

Research on the Impact of Gender Role Perceptions on Women's Educational Opportunities in Urban and Rural China

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of gender role perceptions on women's educational opportunities in urban and rural China, focusing on how socio-cultural, familial, societal, and personal factors contribute to educational disparities. Through a comprehensive review of existing research, the study tests three hypotheses: (H1) perceptions of gender roles in urban areas correlate with higher educational attainment among women compared to rural areas; (H2) exposure to progressive media positively influences educational ambitions across both urban and rural contexts; and (H3) increased access to technology narrows the gender gap in education between urban and rural women. The findings underscore the persistence of traditional gender norms in rural areas, which hinder women's educational progress, while urban areas benefit from more progressive views that support higher educational attainment. The study also highlights the significant role of media and technology in challenging traditional gender norms and promoting educational equality. By addressing these factors, policymakers and educators can develop targeted strategies to reduce educational disparities and foster gender equality in both urban and rural China.

Keywords: Gender roles, urban and rural China, traditional norms, women's education, patriarchy.

1. Introduction

The evolution of gender roles in women's education in China reflects a significant journey toward equality. Historically, patriarchal norms severely restricted educational opportunities for women, leading to widespread illiteracy among women in ancient China. However, the 19th century marked a turning point with increased East-West interactions, which facilitated the establishment of schools and missionary girls' schools dedicated to female education [1]. The 20th century furthered this progress with the establishment of girls' schools and significant reforms following the 1911 Revolution, ultimately leading to the legal affirmation of women's educational rights [2]. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was rapid development in women's education, though 90% of women were still illiterate at that time [3]. The post-1978 economic reforms sparked considerable advancements, particularly in higher education. By 2020, the female illiteracy rate had decreased to 4.1% [4]. Educational statistics reveal a significant shift: only 23% of primary school students were girls in 1949, a figure that rose to over 46% by the 2000s, nearing parity with

boys [5]. In secondary education, girls represented 46.7% of middle school students in 2002 and 50.4% in tertiary institutions by 2020 [6]. Higher education saw a dramatic increase from 24.1% female college students in 1978 to over 52% by 2015, with female postgraduate students reaching 50.9% in 2020 [7]. (comment: all blue highlighted sections are from the same source, source 3).

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Socio-cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping gender roles and exert great impact on women. Traditional son preference in rural areas continues to result in lower average schooling years and educational attainment for women compared to their counterparts in developed countries [8]. Wang Xiaojie investigates the persistence of son preference in rural China, showing that this cultural norm leads to disparities in educational investment between boys and girls. While traditional preferences for boys over girls in education are still prevalent in rural western China, ongoing social and economic development is expected to mitigate these issues over time [9]. This study also outlines the effects of parental education levels on these cultural norms, finding that more educated parents have higher tendencies to invest equally in their daughter's education. Rising education levels are also contributing to delayed marriage and childbearing, affecting demographic trends [9].

The purpose of this study is to understand the factors shaping educational disparities and to provide insights for policymakers and educators to address these inequalities. This will be achieved through a comprehensive review of research exploring the impact of gender role perceptions on women's access to education in both urban and rural areas of China. The method is also applied to prove three hypotheses demonstrated as follows. To prove the first hypothesis (H1), the study will synthesize findings from previous research comparing educational attainment levels between urban and rural women, focusing on how gender role perceptions in each setting contribute to these differences. For the second hypothesis (H2), the study will examine existing literature on the impact of exposure to progressive media on women's educational ambitions across both urban and rural contexts. Finally, to support the third hypothesis (H3), the study will review studies that analyze how increased access to technology has influenced the gender gap in education between urban and rural women. Through this research-based approach, the study will provide a detailed understanding of the factors shaping educational disparities and offer insights for policymakers and educators on addressing these inequalities.

The study highlights the importance of ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in education, particularly through policies and initiatives that challenge traditional gender norms and expand access to educational resources in rural areas. By fostering progressive gender role perceptions and leveraging the power of media and technology, there is potential to further close the educational gap between urban and rural women in China.

H1: Perceptions of gender roles in urban areas will correlate with higher educational attainment among women compared to perceptions in rural areas [10].

H2: Exposure to progressive media will positively influence women's educational ambitions, regardless of urban or rural residence [11].

H3: Increased access to technology will narrow the gender gap in education between urban and rural women [12].

