

How much of a challenge does gender inequality pose to China's rise socially and economically?

In China, gender-related challenges persist and are recognized as an issue by the government. The deep-rooted belief of "重男轻女" (*men are superior to women*) in Chinese culture held by Confucianism has been further highlighted by the One Child Policy, which has drawn global attention to the deep-seated issues that contribute to gender discrimination. Despite some progress in urban China, rural regions continue to face significant challenges due to entrenched traditional gender norms. Christine Choy's *Sparrow Village* (2003) highlights the hardship faced by girls wishing to pursue an education and break the cycle experienced by their uneducated mothers. In this blog post, I aim to unpack the issues presented in the documentary and demonstrate how these challenges have serious implications for China's economic and social development.

Sparrow Village

In "Sparrow Village", the documentary focuses on the struggles rural girls face trying to get an education. One scene showcases a girl whose parents were unable to continue funding her education, opting instead to send her brother to school despite the girl's higher academic potential. The documentary also shows the challenges the village experiences due to the location and terrain, which both hinder economic progress. As such, many of the adults of working age migrated to the cities. In addition to this, villages are unable to compete with cities, as shown in the documentary where a girl and her mother go to the city to sell baskets but admit they are unable to compete with machine-made products. Due to this, the village lacks the resources to invest in education which further exacerbates gender inequality, creating an unbroken cycle.

My own reaction

Watching *Sparrow Village*, it is difficult not to feel moved by these girls, particularly when they admit the struggles caused by this. One of these is shown through an emotional scene where the girls cry for their mothers who have gone to the city, whom many have not seen for months. Another scene showed the children learning about cities in school like Shenzhen that had undergone rapid economic development, which juxtaposed with the truth of their lived experience.

Economic problems and implications

Sparrow Village is indicative of the sort of problems women in China face, demonstrating the deeper importance of education as a starting point. For example, the choice to send a son to school rather than a daughter showed the belief held by parents that there would be higher returns due to the fact that having a son would already guarantee more future possibilities of success.¹ As such, this decision was central to the family's own continued survival.² Contextually, although the CCP introduced the Compulsory Education Law in 1986 to give all children, regardless of gender, access to compulsory education, the gender gap in education is still closing too slowly in rural China³, which has been demonstrated through the documentary.

¹ Yuping Zhang, Grace Kao, and Emily Hannum, "Do Mothers in Rural China Practice Gender Equality in Educational Aspirations for Their Children?," *Comparative Education Review* 51, no. 2 (2007): pp. 131-157, <https://doi.org/10.1086/512023>, 133.

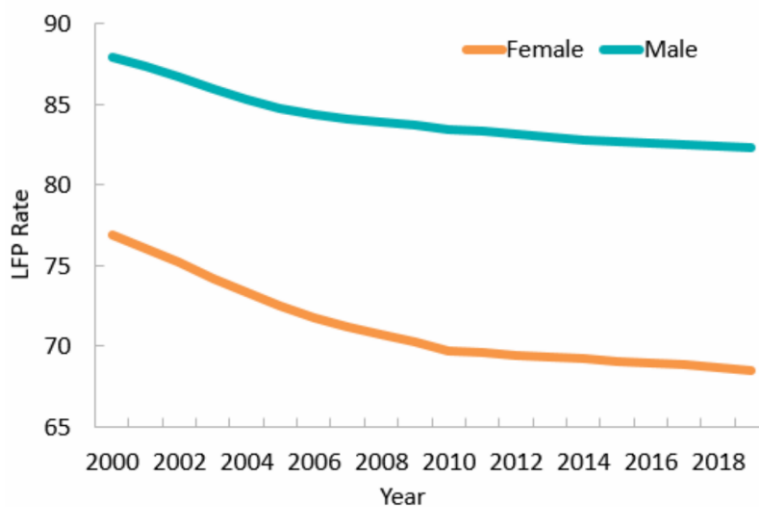
² Yuping Zhang, Grace Kao, and Emily Hannum, "Do Mothers in Rural China Practice Gender Equality in Educational Aspirations for Their Children?," *Comparative Education Review* 51, no. 2 (2007): pp. 131-157, <https://doi.org/10.1086/512023>, 133.

³ Qi Wang et al., "Gender and Rural Crises," in *Revisiting Gender Inequality: Perspectives from the People's Republic of China* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 179-200, 183

Due to the limited skills and education level of rural women, they are often confined to low-skilled or traditionally gender jobs such as domestic work. There are already discriminatory practices in job applications against women who are qualified for higher positions, as employers may inquire about their marital status or plans to have children. For instance, the Human Rights Watch found that in 2020, of nearly 14,000 job postings, 6% explicitly specified that only men should apply, indicating gender-based discrimination in hiring practices.⁴ Although The Labour Law (劳动法), the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (妇女权益保障法), the Employment Promotion Law (就业促进法), and the Provisions on Employment Services and Employment Management (就业服务与就业管理规定) all prohibit discrimination on the grounds of gender, this demonstrates that this is not being enforced.⁵

As a result of the One Child Policy, there is already a shortage of men which has led to a shrinking labour force. Women stuck in low skilled jobs means that a significant proportion of the population is not being utilized which could negatively affect China's future productivity and economic growth. Figure 1 below contains data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) that shows the decrease of labour between men and women in China, as well as the stark difference between the two genders.⁶

Figure 1: Labor Force Participation Rate by Gender (2000-2019)



Source: ILO and staff calculations.

