An Examination of the Factors Influencing the Urban-rural Education Divide: A Case Study of Cultural Context

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Abstract. As China's per capita GDP index continues to rise, the disparity, especially the education gap between urban and rural development continuously widens, which has an adverse effect on the development of rural areas. Education in rural areas has emerged as a significant concern among the local population. The education difference between rural as well as urban regions can be attributed to various variables, with the often overlooked yet challenging-to-address influences of cultural and historical backgrounds playing a significant role. Consequently, by comparing various research data and literature in urban and rural areas of China, this paper analyzes the specific cultural and historical factors which may contribute to the urban-rural education divide and offers solutions. It is discovered that Confucian culture and the history of the Cultural Revolution are the primary causes of the disparity in education between China's urban and rural populations. At the same time, some historical policies of rural migrant workers may also cause the problem of left-behind children and hence have a negative effect on the disparity between rural and urban areas. China's economic policies, government propaganda, setting some boarding schools in cities, and certain poverty alleviation policies play a significant role in narrowing the education disparity between China's urban and rural populations. It also needs more supervision and long-term stability policies to ensure the future development of the education system in rural areas.

Keywords: Gender equality, rural and urban disparity, Confucianism.

1. Introduction

As a result of China's status as an emerging economy, the country's social and economic development has sped up in recent years, notably in the coastal cities. However, as a large agricultural country, China's rural areas are developing at a speed that is significantly slower than that of the country's urban areas. This disparity in development speeds is what's causing the problem of urban-rural inequality to become progressively more severe. This disparity in development speeds is causing China's rural areas to lag behind urban areas. According to estimates provided by the World Bank for the year 2022, China's rural population represents 36 per cent of the total population of the world; nevertheless, the gap between countryside and city regions is expanding as a result of a variety of reasons, including economics, culture, policy, and others [1]. In certain rural areas, the number of migrant labourers has expanded dramatically along with the rapid urbanisation that has taken place there. In 2017, China had a dispersed population of 244 million people, 48.9% of whom were considered to be rural migrants, according to United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) [2]. It is then followed by a plethora of educational difficulties in rural areas, such as unequal access to educational resources. In Chinese countryside regions, the total amount of teachers has declined from 3.23 million to 2.81 million starting from 2012 to 2017 [3]. This decline can be attributed to a lack of policy support as well as a comparatively high poverty rate in comparison to urban areas. In addition to this, the quality of the instructors cannot be guaranteed. According to Wang et al.'s research, the quality of educators in rural areas has fallen significantly behind that of metropolitan areas ever since the implementation of universal education [4]. For example, art lessons for children in rural areas are extremely uncommon when compared to the popularity of art, music, and other activities for children in metropolitan places such as Beijing. Furthermore, art programmes for children in rural areas are hardly taught by professional instructors. At the same time, the divide in education attainment between urban and rural areas can be exacerbated by factors such as historical

policies and cultural traditions, which have a profoundly detrimental impact. In addition, the cultural history of China spans thousands of years, which has resulted in a subtly pervasive influence on everyday life in the country that is feasible to be overlooked. Although some dross has been replaced as society advances and the government has enacted policies to regulate it, it is still difficult to eradicate, such as the bride price in rural areas. This article focuses mostly on the educational divide that consists of urban and rural areas and explains it in terms of cultural context and historical causes. It then examines these aspects in order to identify particular solutions and offers some suggestions. In the first place, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the Confucian cultural phenomenon of "respecting the elders" and "preferring boys to girls" has a detrimental effect on rural schooling. Following this, the study investigates and explores the phenomenon of the urban-rural education divide, which was generated by the Cultural Revolution, as well as the policies for migrant labour. In the latter section of the essay, several suggestions for public policy are offered in order to reduce the severity of these adverse impacts.

