

### **Challenging China's rise: The high dropout rate of girls from school in the rural regions of China**

The renewed enthusiasm for Confucian values in 21<sup>st</sup> Century China and the systematic gender inequality that these values encourage is challenging the bounds of China's rise due to the continued exclusion of women from this rise (Gries, 2023). The exclusion of women is occurring in multiple ways across China and one prominent issue in rural China is the high dropout rate of girls from school (Choy, 2003). This issue is of great consequence as without education, women become trapped in unrelenting cycles of poverty with no means to leave. On a national scale, it impedes China's rise as the potential for a full, well-educated workforce with optimum productivity cannot be realised. Moreover, the wealth divide continues to grow as poor villages economically stagnate whilst the wealth of many Chinese cities continues to increase exponentially, thus China is leaving the rural parts of the country behind during its rise. Ultimately, to improve the speed and scale of China's rise, the duration and quality of education for girls must improve to ensure China can attain sustainable and equitable growth.

The documentary 'Sparrow Village' describes the lives of some young girls living in a rural village in a mountainous region of Southwest China. They want to stay in education as long as possible to improve their potential for a career and to have the opportunity to leave the village. Their parents are struggling to afford their education, forcing some girls to dropout of school to be another income earner for their family. The documentary shows the story of one girl who was forced to dropout as her parents could no longer afford her education, yet her brother was allowed to continue despite her being the stronger student. Therefore, regardless of aptitude, families will prioritise the education of their sons due to their Confucian beliefs of prioritising boys. They also believe that boys have greater career prospects as they are desired more by employers than girls and will be paid more for the same job. Furthermore, Confucian values mean that a son's duty is to support his parents but once a girl is married she 'belongs' to a new family and so her duty is to that family, thus the family benefits more by investing in their son. The documentary covers various other barriers to the girls education such as the three hour walk to the school, the poor condition of the school, and the lack of technology. Ultimately, the documentary shows the girls fear that if they cannot become educated, they will assume the positions that their mothers are in now, illiterate and trapped in the endless labour of farming and housework (Choy, 2003).

As a female student, my personal reaction to the footage is that of frustration, that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the prioritisation of boy's education over girls is still normalised. Even if the female sibling is smarter or more ambitious than the male, they still are not considered as worthy of investing in as they are

considered likely to be less successful than their male counterparts and also its presumed that they will not support their family financially in the long-term. The documentary provides just another example of how women are seen as the inferior gender across the world. Furthermore, as a well-educated student, the documentary is a reminder of the global wealth divide and the difference in opportunities that girls have access to; some with limitless opportunities, and others trapped in the situation they were born into without the option of education to aid their escape. Ultimately, the documentary reminds its viewers of the adversity that women and girls continue to face and the global wealth gap that affects women disproportionately.

The documentary zooms in across a range of issues facing rural China, and more specifically to the focus of this blog, the documentary highlights the unequal years of schooling received between boys and girls and the significantly higher dropout rate of girls. Whilst the documentary is now somewhat outdated, it does serve to heighten understanding of the realities of gender inequality in rural China, and using case-by-case examples, it highlights the various, many previously unthought-of barriers to education, and the consequent contributing factors to the high dropout rate. The documentary also contributes to a new perspective in understanding rural experiences, and the difference in treatment of girls in rural settings compared to those in urban ones. Girls in urban settings have fewer barriers to education, the schools are nearer, better equipped, and more financially accessible. Whereas in rural areas there are many more barriers to education including more societal pressures not to go and the presence of more siblings due to the more tolerant implementation of the one-child policy in rural areas, meaning parents have less money per child to spend on education (Qiang, et al., 2008). Therefore, the documentary has improved my understanding of the rural-urban divide, bringing to light many more contributors to the divide.

The documentary highlights the uneven dropout rate from the school between boys and girls. This is attributed to the low levels of gender equality in rural areas compared to urban, where the dropout rate is lower for girls (Song, et al., 2006). One explanation of this lower gender equality in rural areas is the chronically poor nature of many rural villages where parents have to choose if educating their children is worth the financial cost. Consequently children from poor and credit-constrained households are three times more likely to drop out (Brown & Park, 2002). For many parents of daughters, the financial cost is not worth it and this decision is in part due to the Confucian values that many rural households uphold, that the boy's education should be chosen over the girls and this explains why the majority of girls have fewer years of schooling than boys, and why their dropout rate is so high in Primary and Middle school (Song, et al., 2006). Consequently, the majority of women living in rural China receive little education which affects their ability to migrate to cities for work the way men do in an attempt to break out of the cycle of poverty (Gries, 2023). Instead, women remain

trapped in their villages and confined to farmwork and housework, work which had previously been shared with the men before they migrated to the cities for better work (Qiang, et al., 2008). The preference of employers for male workers and the higher pay for men encourages men to leave subsistence agriculture, leaving the women and girls to do the farmwork (Matthews & Nee, 2000). Thus, there are fewer farmworkers and the girls are hence forced to dropout of school to fill the gaps whilst the boys are encouraged to stay in school to continue to senior school or even university so that they also can migrate to the city to find good work. This high dropout rate of girls is a product of the multiple barriers that girls face in attaining an education, including the gender discrimination embedded in the social and physical environment; sexist family values; and girl's own internalised sense of inferiority (Qiang, et al., 2008). Ultimately, women in rural China remain trapped in poverty and left behind by China's rise, yet if these women could attain a good education, they could be empowered to contribute to China's rise instead of inadvertently holding it back.

The enrolment and dropout rate of girls has also been heavily influenced by the 1980-2015 one-child policy (Gries, 2023). For parents whose only child was a girl, they could not exhibit a 'son preference' so they treated the girls the same as the boys, whether that was investing in their education or using them as an additional income earner (Lee, 2012). However, the one-child policy was not strictly enforced for those with rural hukou and the birth of a second child was shown to significantly increase the enrolment and reduce the dropout rate of the first-born child (Qian, 2009). However, if the first-born child was a girl and the second was a boy, this increased the likelihood of the girl dropping out and in this scenario, the girl would have had more years of education if they were an only-child (Huang, et al., 2016). Consequently, there is no significant gap in the education of only-child boys versus only-child girls, yet if a girl had a male sibling it decreased their years of schooling by 0.20 years and 0.62 for rural girls (Lee, 2012). Therefore, whilst gender inequality is still worse in rural areas, the one-child policy did in some ways improve equality and assist China's rise as multiple parents did not have the option to choose which child's education was invested in and so many girls who would not have previously been educated were educated.

Overall, the lack of investment and commitment to girls education is limiting the full potential of China's rise as its full capacity cannot be reached without women contributing more to national productivity, economic activity, and leadership. The 'sparrow village' documentary is an example of just one of the many villages where the girls dropout rate from school far exceeds the boys and consequently girls are left trapped in these villages whilst their male counterparts are able to leave to pursue their ambitions. Ultimately, the documentary is a demonstration of how China will not be able to continue to rise if it does not address the barriers to education that girls are facing. Without the education of girls China is currently missing out on the potential contributions of millions of women

and girls to the workforce and greater society. Thus if China does not make reforms for gender equality, its rise will falter and it could eventually find itself outcompeted in multiple capacities by its international competitors.

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