

The Dilemma and Countermeasures of Chinese Women in Educational Equity

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Abstract: Educational equity remains a critical issue in China, particularly concerning gender disparities that persist despite significant socio-economic development. This paper examines the multifaceted challenges Chinese women face in achieving educational equity. Through an extensive review and analysis of relevant data, literature, and observations, it elucidates the profound impact of gender inequity on access to educational resources, the influence of traditional cultural norms, and the persistent disparities in academic opportunities. The study identifies a significant gap between men and women in both educational attainment and subject choice, attributing these disparities to socio-economic imbalances, cultural inertia, and deficiencies in educational policies. It argues that addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including targeted government interventions, policy reforms, and increased public awareness. By fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment, these measures can help bridge the gender gap and promote broader social progress.

Keywords: Chinese Women, Educational Equity, Gender Equity

1. Introduction

Educational equity is not only a vital foundation for social equity, but also a key element for individual development and social progress. A quality and fair education system can provide equal opportunities for all members of society, promote social mobility, and ultimately promote the long-term development of the country. In recent years, with the continuous development of China's education cause, by 2023, the gross enrollment rate of preschool education in China had reached 91.1%, the retention rate of nine-year compulsory education had reached 95.7%, and the gross enrollment rate of higher education had reached 60.2%. The overall situation of female education has been greatly improved. However, it is undeniable that in some regions and social groups in China, women still face many challenges in terms of access to education, quality of education, and subsequent career development. For example, in some remote areas, women's access to education still lags behind that of men. Some families are affected by traditional ideas and pay less attention to female education. It is of great significance to study the inequity of female education. This paper makes an in-depth and specific study of the problems faced by women in educational equity. Through in-depth study of the current situation, the essence and root causes of the problems can be more clearly understood, and the basis for formulating targeted policies and measures can be provided, so as to promote educational equity more effectively, improve the situation of women, and promote the overall development of society.

2. Problems faced by Chinese women in education equity

2.1. Gender differences in resource access in the educational process

2.1.1. Unequal enrollment opportunities

Education plays a pivotal role in personal development, career advancement, and social mobility, significantly influencing an individual's future prospects, employment opportunities, income levels, and socioeconomic status. In recent years, China has implemented various measures to promote educational equity, such as enforcing compulsory education, enacting relevant laws and regulations, and increasing investment in education in impoverished regions. However, due to limited economic and educational resources, many families' investments in their children's education remain influenced by gender biases. In particular, in less developed rural areas, families are more likely to prioritize educational opportunities for boys over girls, who may face greater barriers to school enrollment. This gender bias is deeply rooted in the traditional belief that "men manage external affairs while women manage household matters," which posits that men are better suited to assume economic responsibilities after receiving education, whereas women ultimately return to the family to care for their husbands and children. This traditional division of labor results in lower expectations for returns on investment in girls' education, leading to reluctance in providing them with more educational opportunities and resources.

Research indicates that with economic development, parents' enthusiasm for their children's education, especially higher education, has significantly increased. Over 90% of parents across urban and rural areas aspire for their children to receive university education, regardless of gender. However, gender disparities emerge when considering whether a child should repeat a grade if they fail. In urban areas, 71% and 79% of parents, respectively, would not insist that girls repeat a grade, citing limited potential and benefits. In rural areas, this proportion rises to approximately 95%, with most parents believing that girls should not repeat grades. Conversely, for boys, both urban and rural parents generally support repeating grades, believing that failing to do so could hinder their future development [1].

Despite overall improvements in access to education, traditional social concepts continue to influence the distribution of educational resources between genders, resulting in potential inequities at the outset of education. This is evident not only in the lower priority given to girls' educational opportunities in rural areas but also in the conservative attitudes of urban parents towards girls repeating grades. Therefore, although today's parents generally value higher education for their children, gender-based educational inequities persist. Policies and society must collaborate to ensure equal educational opportunities for all, irrespective of gender.