2. Confucianism and Gender Inequality in Education

2.1. Introduction to Confucianism and its Relationship to Sexism in Rural Areas

The subtle influence of Confucianism on people's lives is the first cause of the disparity between village and city education in Chinese cultural background. Confucianism originated in China between 551-479 B.C., evolving from the philosophical and educational ideas of Confucius. The philosophy of Confucianism, which emphasises family and social harmony, has influenced Chinese culture for thousands of years. These four virtues are revered in Confucianism: beneficence, upholding righteousness, adherence to ritual norms and propriety, and the ability to recognise equity. At the same time, "respect for elders" is an essential aspect of Chinese culture. China's politics and culture are influenced by the strict class system and patriarchy, in which it is assumed that older people are more knowledgeable and have more decision-making authority. Due to the globalisation of modern society and the high-speed development of modern technology, some of the ideas of the elderly may no longer be applicable to the younger generation. Confucianism, for instance, has a greater impact on the preference of sons over daughters in rural Chinese families, which can contribute to severe educational disparities in rural areas. According to the research of Gao, Confucianism, a millennia-old patriarchal ideology, is a major cause of gender discrimination against contemporary women and has a significant negative impact on Chinese women's marriage, education, and other aspects. The Female Training, a representative work of Confucianism, once emphasised that women should possess seven virtues, such as submission to their spouses, meekness, and devotion, and even emphasised the view that "excellent women should not possess wisdom and talent" [5]. This causes some parents to disregard the education of their daughters. According to Wang, et al., the average number of years Chinese men spent in school in 2008 was 0.879 years longer than that of Chinese women, with the gender gap in rural areas being significantly greater than in urban areas [6].

2.2. Financial Factors under the Background of Confucianism

Additionally, the economic influence of rural families under Confucianism has significantly widened the education disparity between urban and rural women. Brown and Park find that the education of children (particularly women) in rural China is proportional to the family's economic income [7]. First, there is a distinct preference for boys in China, which limits the education of rural girls due to a lack of financial resources. Wang, et al. find that the educational resources of daughters in rural families are more susceptible to the squeeze effect with each additional sibling, and the average educational level of daughters will be significantly lower than that of sons [8]. In addition, the disparity between urban and rural economic income in China exacerbates the impact of this compressing effect. According to the 2010 Gini coefficient of household consumption per capita distribution, China's Gini coefficient reached approximately 43.5, with a median of 39.2. The greater the number, the greater the severity of national income inequality [9]. China has 665 counties and

142 million persons who are considered multidimensionally poor as of 2016 [10]. This makes *caili*, which stands for bride price and has been practised in China for thousands of years, a second barrier to rural girls' access to education. As a result of societal development, bride price has become an essential factor for rural Chinese women when selecting marriage partners. Lyu & Zhang's research finds that the bride price in rural areas of China is frequently several times or even tens of times the annual income of a rural family, making it a common source of revenue for the female family [11]. Due to the Confucian culture of reverence for elders, ancient Chinese parents determined the marriages of their daughters almost exclusively. Due to the son's preference, in modern society, some rural families with both sons and daughters hope that their daughters will forego higher education and marry in order to acquire more financial resources to support their sons' education through dowry. Some households marry their daughters while they are still minors. According to sample survey data from Luo et al., the 2015 Chinese marriage rate for women aged 15 to 19 was as high as 2.4%, which had a significant impact on the educational status of women, particularly rural women [12]. In 1990, only 4.5% of rural women aged 15-24 had completed high education, compared to 33.2% of urban women of the same age. Despite a number of government-issued policies, such as the one-child policy and the 'nine-year compulsory' education law, the high school education rate of rural women in China increased to 49.2 per cent in 2015, but it remains significantly lower than that of urban women, at 80.4%.

