true realities of families in those provinces after the introduction of the law. The law that was introduced in 1986 undoubtedly had a positive effect on the Chinese education system, yet it wasn't enough and as discussed previously China has introduced further improvements that have been crucial to rural inhabitants and the female population. However, rural Chinese girls still experience a tough route to education to this day and China's future could benefit hugely from the improvement of the system. Equality in education not only would increase economic growth but also improve; national security, innovation and social development. A possible policy addition the Chinese government could introduce to improve this is the provision of scholarships for rural girls and investment in rural schooling facilities.

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