2. Gender Role Perceptions in Various Aspects of Chinese Society

2.1. Cultural

The concept of gender is central to Chinese philosophy, rooted in the interplay of yin and yang, which represent complementary forces such as "dark and light" and "female and male." These ideas, originating from the Hundred Schools of Thought (c. 500s-200s B.C.E.), have significantly shaped cultural gender roles in China. Confucianism often highlights the dominant, male-associated yang,

while Daoism, especially through Laozi, appreciates the subordinate, female-associated yin. Despite their differing views, both traditions see yin and yang as interdependent and complementary. The modern Chinese term for gender, embodies this understanding, referring to physiological differences that underpin social identities. These philosophical traditions provide valuable perspectives for contemporary feminist thought, though they must be applied with caution [13].

2.2. Familial

Educational equality remains a significant issue in China, despite numerous government policies aimed at balancing educational opportunities, such as expanding higher education and implementing compulsory education. While access to primary education is nearly universal and male and female enrollment in higher education is almost equal, disparities persist between urban and rural areas. In rural regions, women have fewer educational opportunities than men. Wang argues that academic performance is not the primary reason for this disparity; instead, factors such as parents' educational levels, the number of siblings, and family economic conditions play a crucial role. Rural families often have lower parental education levels, more children, and poorer economic conditions, contributing to the gender gap in education. Wang comments that future research should explore children's attitudes toward education to better understand the motivations and barriers influencing their educational pursuits [10].

2.3. Societal

Traditional gender roles significantly lower women's earnings but have no notable effect on men's incomes. The Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition shows that these attitudes contribute to the gender income gap through differences in educational attainment, labor force participation, working hours, and occupational status. Despite modernization, traditional gender attitudes, especially among men, remain prevalent. Men earn about 32.4% more than women on average, and women's labor force participation rate is significantly lower at 75.7%, compared to 94.9% for men. Women also work fewer hours weekly but hold slightly higher occupational statuses. While women's education levels are improving, they still lag behind men. This indicates that societal gender roles in China expect women to be less active in the workforce and more focused on traditional roles, despite some progress toward equality [14].

2.4. Personal

While students generally hold progressive views on gender roles, there are personal differences. Girls often aspire to greater equality in social status and resource sharing but may also support traditional notions of submissiveness in sexual interactions more than boys. Traditional gender roles, although gradually changing, still impact how individuals personally perceive and respond to non-consensual sexual contact (NCS). For example, girls with more traditional gender-role attitudes were more vulnerable to physical NCS. These findings emphasise the need to address these personal attitudes and enhance education on NCS to better support both men and women in navigating gender roles and preventing risky situations [15].

3. Analysis

3.1. Correlation Between Gender Role Perceptions and Educational Attainment

Gender roles, deeply rooted in cultural and social norms, play a crucial role in shaping educational opportunities for women across different regions in China. Perceptions of gender roles in urban areas correlate with higher educational attainment among women compared to perceptions in rural areas.

Urban areas, characterized by more progressive views on gender, tend to offer women greater educational opportunities and higher levels of academic success. In contrast, traditional gender role perceptions in rural areas continue to restrict women's educational opportunities, leading to a persistent gender gap in education.

3.1.1. Urban Areas and Progressive Gender Role Perceptions

In urban areas, the perception of gender roles has shifted significantly over the past few decades, largely due to economic development, modernization, and increased exposure to global cultural norms. Deng et al. conducted a study in Beijing and Shanghai, revealing that urban women are more likely to reject traditional gender roles that confine women to domestic responsibilities [16]. Instead, these women are encouraged to pursue higher education and professional careers. The study found that urban women with more egalitarian views on gender are not only more likely to attend university but also to pursue postgraduate education. These progressive gender role perceptions are linked to higher levels of educational attainment, as women in urban areas face fewer social barriers to pursuing their academic and career goals.

A similar study by Chen and Wang examined the impact of gender role perceptions on educational aspirations among high school girls in Guangzhou [17]. The researchers found that students who perceived gender roles as flexible and non-restrictive were more likely to aim for higher education and professional careers compared to their peers with more traditional views. It highlighted the role of urban environments in fostering progressive gender norms, which, in turn, correlate with higher educational attainment for women.

