Reducing Educational Gender Inequality in Rural Chinese Provinces: The Key to Sustaining China's economic growth?

Educational gender inequality refers to unequal participation and access to educational opportunities by women, leading them to become marginalised and fail to experience the benefits of education (EU, 2020). Around the world only 49% of countries have managed to attain equal gender participation at primary stages of education, but this figure drops significantly as you move upwards to secondary and higher education (UNICEF, 2020). Common barriers preventing equal education opportunities are poverty, gender violence and child marriages, with the ramifications being most harmful to ethnic minorities, families of lower financial status, and in China's case, rural communities.

Home to 491 million people in 2022 (Textor, 2023), China's rural populations are concentrated in Western mountainous provinces like Gansu and Qinghai. Irrespective of gender, rural communities already suffer from greater educational barriers, with lower average incomes from their agricultural jobs (seen in Figure 1), increasing the economic burden of educating children and highlighting how the socio-economic status of households is a major factor dictating educational outcomes (Van der Berg, 2008). Therefore, blocked by economic, geographical, and cultural obstacles, it's within these rural provinces that girls are 155% more likely to not attend school than boys (Kuang, Liu, and Ren, 2022).

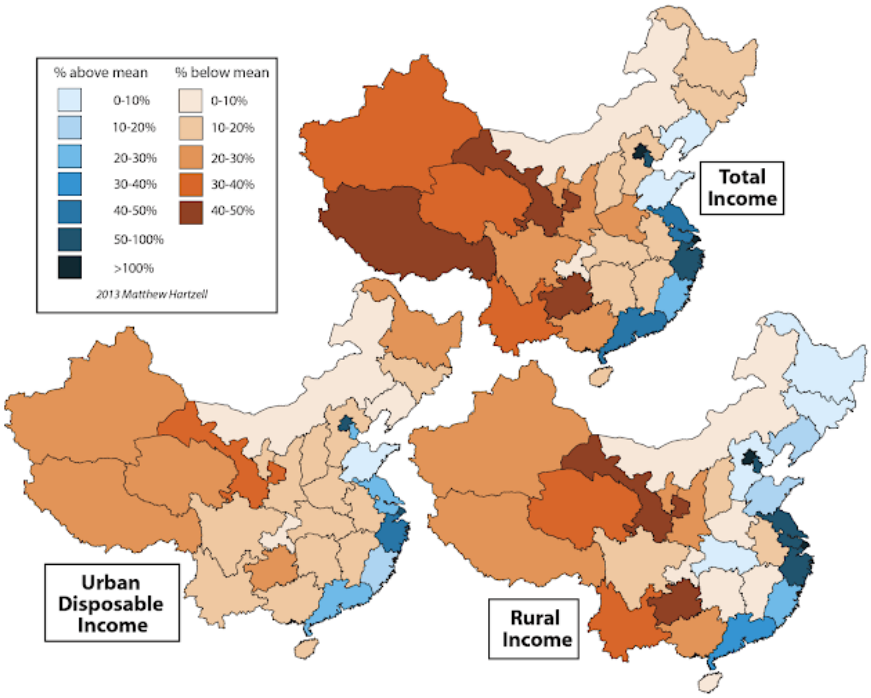

Figure 1, Choropleth map of differing regional incomes comparative to average income across Chinese provinces (Hartzell, 2013).

But how could this injustice impact China's economic growth?

As China's rapid urbanization in the last decade has produced powerhouses of technological, financial, and industrial progress in Eastern cities like Hangzhou (Economist Intelligence, 2021), it's easy to look at these as beacons for advancing China's economic growth. Here, the future of China as an economic superpower is reflected in transitions away from manufacturing towards innovations and the production of higher-valued goods. As such, higher-skilled jobs are requiring a higher-skilled labour force. Theoretically, the only feasible way to meet this demand would be to (re)educate the populations that have previously represented the majority of China's workforce; factory workers.

Already, 33% of China's workers are composed of rural migrants, who often migrate to cities in the hope of brighter economic futures (China Labour Bulletin, 2022). With research suggesting that rural-urban migration is only going to increase (Qi, 2019), vital investment is needed in rural communities to improve the standard and availability of education to better equip migrating populations. Whilst this includes girls and boys alike, if intervention was targeted towards increasing girl's educational attainment the direct impact of increasing the productivity of the labour market and the size of the available labour force may well be the key to China's growing need for more highly trained workers.

The issue is systemic in China, and many documentaries have highlighted the gruelling reality that rural girls face. 'Sparrow village' produced by Christine Choy (Choy, 2003) captures the daily struggle of the Miao people, farmers who reside in the mountainous outcrops in South-West China. The heartfelt account follows the desire of young girls (around 14 years old), as they strive to become educated and achieve their dreams of becoming doctors, writers, and basketball players. To fulfil their ambitions the girls must travel three hours to their closest school, braving any weather conditions and carrying all their supplies for the week as they will not return home to their families until the weekend. After their treacherous journey awaits

their school and home, a communal dorm room with a dirt floor and broken wallboards that provide little protection against the wind and chill of winter nights.

