

The One-child Policy and its Impact on Investment in Educating Girls in Rural China

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Abstract. Girls in rural China were helped by the One Child Policy (OCP) because it increased the overall levels of enrollment for girls in school. While the rural areas lagged the urban ones, a cross-panel data comparison shows that the long-term impact was seen in the increased academic achievement for girls when they surpassed boys in higher education institutions in the 2010s. The cultural challenges that reduce the chances of education for girls still exist; among them is a patrilineal system that puts more value on the birth of boys than girls. This paper attempts to investigate the OCP and how it affected educational investment for girls in rural areas based on currently available literature. Moreover, this paper attempts to identify the differentials between families that had firstborn daughters and secondborn sons on differences in educational investment. The son preference has affected the education investment of girls, and the evidence in this study illustrates that even though the situation has improved, there is a need for civic education in China's rural areas. This is because the competition for resources, especially in cases where the firstborn was a daughter and the secondborn was a son, disproportionately favored sons, thereby affecting the overall educational attainment of daughters.

Keywords: Education Attainment, Education Investment, Patrilineal, One Child Policy.

1. Introduction

In 1979, China introduced a one-child policy that limited the number of children that families could get to control population growth. Several approaches were used by the government to encourage people to adhere to the one-child policy, including communication on the benefits to children when there was less competition for resources. While analyzing the one-child policy, henceforth referred to as OCP, it is important to note some of the differences in implementation between urban and rural areas. For example, in agrarian rural areas, families were allowed to have more than one child if the first child was a girl or had a disability [1]. This created different levels of emphasis on the OCP between rural and urban areas, and it was premised on the fact that China's rural areas are primarily agrarian with a demand for labor force. One thing about rural China is that it is characterized by lower income levels compared to urban centers, resilient and unfair cultural practices that show a preference for investment in educating boys compared to girls, something that lowers the chances of equitably accessing education for rural girls [2]. Education is regarded as one of the most reliable predictors of social mobility. Thus, access to high-quality education can help people access opportunities that require specialized skills obtained through education [3]. By studying investment in education in rural China and investigating how it affects girls and boys similarly and differently, this paper can shed light on the policy adjustments that need to be made to ensure that girls have an equal chance of education as boys.

2. Effects of One-Child Policy of Education for Girls

At the core of the OCP was the pursuit of better wellbeing for Chinese children, and the government had reckoned that controlling population growth would lead to better quality of life experiences for the children. With this rationale and with the requirement that families only have one child, it was understood that the children would have more resources to share. Also, the OCP was recommended for many families, and it was instrumental in increasing the chances that girls born from one-child families would access education at a better rate and chance compared to previous

generations. The OCP had significant impacts on the education for girls because it created a situation where the school enrollment rates for girls and boys were the same. Having one child had improved access to education, and they had more opportunities than multiple-children's households from either the previous location or other rural areas [4]. The study also notes that girls had more improvement than boys in the OCP status, indicating that the decision by the government to introduce the OCP policy had a positive impact on the educational opportunities for girls in both urban and rural areas.

Traditionally, the Chinese education system was inclined towards benefitting male children, and it was only after the 1980s that a sense of parity started in the education sector. Some studies have shown that Chinese patriarchal culture invests more in the education of boys than girls, which supports the difference in educational attainment between boys and girls in China [3]. The situation differences in educational investment and attainment have the potential to affect their access to economic opportunities and, therefore, affect the income gap. The inequality is relatively large as it moves to the rural areas where the gender gap is enlarged regarding education investment [5]. Rural families with more than one child tend to invest more resources in educating their sons, and as the number of children increases, there is a trend of crowding out on the financial resources that would be invested in female children [6]. According to the descriptive data for over six decades, girls born in the 1980s surpassed boys in educational attainment, especially in undergraduate and postgraduate enrollment, a factor that explains why female students formed more than 50% of the university enrollment numbers in China in 2010s [3]. Contrary to the belief that the growth of enrollment for girls was influenced by the increased wellbeing of children because of the reduction of family size, from the discussion, it is apparent that girls started having more educational attainment during the OCP era because parents did not get the opportunity to discriminate between their children.