3.1.2. Rural Areas and Traditional Gender Role Perceptions

In contrast, rural areas in China are often characterized by more traditional gender role perceptions, which can significantly hinder women's educational opportunities. Li et al. studied the educational experiences of rural women in Shaanxi province and found that traditional views, which prioritize male education and see women primarily as caregivers, remain prevalent [18]. These gender role perceptions contribute to lower educational attainment among rural women, who are often encouraged to marry and assume domestic roles at a young age rather than pursue higher education. The study found that rural women who internalized these traditional gender roles were less likely to complete secondary education and much less likely to attend university.

Moreover, Huang and Zhang conducted research in rural Sichuan, revealing that parents' perceptions of gender roles significantly influence their daughters' educational paths [19]. The study found that in families where traditional gender roles were strongly upheld, girls were often discouraged from continuing their education beyond middle school. These findings indicate that the persistence of traditional gender roles in rural areas is a key factor contributing to the gender gap in educational attainment.

3.1.3. Cross-Regional Comparisons

Comparative studies further illustrate the stark differences in educational outcomes between urban and rural women, driven by contrasting gender role perceptions. A comprehensive analysis by Wu and Xie compared educational attainment levels between women in urban and rural areas across multiple provinces [20]. The study found that urban women, benefiting from more progressive gender norms, had significantly higher rates of university enrollment and completion compared to their rural counterparts. The researchers attributed this disparity to the more restrictive gender role perceptions prevalent in rural areas, which limit women's educational and professional aspirations.

3.2. The Influence of Media on Women's Educational Ambitions

Exposure to progressive media is instrumental in shaping women's educational ambitions across both urban and rural regions in China. Media serves as a powerful tool for challenging and reshaping gender roles. Platforms such as television, the Internet, and social media play a pivotal role in presenting diverse models of successful, educated women, challenging entrenched gender norms, and inspiring them to pursue higher education. Media has the potential to bridge the educational gap between urban and rural women by providing the motivation and resources needed to overcome traditional barriers and pursue academic and professional success. Media exposure positively correlates with women's educational aspirations, broadening their worldview and offering access to information that may not be readily available in their immediate environment.

3.2.1. Impact of Media in Urban Areas

In urban China, where media access is more widespread, exposure to progressive media significantly influences women's educational goals. Li and Wang conducted a study on female university students in Beijing, finding that those who frequently engaged with media portraying women in empowered roles were more likely to pursue advanced degrees and leadership positions [21]. It highlighted that media exposure not only provided role models but also offered a sense of possibility and ambition beyond traditional domestic roles.

Similarly, Wu et al. investigated the relationship between media consumption and educational aspirations among high school girls in Shanghai [22]. The study revealed that girls who regularly consumed media content that featured strong, independent women were more likely to express ambitions to attend prestigious universities and enter competitive fields traditionally dominated by men. This suggests that media exerts great influence on redefining gender roles and expanding educational ambitions in urban settings.

3.2.2. Media's Role in Rural Areas

In rural China, where traditional gender roles are more deeply ingrained, the influence of media is even more pronounced. A study by Zhang and Liu explored the impact of media on girls' educational aspirations in rural Sichuan [23]. The researchers found that exposure to television programs and online content featuring successful women in various professions significantly increased the likelihood that these girls would aspire to continue their education beyond secondary school. It noted that media served as a critical counter-narrative to the traditional expectations of early marriage and domesticity, offering alternative pathways for young women.

Another supporting example is the research conducted by Chen et al. to learn the impact of social media on educational aspirations among rural girls in Guangxi province [24]. Social media platforms, particularly those focused on education and career development, provided rural girls with access to networks of like-minded individuals and information about educational opportunities. This exposure not only motivated them to pursue higher education but also equipped them with the knowledge and resources to navigate the application processes for universities, scholarships, and internships.

3.2.3. Cross-Regional Comparisons

A cross-regional study by Huang compared the influence of media on women's educational ambitions in both urban and rural areas of China [25]. While the overall impact of media was positive across both settings, the effect was more transformative in rural areas. This is because rural women typically have fewer role models and less access to information about educational opportunities, making media a vital source of inspiration and guidance. Rural women regularly exposed to progressive media were

not only more likely to pursue higher education but also more willing to challenge traditional gender norms within their communities.