2.1.2. Gender bias in subject selection

There has long been a clear gender differentiation in subject selection, with girls tending towards liberal arts and boys towards science. Most girls prefer to choose subjects like politics and history, while fewer venture into fields such as physics and chemistry. This phenomenon is mainly influenced by the following factors:

Firstly, the impact of gender stereotypes. Traditional beliefs hold that girls are better at memory, language expression, and emotional thinking, but not at calculation, while boys are more adept at logical reasoning and spatial imagination. Thus, the stereotype that "girls are better suited for liberal arts and boys for science" has persisted for a long time. This notion is constantly reinforced at the family, school, and societal levels, guiding girls' subject choices rather than being based solely on personal interest or ability. Secondly, during the middle school years, some teachers unconsciously reinforce gender stereotypes in their teaching. For instance, when female students excel in liberal arts,

they often receive more encouragement, not because of their personal interest but due to the teachers' so-called "teaching experience" that is tinged with gender stereotypes. When they encounter difficulties in science, teachers may more readily suggest they switch to liberal arts rather than encourage them to persist in science. This subtle guidance can affect students' confidence and subject choices to a certain extent. Additionally, textbook content is a significant factor influencing students' subject choices. The differences in professional choices are mainly influenced by traditional expectations of social division of labor. During the learning process, textbooks are the primary carriers of traditional social expectations. For example, an analysis of Chinese textbooks found that in the 1998 edition, the proportion of male and female characters was significantly different, with male characters often described from a societal perspective, while female characters were more associated with family or emotions. In the 2003 edition, male characters still dominated, and discussions about them were more from a societal angle, while female characters were more about personal significance and value. The distribution of male and female roles still had a strong "men outside, women inside" flavor. Cui Chong et al.'s empirical study on the gender roles in the 2017 Ministry of Education-compiled textbooks also found similar situations. Similar conclusions were drawn from studies on other liberal arts-oriented subject textbooks, such as English textbooks. Although there are fewer studies on science-oriented subject textbooks, research shows that similar situations exist [2]. This reflects the distinct shaping of representative male and female images in terms of social division of labor in textbooks, and the concepts imparted also have significant differences, which have a notable impact on women's values, worldviews, and future career choices, being a major reason why girls' professional choices are concentrated in fields like education, nursing, and other areas that focus on "caring for others" or require emotional abilities.

This gender bias directly affects women's professional choices in higher education. According to statistics, in the distribution of higher education majors, women tend to choose fields such as humanities, education, art, and medicine. For example, the proportion of female students in liberal arts majors usually exceeds 30%, and in education majors, it is even higher, reaching over 50%, while in agriculture, forestry, and science and engineering majors, the proportion remains relatively low [3]. Taking the freshmen of Tsinghua University in 2010 as an example, the proportion of male students in engineering disciplines such as automotive, civil engineering, materials, water conservancy, and electronics was much higher than that of female students, reaching 82.8%, 78.3%, 71.9%, 77.4%, and 77.8% respectively [4]. This gender bias in subject selection is not merely a reflection of personal interest but is influenced by multiple factors such as social expectations, educational guidance, and textbook content. The consequences are not only reflected in the choice of majors at the higher education stage, but also extend further to career development, resulting in a persistently low proportion of women in high-paying industries such as science and engineering, which has affected the improvement of their socio-economic status.

2.2. Gender disparities in educational outcomes

2.2.1. Inequity in employment opportunities

Under the same educational qualifications, men and women should have equal employment opportunities. However, the reality shows that women often face greater challenges in job hunting, especially when encountering gender discrimination. Despite the gradual popularization of gender equity concepts in recent years, the job market still generally favors men, who are in a more advantageous position in terms of obtaining job opportunities and promotion prospects. Research data indicates that, under the same conditions, the employment opportunities for female university graduates are only 87.7% of those for male graduates [5].