3. Historical Influences

3.1. The Cultural Revolution

The 'Cultural Revolution' exerted a substantial influence on the educational ideologies of contemporary Chinese elders and parents within the historical context. The Cultural Revolution was a political revolution that began in 1966 and continued for nearly eleven years, during which time almost all schools were closed and teaching ceased. Simultaneously, with the cancellation of GaoKao, China's education system was on the verge of collapsing, and educational attainment throughout the nation was adversely impacted [13]. According to the survey conducted by Tan et al., the educational level and academic performance of students are clearly proportional to their parent's educational level and the importance they place on family education [14]. Although "Send-down" has an impact on rural education, it has a greater impact on the educational opportunities of students from urban intellectual families; however, the families of these intellectuals have a higher social and economic standing, and many urban students are transferred back to the city to work. With the reinstatement of the college entrance examination after this period, the majority of these urban youth could access to higher education, whereas the high cost of education once again limited the education of the elders generations in rural areas at that time, resulting in an education gap between urban and rural students between 1966 and 1976. Consequently, parents in urban and rural areas now place varying levels of importance on their children's family education [15].

3.2. Social Status of Peasants & Reform and Opening-up

In recent years, with the development of globalisation and capitalist marketization in the late period of reform and opening up, cities have more resources and development policies than rural areas, causing many migrant workers to enter the cities in search of higher wages. Due to the stereotype of farmers as "rude, uncivilised, and uncivilised" in the annals of contemporary economic development, migrant workers in China are still discriminated against. Although there has been some progress, migrant labourers in urban areas are still considered "second-class citizens" [16]. The resulting education gap between urban and rural areas is largely due to the enrollment of children of migrant labourers and the problem of children left behind. It is difficult for the children of migrant labourers to enrol in school. Since China's education resources are distributed based on household registration, even if their parents work in cities, their children have less access to school opportunities and quality education resources if they lack urban household registration. Offspring from coastal cities with more

resources are more likely to receive higher education and study abroad opportunities than offspring of migrant workers. For example, Shanghai has over 120 international schools with international accreditation, which exacerbates the urban-rural education divide [17]. Furthermore, the education of a significant proportion of children in rural areas is impeded as a result of economic challenges and limitations on available time. In 2013, the total number of left-behind children in Chinese rural areas reached 61 million, representing 22 percent of all Chinese children [18]. Based on the findings of Duan et al.'s survey and the data from the sixth national census, it is evident that the enrollment rate of left-behind children in high school is significantly low in both urban and rural areas. Specifically, the survey reveals that merely 59.4% of left-behind children in urban areas are enrolled in high school, whilst the corresponding figure for rural areas stands at a mere 23.1%. All of these factors contribute to the larger gap in education attainment rate between urban and rural areas [19].

4. Solutions

4.1. Solutions for Son Preferences

First, the most direct method is to provide financial aid for rural impoverished students' education. Sufficient financial resources empower parents residing in rural areas to provide the necessary funds for their children's future education, thereby mitigating the scarcity of resources that hinders access to schooling possibilities for daughters. In addition, economic subsidies allow students in rural areas to choose schools with improved facilities and teachers, which is positively correlated with student performance, as demonstrated by studies [20]. Second, enacting laws that rigorously regulate the bride price may be the solution to the problem of rural female marriage trafficking. Although the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China prohibits soliciting money through marriage, the government does not adequately regulate bride price in rural areas [21]. The administration must increase surveillance of bride price collection and enact more stringent laws to prohibit human trafficking and marriage trafficking. Furthermore, it is imperative to disseminate supplementary knowledge pertaining to the eradication of son preference and the introduction of a mandatory nine-year schooling programme in rural areas. According to the findings of Zhang et al., the community's educational environment has a significant effect on children's achievement [22]. The government may encourage family elders to motivate females to pursue higher education through slogans and media campaigns. Although these methods may improve the patriarchal preference in Confucian culture and the educational level of children, particularly girls, in rural areas, the development of background culture over thousands of years may not be completely eradicated in the short term, necessitating the government's long-term promotion and legalisation.

