



Study on Access to Education and Gender Differences in Social Transformation

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Abstract. This paper discusses the change of educational attainment and gender difference in the process of social transformation in China. By analyzing the changes in socio-economic, cultural and policy levels, this paper discusses the differences in gender performance in education acquisition at different stages. Studies have shown that while gender disparities have generally narrowed, gender inequalities persist and present complexity in certain contexts, influenced by urban-rural differences, cultural perceptions and economic factors.

Keywords: Social transformation, access to education, gender differences, cultural perceptions, policy implications

1 Introduction

Social transformation, especially the evolution from agricultural society to industrial society and then to information society, not only changed the economic structure, but also profoundly affected the lifestyles and values of all levels of society. In this process, education has become an important tool for promoting social mobility. However, gender inequality in access to education remains widespread, affecting access to education for different gender groups. In the context of China's social transformation, this paper explores the performance of gender differences in education acquisition and analyzes the root causes of these differences.

1.1 Theory Framework

Social transformation involves not only economic and technological development, but also changes in culture, values and social structures. As China transitions from a planned economy to a market economy, and urban-rural integration advances, gender roles and gender division of labour have also been adjusted. Traditionally, men have been given higher social status, while women have a secondary role in the family. However, the modernization process provided an opportunity for women to strive for a more equal social status.

1.2 Theory of Gender Differences in Access to Education

Gender differences in access to education are reflected in many aspects, including enrolment rates, completion rates, academic performance and subject choice. Although gender equality has been promoted at the policy level, in reality, cultural perceptions and economic conditions still constrain women's access to education. Gender differences between social strata and regions present their own characteristics.

2 Changes in Access to Education in the Context of Social Transformation

2.1 Changes at the Policy Level

Since the reform and opening up, the Chinese government has gradually introduced a number of education policies, emphasizing education equity and gender equality. For example, the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates that men and women enjoy the same right to compulsory education, and implements an education subsidy policy for poor areas. However, the effectiveness of policies varies depending on the level of economic development and cultural background of the region. In developed regions, policies have promoted equal access to education for women and men, while in less developed regions, gender disparities remain more pronounced.

2.2 Changes in Economic Structure

With the transformation of economic structure, industrial upgrading and urbanization accelerating, the demand for high-quality labor in society has increased, and women have gradually occupied a more important position in the labor market. This change has contributed to the improvement of women's access to education, especially at the tertiary level, where female enrolment rates are increasing. However, in the job market, gender division still exists, women are mostly concentrated in traditional "female-dominated" fields such as education, health care, and services, while engineering and science are still dominated by men.

2.3 Changes in Culture and Attitudes

Although the gender perspective tends to be equal in urban areas, the traditional concept of "male-dominated and female-dominated" is still deeply rooted in rural areas and some ethnic minority areas. This perception has a direct impact on the family's choice of investment in the education of boys and girls. Particularly in families with limited economic conditions, girls' education is often sacrificed as a priority. This perception manifests regional differences in social transformation, with gender perspectives and educational investment priorities varying between north and south, urban and rural areas.

3 Empirical Analysis: Gender Differences in Access to Education

In this section, we analyse in detail the performance of gender differences at all stages of education through specific data and cases. The analysis covers basic education, higher education, and urban-rural and regional differences.

3.1 Gender Differences in Basic Education

Gender disparities in the basic education stage are mainly reflected in enrolment rates, dropout rates, academic performance and the allocation of educational resources. Specifically, it is as follows:

Gender differences in enrolment and dropout rates

According to the "China Education Statistics Yearbook" data, in 2020, the national primary school enrollment rate has reached nearly 100%, and the enrollment rate of boys and girls in the middle school stage is basically the same, exceeding 98%. However, in some poor areas, especially in remote western areas, the drop-out rate of girls at the lower secondary level is still higher than that of boys. For example, in some rural areas of Linxia State, Gansu Province, the drop-out rate for girls at the lower secondary level was 15 per cent, compared with 8 per cent for boys, owing to family financial difficulties and the preference for boys. Parents in these areas tend to prefer boys to continue their education, while girls are required to undertake household chores or marry early to ease the burden on their families.

Gender differences in academic performance

According to the results of a province's 2021 midterm examination, the average score of girls in language and English subjects is generally higher than that of boys, with 6 and 8 points higher, respectively. However, in mathematics and physics, the average score of boys is three to five points higher than that of girls. This difference reflects the differentiation of gender in disciplines, and also shows the adverse effects of the grading system of scientific tendencies on girls in the entrance examination.