Furthermore, even when women enhance their educational qualifications through further studies, they still find it difficult to avoid gender discrimination in the job search process. The "Anti-Gender Discrimination in the Chinese Workplace" survey report released by the Women's Legal Research and Service Center of Peking University Law School in June 2009 shows that women with high school education or above and those with a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely to encounter gender discrimination in job hunting compared to women at other educational levels. Among them, women with a postgraduate degree or higher have the highest rate of being rejected for employment, reaching 19.2%, meaning that on average, one out of every five women with a postgraduate degree or higher has been rejected for employment due to gender reasons [6]. This phenomenon reflects that despite women enhancing their competitiveness through higher education, gender bias still places them at a disadvantage in the job market.

2.2.2. Gender gap in employment income

Even after successfully entering the workplace, women still face various forms of unequal treatment related to gender discrimination, with one of the most significant issues being the gender pay gap. The "2009 China College Graduates Employment Report" shows that even in fields where female graduates have an advantage, male graduates still earn higher salaries, indicating that salary discrimination is still widespread. Data shows that among the 2008 graduates, in the same educational level and major, the maximum monthly income gap between male and female graduates was nearly 800 yuan. This indicates that even when women have the same educational level, professional background, and work experience as men, there is still a significant gender gap in salary treatment.

Traditional expectations for women's childbearing are also an important factor contributing to gender inequity in employment. The "Anti-Gender Discrimination in the Chinese Workplace" survey results show that during pregnancy, maternity leave, and breastfeeding periods, 20.9% of female employees were forcibly transferred to different positions or had their salaries reduced, and 11.2% were forcibly dismissed [7]. Due to employers' concerns that women's family responsibilities may affect work efficiency, many women are pre-assumed to be "high-risk" employees who will be affected by childbirth in terms of job stability during the job search process. This implicit discrimination further restricts women's career development space.

In addition, studies show that family care responsibilities are closely related to women's employment status. When women take on responsibilities such as child-rearing and caring for elderly parents, their career development is often restricted. The dual responsibilities of population reproduction and social reproduction, as well as the resulting role conflicts, are significant factors that restrict women's employment [8]. This places many women at a relatively disadvantaged position in workplace competition, not only affecting salary growth but also limiting their career advancement opportunities.

Overall, women who enter the workplace after graduation still face multiple challenges brought about by gender inequity, and their legitimate rights and interests have not been fully protected in employment.

3. Social roots of gender inequity in education

3.1. Historical and cultural influences of traditional thought

China has a long history of feudalism, and one of the characteristics of the feudal system is the social structure of male superiority and female inferiority. In agricultural societies, men gradually gained the upper hand in social development due to their physical advantages and became the masters of women in their families, thus forming a social division of labor pattern where "men work outside and women manage the household". This division of labor strengthened the gender hierarchy, and in the

distribution of social resources, men usually held a priority position while women were in a subordinate position [9]. Under the dominance of patriarchy, women's rights to education and work were long restricted, making it difficult for them to become independent social individuals. Historically, women gained the right to education much later than men. It was not until February 1920 that Peking University first admitted three female students, Wang Lan, Xi Zhen, and Zha Xiaoyuan, as auditors, becoming the first public university in China to implement coeducation [10]. Women began to have the initial opportunity to receive education on par with men, but they still could not escape the background of a patriarchal society. Even today, although the People's Republic of China has gradually improved relevant legislation to ensure women's right to education, in the practical social level, many women still lower their willingness to receive education due to the deep-rooted imprint of gender inequity left by thousands of years of traditional gender culture in people's consciousness.

3.2. The impact of family education

In traditional social concepts, women have long been regarded as the appendages of men, with their main responsibilities being giving birth to children, taking care of their husbands and children, and looking after the elderly. Therefore, they did not need to receive much education. Wu Yu's research pointed out that "patriarchal culture follows traditional gender role divisions and has direct or indirect gender discrimination factors. Therefore, parents are willing to invest educational resources in their sons. Additionally, women who grow up in a patriarchal culture may, to varying degrees, position themselves according to traditional female roles during the process of socialization and voluntarily give up educational opportunities to participate in the family's economic life earlier" [11]. Therefore, when educational resources are limited and need to be allocated within the family, they are mostly given to men. Families may even go into debt to support their sons' education, using all their resources, while they may simply give up on their daughters. Under the traditional social division of labor, getting married and having children is considered the "natural duty" of women. Under such family concepts, women's right to education is often compromised.