3. Educational Attainment for Boys and Girls

Apart from exploring the trend of educational attainment between boys and girls before and after the passage of the OCP, the correlation between number of siblings and educational attainment has been analyzed as well. While doing this, one of the strategies was to investigate the impact of an additional sibling on educational attainment, and the authors found dissimilar results between boys and girls, with the addition of a sibling having a larger decreasing impact on education chances for girls compared to boys. Further, this dissimilarity was more pronounced for rural families than urban ones, confirming that the girls in rural China faced inequality in schooling because of the traditional patriarchal culture. Notably, the gains noted in the educational attainment for college enrollment for people born in the 1980s are not all rosy, as some collapse the findings into a comprehensive picture of total years of education for the overall Chinese population, noting that males have 1.3 extra years of education compared to females in the rural China, a statistic that captures the reality of the differences in educational attainment in the country [3]. This illustrates that the OCP did not really bridge the gap between boys and girls, and the girls in rural China have fewer years of education compared to their counterparts in urban areas.

Another way of looking at the state of education in China is from the perspective of the impact of parents' educational expectations on the education of their children. The thinking behind this approach is that if there are dissimilar expectations between siblings based on gender, then that will most likely translate into a difference in the amount of investment that parents put in these children. Several studies have connected this dissimilarity in expectations between siblings with the investment in their education. By looking at the factors that act as enablers of family inequality in northeast rural China, some mothers felt that they would rely on boys in old age and that they needed to put more emphasis on their education. One of the statements that respondents were required to agree or disagree with (using the Likert scale) was, "Sending girls to school is useless since they will get married and leave home", and there are still some mothers who prefer boys [7]. The study was carried out over a long time, with the first survey being for parents of children between 9 and 12 years, followed by a review of progress 7 years later to check whether the parents' expectations and opinions had affected

the school attainment for girls and boys similarly or dissimilarly [7]. At the start, girls had better outcomes in academic performance and engagement, and they outperformed boys in class, but seven years later, boys had a third a year in the duration of time they spent schooling more than girls [7]. While the difference cannot be completely attributed to investment in boys' education over that of girls, it signposts the possibility that the differences in educational attainment were created by the differences in expectations on boys versus girls in rural China.

4. OCP and Educational Differences for Boys and Girls

Thus far, the discussion has focused on the role of OCP in education for boys and girls in rural areas, with several viewpoints on how the policy removed the patrilineal preference from parents in urban areas. However, the implementation of the OCP was nuanced in several ways, including the relaxed implementation in rural areas in China because of the regions' agrarian cultures. Therefore, this issue and the dissimilar impacts of an additional sibling on the educational chances of the older siblings based on gender have been studied [3]. At this point, it is important to note the specific elements of educational investment in China, especially considering the role of supplementary academic education in passing the national exams in China. The OCP model has a relaxation effect on enrollment, confirming that a second sibling affects enrollment experiences if the eldest child is a daughter. In rural areas that were allowed to have several children because of ethnic size, the evidence shows that firstborn boys were not affected by the birth of a secondborn girl. A different perspective of the debate is the study of the impact of the mother's level of education on girls' investment in education in families where the firstborn is a boy and the second born is a daughter, and the study of the iteration of investment in education in families where the firstborn is a girl and the second born is a boy [8]. The hypothesis was that, for mothers who had completed primary education or more, their attitudes towards education were positive, and they did not show preference for either gender. The study revealed that for these parents, the gender of children does not create dissimilar educational aspirations for girls and boys, the order of the siblings notwithstanding.