Gender differences in the allocation of resources to education

In some ethnic minority villages in southwestern China, educational resources are mainly focused on boys because of the widespread belief that girls do not need higher education. In a village in Guizhou Province, for example, three of the five primary schools in the village belong to "village schools", with poor teaching facilities, mostly girls, while boys are sent to better-off town or county schools. This inequality in resource allocation not only affects girls' academic performance, but also reduces their chances of continuing their studies.

3.2 Gender Differences in Tertiary Education

Gender disparities in tertiary education focus on enrolment rates, subject selection and academic performance, particularly in traditional "male dominated" areas such as engineering and science.

Gender differences in enrolment rates

According to the 2022 China Higher Education Statistics Bulletin, women account for 54.6 percent of undergraduates nationwide, and more than 55 percent of undergraduates at key universities such as Peking University and Fudan University. However, women are significantly underrepresented in engineering. For example, only 13.5% of freshmen majoring in mechanical engineering at Tsinghua University in 2021 are women. This phenomenon shows that, despite the predominance of women in overall enrolment, gender disparities remain significant in certain professional areas.

Gender differentiation in subject choice

According to the Ministry of Education 's National General University Admission Scheme Summary, women account for more than 70 per cent of literature, education and law majors, while women account for less than 20 per cent of computer science, electronic engineering and materials science. This differentiation of subject choices reflects the continuation of the gender division of labour, with girls inclined to opt for occupations considered more "feminine", while boys predominate in technical and engineering fields.

Gender differences in academic performance

In higher education, girls excel in some fields of liberal arts and social sciences. For example, women account for 65% of outstanding graduates in education, sociology and other subjects in a prestigious university in 2021. However, men continue to excel in science and engineering, especially in engineering research projects and competitions, such as the national university electronic design competition, where more than 80% of the participants are men. This difference reflects the gender impact of disciplinary background on academic research and career development.

3.3 Urban-Rural and Regional Differences

Gender differences in access to education are particularly pronounced between urban and rural areas and regions. There are big differences in education resource allocation, cultural concept and policy implementation between the developed regions of the east coast and the less developed regions of the Midwest.

Gender differences in the East and Midwest

According to the 2021 China Education Development Report, in economically developed areas along the eastern coast, such as Shanghai and Jiangsu, there is almost no significant difference in enrolment rates between boys and girls at the primary and secondary levels. However, in Yunnan, Guizhou and other central and western regions, the rate of female junior high school students is lower than that of male students by more than 10 percentage points. In some poor districts, girls enter the labour market directly after completion of junior high school or opt for early marriage and are unable to continue high school and higher education owing to underdevelopment and lack of emphasis on girls ' education.

Gender differences between rural and urban areas

Differences in access to education between urban and rural areas are particularly evident in the issue of gender equality. According to the National Rural Education

Survey, in rural areas such as Henan and Anhui, although the enrolment rate at the primary level is close to 100%, the drop-out rate for girls in the lower secondary level is about 15%, compared with 10 per cent for boys. In rural households with limited economic conditions, girls' investment in education is often prioritized and families prefer to devote limited resources to supporting boys' learning. This phenomenon is particularly evident in mountainous and remote rural areas, where rural women are disadvantaged in higher education and the job market.

4 Conclusions

4.1 The Complex Impact of Social Transformation on Gender Differences

Social transformation does contribute to some degree to the achievement of gender equality, but the process has been uneven. Cultural attitudes and economic conditions remain the main obstacles to gender equality, despite the guarantee provided at the policy level for the promotion of gender equality. In particular, in the process of social structural change, gender inequality shows dynamics and complexity.

4.2 Differences Long-Term Effects of Gender Differences in Education

Gender differences in educational attainment not only affect individual career choices, but also have a profound impact on family structure and social mobility. Because of their disadvantaged position in education and career choices, women often have difficulty accessing the same career development opportunities as men, which further exacerbates income inequality and social status disparities. Over time, this gap may also affect educational opportunities for the next generation, forming intergenerational transmission.

4.3 Prospects for the Future

With the rise of the digital economy and emerging industries, new changes will occur in educational needs and career choices. This provides an opportunity to break the traditional gender division of labour. In the future, society should pay more attention to the achievement of gender equality in emerging areas, especially in STEM, encouraging women to participate and provide more support. In addition, policymakers should further narrow regional and urban-rural disparities and ensure equitable distribution of educational resources to achieve broader gender equality.

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