Additionally, the lack of women in the workforce also severely effects innovation and creativity. A published study about Innovation found that companies with women were more likely to introduce radical new innovations into the market over a two-year period.⁷ Technology is an important issue

⁴ "China: Gender Discrimination in Hiring Persists," Human Rights Watch, October 28, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/29/china-gender-discrimination-hiring-persists>.

⁵ "China: Gender Discrimination in Hiring Persists," Human Rights Watch, October 28, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/29/china-gender-discrimination-hiring-persists>.

⁶ Mariya Brussevich, Era Dabla-Norris, and Bin Grace Li, "China's Rebalancing and Gender Inequality," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, May 2021, pp. 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4026314>, 4.

⁷ Cristina Díaz-García, Angela González-Moreno, and Francisco Jose Sáez-Martínez, "Gender Diversity within R&D Teams: Its Impact on Radicalness of Innovation," *Innovation* 15, no. 2 (2013): 149–60, <https://doi.org/10.5172/impp.2013.15.2.149> quoted within "What Is the Relationship between Innovation

relating to China's own development, Xi having said "we must quicken the pace of tech self-reliance to prevent being strangled by foreign countries".⁸ Therefore in order to achieve this, women must be utilized to their full potential.

Social problems and Implications of Gender Challenges

Gender inequality poses a challenge because, as already explored, it is the cause behind the barriers women face. One problem women face is gender based violence which ranges from 19 to 29.7% for women suffering physical violence, 58.1% among women suffering lifetime psychological violence and 16.7% for those experiencing lifetime sexual violence.⁹ As such, many women do not want to speak up due to the traditional idea of wanting to hide shame and preserve face¹⁰, expressed in the phrase 家丑不外扬 (*the disgrace of a family should never be spread out*) as identified by Hou.¹¹

Furthermore, the continued discrimination towards women creates a cycle, which, combined with China's societal and cultural norms for women, make it hard for women to break free. Even a woman who has achieved a high position on the career ladder may feel pressure to conform to the societal norms of being a mother and caregiver.¹²

Despite the Party's attempt at modernization and development, many scholars think that gender will continue to follow the deeply ingrained traditional patriarchal beliefs in Chinese society. Although the Communist Party followed the ideals of 男女平等 (*equality between men and women*) believing that women 'held up half the sky', this gradually reverted to traditional patriarchal ideals following the economic reformation of the market when efficiency was key. Leung and Tsai comment that there has been more of an emphasis on breaking down class barriers rather than gender, which is why inequalities in the job market have become more apparent.¹³ This unwillingness to solve gender inequality will only worsen the issues already mentioned and prevent social and economic development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gender inequality, particularly in rural China poses a problem for China's future social and economic rise due to the deep-rooted gender norms and preference for boys over girls. Sparrow Village effectively demonstrates the hardships of the girls, particularly when it comes to access to education; although some change has been made such as the 1986 Compulsory Education Law, the gender gap in education persists particularly in rural China. This has a direct result

Tech and Gender Equality," *Careers.snclavalin.com*, accessed May 2, 2023,

<https://careers.snclavalin.com/blogs/2023-3/relationship-between-innovation-tech-and-genderequality>.

⁸ 1. "China Must Be a World Leader in Science and Tech or Risk Being 'Strangled': Xi," *South China Morning Post*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3208882/xi-jinping-says-china-must-quicken-pace-tech-self-reliance-prevent-being-strangled-foreign-countries>.

⁹ Fengsu Hou et al., "'Whose Fault Is It?' How Rural Chinese Women Explain Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (February 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.711819>, 2.

¹⁰ Fengsu Hou et al., "'Whose Fault Is It?' How Rural Chinese Women Explain Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (February 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.711819>, 2.

¹¹ Fengsu Hou et al., "'Whose Fault Is It?' How Rural Chinese Women Explain Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (February 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.711819>, 3

¹² Ying Fang and Alan Walker, "'Full-Time Wife' and the Change of Gender Order in the Chinese City," *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 2, no. 1 (2015): pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-015-0006-x>, 11-12.

¹³ Sisi Sung, *The Economics of Gender in China Women, Work and the Glass Ceiling* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 82.

on their future employment prospects, which are already at a disadvantage due to unequal hiring practices and pay.

Research has shown that gender inequality has already contributed to China's shrinking labour force and decreased productivity which could hamper China's economic growth. Additionally, the normalisation of gender inequality hinders social development, particularly in rural China where domestic violence is more prevalent. More importantly, gender inequality poses a challenge to China's rise due to the cyclical nature that women find it hard to break out of.

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