Whilst their enthusiasm and love for learning is blatant, they feel ripples of guilt as they're conscious of the financial strain their family suffer whilst they learn. The documentary interviews one family where the financial burden became too much and so were forced to remove their daughter from school as they couldn't afford to spend their scarce resources on educating both their son and daughter. The daughter comments on the harsh reality that parents often favour sons, with girls considered 'non-permanent' members of families that will inevitably marry and have loyalties to their family-in-law. This entrenched gender discrimination is common across China, but is more deeply ingrained within rural communities, as the daughter sadly reflects "in these parts, boys are treated as being more important than girls" (Li and Tsang, 2003; 22:24).

It's deeply saddening to see the contrast between the girls fortunate enough to attend school and those who were either forced due to their family's financial situation. The guilt is almost overwhelming. As a white woman growing up in Southern England never once have me or any of my peers had to question our right to an education. Instead, school often became a chore, an inconvenience of waking up at 7am. Our privilege is incomprehensible when compared to the 129 million girls across the world who face the same deprivation as the Miao children (UNICEF, 2020).

Nevertheless, I feel as though ethnographic research and documentaries like 'Sparrow village' are crucial in capturing the hardship of so many underrepresented communities, highlighting their struggles and facilitating their voices. Often research into social issues are conducted empirically, reducing the rural girls to statistics and impoverished communities to points on maps that have lower incomes (like in Figure 1). But the girls are real people. They represent real lives that continue to be let down by institutional barriers, social norms and infrastructural gaps that favour boys and ultimately limit girl's qualities of life. However, with greater awareness and exposure on the issue (helped by documentaries like 'Sparrow Village'), we can change the tide. We can reduce inequality by pushing the Chinese government to invest in equal educational opportunities for boys and girls, and not stopping until they do.

But why is educational gender inequality so prevalent in rural China?

The issue can essentially be broken down into key; economic, cultural and geographical reasons.

Economically, the cost of household education spending (on textbooks, stationary etc), is a vastly greater economic drain on rural areas than urban regions, often coercing parents to educate none or one child (Wu and Zhang, 2010). Equally, ideological changes since the 'Reform and Opening' in 1978 has shifted China towards a more market-orientated economy (UCIL22602, 1.4 module). For rural communities, this has expanded opportunities for children to earn money, disincentivising parents to force girls to remain in school when the family could profit from their daughters in factory jobs (Li and Tsang, 2003).

Long standing gender-differentiated Confucian values about the role of women in society also cause educational gender inequality. Old sayings like, 'Too much learning does not become a woman', have become deeply engrained in rural consciousness', creating general perceptions that there's a smaller return to female education as women don't as frequently enter high-paying jobs (Van der Berg, 2008). Additionally, as highlighted in 'Sparrow Village', filial piety and the obligation of caring for one's parents is valued as a more masculine duty, meaning that parents support sons in educational endeavours with more vigour so they can obtain higher-paid jobs that will provide greater returns to the family (Hannum, Kong and Zhang, 2009; UCIL22602, 7.4 module).

Geographically, rural areas also have a poorly developed educational infrastructure, with lack of available secondary schools reducing future advancement in female education, so families limit investment in girl's education as there're no apparent prospects (Zeng et al., 2013).

What are the implications for sustaining China's growth?

Whilst it's clear that the issue of educational gender inequality in Chinese rural provinces is a systemic issue confronted by a long history of structural economic and cultural barriers, it's

not one that needs to persist. Aside from a moral duty to help better the lives of young girls like in 'Sparrow Village' and across China, Chinese society also has a multitude of economic and social factors to gain by increasing education equality.

On the local scale, higher literacy rates have been proven to increase the chances of breaking out of intergenerational cycles of poverty that usually plague impoverished rural communities (Lewis, 1996). In local villages higher levels of education in woman (especially in mothers), creates social and health benefits such as lower infant mortality rates (Balatchandirane, 2003).

Comparatively, on the national scale 'quality-adjusted education' generates greater economic opportunities with an educated population being more productive and having a wider skill set that enables them to function more effectively (Van der Berg, 2008). In terms of sustaining China's economic growth, one could argue that if gender equality in education had been achieved earlier, then the society would be even-more developed than current levels. For instance, research suggests that (like other South Asian countries), China would have seen a 0.9% quicker economic growth annually if equal gender opportunities were promoted since 1960 (Balatchandirane, 2003).

Overall, when examining the array of social welfare advantages and economic benefits of reducing educational gender inequality in rural Chinese provinces, it's clear that there are many opportunities for China's future development. Through emancipating girls in rural areas like 'Sparrow Village' into higher levels of educational attainment, we can enable them to secure more lucrative jobs, thus, improving both the quality of the workforce as well as the physical numbers of human capital that can fulfil the more challenging job roles; ensuring continued economic growth for China.

To achieve this, future Chinese policies could focus on better infrastructural developments in rural communities, building more secondary schools in mountainous regions and implementing transport frameworks to facilitate better and equal access. Equally, to alleviate the economic burden of schooling resources governmental investment could allow free access to textbooks and other educational resources. Whilst the cultural barriers to educational gender equality may be too institutionalised into society for the government to intervene, a plausible technique may be the creation of 'Social Issues' classes open for whole

villages, helping parents understand the benefits of sending girls to school and creating support networks for struggling families (Lecheng, 2022).

[Word count: 1649]

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