

What causes the lower school enrollment of girls in rural China?

China has made remarkable progress in promoting basic education over the past few decades, as reported by Zhao and Glewwe (2010:451). For instance, the enrollment rate for basic education in rural China has increased and is higher than that of many economically comparable countries' rural areas (Song, Appleton and Knight, 2006:1650). However, despite these achievements, there is still a significant gender imbalance in education in rural China. Girls in rural areas have lower school enrollment rates than boys, particularly in secondary education, and often confront the issue of an uneven distribution of educational resources (Hao, Zhang and Yu, 2021:72). According to Hao, Zhang and Yu (2021:67), promoting school enrollment for girls in rural China can contribute to sustainable development in rural education, as well as the greater economic and social development of China. Thus, it is essential for the Chinese government to be aware of these significant gender disparities in rural education and take action to address them. This blog post will therefore mainly focus on the causes of the lower school enrollment of girls in rural China, and will propose several possible solutions at the end of this research.

In rural China, especially in minority regions, many young girls are either unable to access education or are compelled to drop out of school early. The documentary film, 'Sparrow Village', directed by Christine Choy in 2003, illuminates the challenges confronted by young girls living in a rural village in southwestern China in terms of obtaining an education. Through this film, the audience can see some young girls engaging in household chores such as cooking meals, washing clothes, or carrying heavy loads, rather than attending school. Moreover, the film indicates that the illiteracy rate among women in this village is higher than that of men due to the lower school enrollment of girls, particularly at the secondary level. For instance, in the film, one girl asked her parents if she could continue attending high school, but they refused because they could not afford it. In addition, the film also shows that another girl was also unable to pursue her education as her family prioritized her brother's education over hers, leaving her without financial support to attend high school. These stories illustrate the harsh realities faced by those girls who aspire to receive an education and the obstacles they need to overcome, including poverty, gender discrimination, and the pressures of traditional norms, etc. Besides, through the perspectives of these girls and their families, the film also reveals the transformative power of education and the hope it brings to their lives. For example, the director recorded a group of girls expressing their yearning for education and their dreams of being a doctor, a teacher, and an athlete in the future, meanwhile implying the importance of education. All in all, 'Sparrow Village' is a touching documentary film that sheds light on the challenges faced by young girls in rural China who strive for an education,

while emphasizing the importance of education and the issues of poverty and gender inequality in the distribution of educational resources in rural China.

While as a girl growing up in Beijing, the capital city of China, I must admit that I had never felt the large gender gap in education in rural China until I watched the film mentioned above. As the film 'Sparrow Village' suggested, education plays a critical role in one's life and future, especially for females. Meanwhile, there is no doubt that promoting the educational level of rural women can improve their social status and well-being. From this perspective, it is therefore essential for us to understand the main reasons behind the lower school enrollment of girls in rural China, since it can help us better realize the dilemma that rural girls are confronting, and enable us to devise appropriate solutions to address it, then ultimately achieve the sustainable development goals of gender equality and reducing poverty.

Firstly, one of the reasons for the lower school enrollment of girls in rural China is the lack of financial support. Poverty is a widespread issue in rural areas, making it challenging for many families to provide education for their children. Although the Chinese government has introduced a nine-year compulsory education system that offers young boys and girls free tuition to enter primary and middle school, middle school education requires a high outlay of cash. This is because most middle schools are usually located in towns and far away from home, and parents must pay for fees such as transportation, textbooks, and boarding expenses (Qiang et al., 2008:69). A example of this is the documentary film mentioned above, as 'Sparrow Village' showed that, those middle school girls in the village usually took about three hours to arrive at school, therefore, many of them have to choose to board at school and return home only at weekends due to the long commute. To some extent, all of these result in some poor rural families being unable to afford education for their children. Moreover, for those families who have multiple children but limited income, parents often prioritize the education of their sons over their daughters, which also leads to lower school enrollment of girls.

As a matter of fact, for those relatively poor rural families with two or more children, there is bound to be an uneven distribution of educational resources. In this context, boys are usually not deprived of the opportunities of education. This is because their parents think that investing in the education of their sons has a higher return than investing in their daughters. One of the factors that contribute to it is the idea of traditional gender roles, in China, the idea is particularly strong in rural regions, regarding men as superior to women, and the role of men is usually dominant in the family, while women's roles are less important (Qiang et al., 2008:66). Meanwhile, men are traditionally seen as more important to the livelihood of the family than women. Sons usually continue to live with their parents and provide support to them after marriage,

while daughters are likely to leave their parents and join their husbands' families. Besides, it is also worth noting that there is a large number of left-behind children in rural regions whose parents have migrated to the city for work (Lu, 2012:330). Although these families may have a relatively stable source of income due to the migrant parents working in cities, those girls who have siblings or grandparents in the household still face a high risk of dropping out of school (Meyerhoefer and Chen, 2011:390). For example, when parents are working away from home, girls are often expected to take on the responsibility of caring for their siblings and grandparents, as well as doing household chores. Furthermore, in terms of farm work, it relies more on the female workforce, and usually girls spend far more time on it than their brothers do (Qiang et al., 2008:74). Such extra burdens make them almost have no individual time on studying, which are detrimental to their educational progress and performances, therefore, most of them have to drop out of school.

In addition, some studies found that the educational level of mothers has a greater influence on the educational level of the next generation compared to that of fathers. An educated mother can encourage her daughter to have a better academic performance by serving as a role model or providing direct assistance in learning, according to a survey conducted by Song, Appleton, and Knight (2006:1642). However, the reality is that there is still a large number of women who are left behind in subsistence agriculture and are unable to access secondary or higher education in many rural areas of China. Therefore, the lack of female role models also contributes to the lower school enrollment of girls. Many girls may feel discouraged or unsupported in their educational pursuits due to the limited educational level of their mothers and the absence of rural women who have successfully pursued education and career opportunities.

All in all, the documentary film 'Sparrow Village' is a powerful reminder of the importance of education and has inspired me to take action towards improving the educational conditions of girls in rural China. Therefore, I want to propose several policy recommendations to the Chinese government:

First of all, subsidize girls in poor rural regions of China regularly, especially those who lack financial support to obtain an education. Secondly, establish more boarding schools or all-girls high schools with free tuition and fees. A good example of this is Lijiang Huaping Girl's Senior High School, located in southwest China, which mainly recruits poor female students from remote townships and alpine areas in Lijiang, a county of Yunnan province. The school is not only free of books, tuition, and accommodation fees for all students, but it also provides them with free daily necessities. As a result, since its establishment in 2008, the school has helped more than 1,800 girls leave

the mountains and attend college over the past decade. Last but not least, the government needs to enhance advocacy for gender equality, particularly in rural regions, to increase the realization that traditional gender ideas need to be changed into modern ones.

According to Guo, Zhou and Liu (2020:305), many policies for education can help promote the modernization, popularization, and balanced development of education. Meanwhile, the development of education can serve as a significant driving force for China's economic development (Guo, Zhou and Liu, 2020:305). Thus, I hope that this blog post can not only help promote greater awareness and action towards improving educational opportunities for girls in rural China, but also contribute to a better understanding of the prospect of China's rise.

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