3.3. The Role of Technology in Narrowing the Gender Gap in Education

Increased access to technology has been identified as a key factor in narrowing the gender gap in education between urban and rural women in China. Technology, particularly the internet and mobile devices, has revolutionized access to educational resources, enabling women in remote and underserved areas to engage in learning opportunities that were previously out of reach due to geographical and economic constraints. Technology is a powerful tool for promoting gender equality in education, offering new opportunities for learning and personal development that transcend geographical and economic limitations. Du et al. underscore the democratizing effect of technology on education, highlighting its role in bridging the urban-rural divide by providing rural women with access to online courses, educational materials, and information that can enhance their academic and professional prospects [26].

3.3.1. Impact of Technology in Urban Areas

In urban regions, where technological infrastructure is more developed, the impact of technology on women's education has been profound. A study by Zhao and Li on female university students in Beijing found that access to digital learning platforms significantly improved educational outcomes, particularly in STEM fields [27]. Urban women who frequently utilize online resources have higher tendencies to achieve higher academic performance and pursue advanced degrees in technology-related fields. Thus, technology not only supports educational attainment but also encourages women to enter traditionally male-dominated disciplines.

Additionally, Wang et al. examined the role of technology in promoting lifelong learning among urban women in Shanghai [28]. The study found that access to online courses and professional development platforms allowed women to continuously upgrade their skills and knowledge, contributing to greater career advancement and economic independence. This underscores the role of technology as a tool for both academic education and professional empowerment.

3.3.2. Technology's Role in Rural Areas

In rural areas with limited educational resources, technology plays an even more critical role in levelling the playing field. Research by Liu and Chen on rural women in Gansu province demonstrated that access to mobile learning applications significantly improved literacy rates and educational attainment among adult women [29]. The study found that rural women who regularly used these applications were apt to complete secondary education and consider further studies, despite the challenges posed by traditional gender roles and economic hardship.

Besides, a study by Sun et al. focused on the impact of internet access on the educational ambitions of girls in rural Yunnan [30]. The researchers found that access to online educational content and virtual classrooms significantly increased the likelihood that these girls would aspire to attend university. The study noted that technology provided rural girls with a sense of connectedness to the broader world, reducing feelings of isolation and reinforcing the importance of education as a means of social mobility.

3.3.3. Cross-Regional Comparisons

A comprehensive study by Zhang compared the role of technology in reducing the gender education gap in both urban and rural areas of China. The study found that while technology positively

influenced educational outcomes for women across all regions, its impact was particularly transformative in rural areas. The study highlighted that rural women who gained access to the internet and digital learning tools preferred to pursue higher education and engaged in self-directed learning, beneficial to narrowing the gender gap in educational achievements.

Ultimately, the evidence provided strongly supports the hypothesis that increased access to technology is instrumental in narrowing the gender gap in education between urban and rural women in China. Offering access to educational resources, online courses, and collaborative networks, technology empowers women—particularly those in rural areas—to overcome traditional barriers and pursue higher education. Technology is a powerful tool for promoting gender equality in education, creating new opportunities for learning and personal development that transcend geographical and economic limitations [31].

4. Conclusion

This study has explored the complex interplay between gender role perceptions and women's educational opportunities in urban and rural China. The research findings indicate that urban environments, characterized by more progressive gender norms, offer women greater educational opportunities and higher levels of attainment. In contrast, rural areas, where traditional gender roles are more entrenched, continue to limit women's access to education. Moreover, the influence of media and technology emerges as a critical factor in shaping women's educational ambitions and narrowing the gender gap. Progressive media serves as a powerful tool in challenging traditional gender norms and inspiring women across both urban and rural regions to pursue higher education. Similarly, increased access to technology has been instrumental in bridging the urban-rural divide by providing rural women with access to educational resources and opportunities that were previously out of reach. Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Traditional son preference and gender role expectations in rural areas continue to hinder women's educational achievements, underscoring the need for targeted interventions that address these deeply ingrained cultural norms. Additionally, while media and technology have the potential to narrow the gender gap, their impact is contingent on broader access and awareness, particularly in underserved regions.

It is important to note that this paper has analyzed the proposed hypotheses through a literature review and has not conducted empirical social research. Future research should focus on intersectional approaches that consider how factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and disability intersect with gender to impact educational opportunities. Such research will be crucial in developing more nuanced and effective strategies for promoting gender equality in education across diverse contexts in China.

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