4.2. Boarding School

The addition of boarding schools may be a solution to the rural education dilemma for children left behind. The issue of left-behind children arises from the insufficient availability of parental time and finances to adequately attend to their children. The introduction of boarding schools can potentially address the challenges associated with commuting and lodging, thereby leading to an improvement in the enrollment rate of left-behind children. Second, the academic performance of boarders has improved substantially in comparison to that of non-boarding left-behind children, as have psychological issues. According to the research of Behaghel et al., boarding schools can assist orphaned children in escaping their original unfavourable environment, enhancing their communication with their school peers, and resolving psychological issues resulting from a lack of family education and parental companionship [23]. Similarly, the high school graduation rate of boarding students among left-behind children has increased considerably, helping to close the education differences between the countryside and city regions [24]. However, some rural boarding schools still lack educational resources and teachers, and more support from government policies is required; otherwise, it will have a number of negative effects on children left behind who attend boarding schools [25].

4.3. Poverty Alleviation

By eradicating destitution, the urban-rural divide caused by background culture and historical influences can be closed. The disparity between urban and rural education has been significantly narrowed by China's comprehensive policy to assist rural residents escape poverty. From 1970 to 2017, according to the research of Liu et al., a total of 739.9 million people were lifted out of poverty in China [26]. During this time, primary schools were established in more rural areas, more families had sufficient income to pay for their children's education, the situation of women were excluded from school due to a preference for boys and left-behind children were not in school because their parents had moved to cities to find employment were solved. Due to a lack of self-development capacity, economic policies are no longer sufficient to support poverty alleviation plans in certain rural poor areas, and the poverty return rate of poverty-stricken families in rural areas has increased [27]. As a result of poverty-related dropouts, the female higher education rate and the enrollment rate of left-behind children have decreased, and the urban-rural education divide has again widened. The government can conduct research in impoverished rural areas and promote local agricultural development, tourism development, and agricultural product sales through television programmes or live e-commerce in order to address the problem of low self-development capacity. Teaching poor families how to become wealthy is more sustainable than providing them with direct financial assistance. The presence of a consistent and reliable source of income inside rural communities has the potential to significantly enhance educational attainment levels, hence reducing the educational gap that exists between cities and the countryside.

5. Conclusion

This article primarily centres on the educational inequality that exists between cities and the countryside in China, which can be attributed to historical and cultural issues. Confucianism is first discussed. Respect for elders and preference for males are the primary factors contributing to the low education rate in rural areas, which negatively affects the female education rate. Second, the low education level of the elders caused by historical issues such as the Cultural Revolution resulted in elders in rural areas paying little attention to their children's family education and not supporting their children's higher education, thereby widening the education gap between urban and rural areas. Thirdly, the reform of historical policies has exacerbated the disparity between urban and rural education by causing the problem of children's education left behind by migrant labourers when they enter the city to work, as well as the problem of children left behind. Finally, solutions are provided. For instance, economic subsidies for education in rural areas, government propaganda to eliminate son preference, supervision of the amount of the bride price, and the establishment of boarding schools to address enrollment difficulties for left-behind children and children of migrant workers. At the same time, poverty alleviation policies may also improve the condition of women's low education rate and the problems of school entrance of children who live with no parental care in rural areas. However, in rural areas, cultural heritage has a significant impact on the educational philosophy. Although some problems are amenable to short-term solutions, it is extremely difficult to eradicate the influence of thousands of years of cultural history, which may necessitate longer-term government policy support. The education gap between rural and urban areas in China has narrowed in the recent 10 years as a result of the widespread adoption of a compulsory nine-year schooling system and a number of programmes enacted by the Chinese government to assist economically disadvantaged rural communities in climbing out of poverty and becoming prosperous. In the forthcoming era, it is imperative for the government to not only modify the educational policy in rural regions to mitigate the disparity in academic performance between the cities and the countryside, but also to prioritise the psychological education of children residing in rural areas. Furthermore, it is crucial to address the pervasive discrimination experienced by children of migrant workers in urban schools at its core.

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