3.3. The impact of social economy

Gender differences in the labor market are also an important factor leading to gender inequity in educational investment within families. Wu Zhongzhe's research results show that gender inequity in the Chinese labor market is significant, and compared with other countries, this gap is expanding. Shen Xiaomei et al., based on the data from the "Survey on Job Hunting and Work Ability of Chinese University Graduates" in Shandong Province in 2008, examined the employment and wage status of college graduates six months after graduation. The results indicated that female college graduates faced dual discrimination in employment opportunities and wages six months after graduation. In this context, Becker's neoclassical family model well explains the issue of gender discrimination in education. The neoclassical family model states that in the process of optimizing the family as a unit, parents have an optimal level of educational investment for each child, such that the net present value of the expected educational returns equals the educational costs borne by the family. Due to gender discrimination in the labor market, families will inevitably invest more resources in their sons' education.

Therefore, in the context of gender inequity in the labor market, families, out of economic rationality, have significant differences in educational investment for male and female children, further exacerbating gender inequity in education. This phenomenon forms an "economic-social" cycle, resulting in lower educational levels, weaker employment competitiveness, and lower income

levels for women. Ultimately, this further weakens families' willingness to invest in women's education, leading to the long-term continuation of gender inequity.

4. Countermeasures to improve gender inequity in education

Effectively addressing gender inequity in education requires collaboration between the government, society, and the education system to promote equal opportunities for women.

The government plays a crucial role in ensuring gender equity through policy improvements, supervision, and legal enforcement. It should integrate girls' enrollment into universal compulsory education, provide financial support such as educational subsidies, and implement preferential admission and employment policies for women. Special attention should be given to increasing investment in female education, particularly in poverty-stricken areas, to eliminate barriers like school dropout rates. Additionally, legal frameworks such as *the Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law* and the Education Law should be strictly enforced to safeguard women's educational rights.

Society must foster a culture that values female education by leveraging media and public campaigns to highlight successful cases and positive impacts. Promoting gender equity through awareness programs, cultural activities, and community engagement—such as women's reading clubs and mentorship programs—can challenge stereotypes and encourage social support for women's education. Reducing gender bias requires collective efforts to eliminate discrimination and promote equal opportunities in all sectors.

Education system reforms are essential in promoting gender-inclusive learning environments. Curriculum content should be optimized by incorporating female role models and case studies, particularly in STEM fields, to encourage diverse academic interests. Schools should provide guidance and support to female students in traditionally male-dominated disciplines. Increasing the proportion of female educators in leadership roles and providing gender equity training for teachers will help create an inclusive atmosphere that empowers women to pursue their academic and career aspirations.

Through coordinated efforts, gender inequity in education can be effectively addressed, fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

5. Conclusion

Despite the significant progress in Chinese women's education, gender inequity remains a pressing issue. The persistent disparities in access to educational resources, subject selection, and employment opportunities highlight the deep-rooted influence of traditional gender norms and socio-economic factors. Many families still prioritize boys' education, reinforcing gender biases from an early age. Furthermore, women face systemic challenges in the labor market, including limited job opportunities, wage gaps, and the burden of social expectations related to childbearing.

Addressing these inequities requires a comprehensive approach involving government policies, societal advocacy, and educational reforms. The government should strengthen legal protections, increase investment in women's education—especially in underprivileged areas—and ensure equal opportunities for female students. Public awareness campaigns should challenge gender stereotypes and promote the value of women's education. The education system must also integrate gender equity topics into curricula, improve the representation of women in leadership positions, and provide training for educators to foster an inclusive learning environment.

Achieving true educational equity for women demands a collective effort from all sectors of society. By addressing the structural barriers and transforming societal attitudes, China can create a

more just and equitable education system, ultimately contributing to the broader empowerment of women.

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