5. China After the One Child Policy

Lastly, the impact of the OCP on the differences in educational attainment and investment for girls and boys in China can be investigated by looking at the education patterns after the OCP was removed in 2015. Admittedly, the timespan is short to reveal major differences, especially given that there are no major differences between school enrollments at elementary levels. Nonetheless, the resource dilution and budget constraint theories can provide insights into the changes that occurred after the relaxation of the policy [9]. First, the removal of OCP led to an increase in the family size across China, and that was reflected in the reduction of wife's employment by 2%, showing that families were trading off some of the time spent on employment for childcare [10]. After understanding the attitudes of parents in the post-OCP era, the results show that only mothers hinged their expectations on children based on gender; many fathers were focused on meritocracy, and they only cared that their children performed well in school [3]. This recent evidence shows that the Chinese culture retains a sense of son preference, but that cultural aspect has been weakened by the OCP, even in rural areas.

6. Reflections and Recommendation

As can be seen from the analysis above, OCP improved the chances of education for girls in both rural and urban China. That is because the policy took away the option to make preference choices when educating boys or girls, and that opened the opportunities for girls. The challenge with OCP and its role in improving educational achievement for girls is multifaceted because it has many negative impacts in other aspects of life. However, with the focus of this study, the OCP achieved some of the goals that the government of China wanted to achieve, especially the desire to ensure that

parents had enough resources to improve the wellbeing of their children. A higher number of children impacted resource dilution and budget constraint theories because the larger the family, the higher the competition for resources. In the case of the resources that are invested in education, a larger family size leads to lower investment or more unequal allocation of resources between children. Evidence shows that families that adhered to the OCP had better educational outcomes for girls.

The second issue of interest for this paper was to “identify the differentials between families that had a firstborn daughter and secondborn son on differences in educational investment”. A preliminary question would be, are there differences between educational investment for boys and girls? What are the factors that contribute to these differences in rural China? The discussion above illustrates that the OCP was not implemented uniformly across China, and it mostly affected urban populations where parents were motivated to have one child. In agrarian rural China, the OCP was cognizant of the unique needs of the communities, and parents were even allowed to get a second child if the first child was a girl. In the cases where the families had more than one child, there were differences in educational investment. From the evidence explained above, the Chinese patrilineal culture is more pronounced in rural areas, and girls would experience a decrease in education investment when the children that followed them were boys.

Several factors affected that difference, with parental aspirations for children’s education being one of them. In the case of parents in northeast rural China, there was a belief that educating girls would be useless because parents are taken care of by male children when they grow old [6]. This cultural attitude is a core issue in the education investment in these regions, and it shows that girls’ education depends on the availability of male siblings. This argument, however, is mediated by the education level of mothers, as more educated mothers in rural China are more receptive to the idea of educating their girls to higher levels of education. The problem, however, is that there is a difference between parental aspirations for their children and the level of educational achievement because, even in the cases where there are boys, the resource competition favors sons over daughters, and that creates a difference in education attainment. This explains why girls in rural China have fewer years of education (1.3) than their counterparts in urban areas.

With the above issues raised by the OCP, a recommendation is that the Chinese society needs more awareness about gender neutrality and equality when providing education for children. The government can help this cause by creating mandatory requirements for school attendance regardless of gender. It can also sponsor campaigns in rural China that promote modernity and argue for a need to have a fair ground for boys and girls. This campaign can challenge some of the traditional views on family, explaining to parents that they do not need to think about who will take care of them when they get old. Also, patrilineal beliefs in China’s belief system should be challenged through alternative education that explains that the modern world provides equal opportunities for both boys and girls, and parents should put that in their minds when investing in their education.

7. Conclusion

Overall, girls in rural China were helped by the OCP because it increased the overall levels of enrollment for girls in school. While the rural areas lagged the urban ones, a cross-panel data comparison shows that the long-term impact was seen in the increased academic achievement for girls when they surpassed boys in higher education institutions in the 2010s. The cultural challenges that reduce the chances of education for girls still exist; among them, a traditional patriarchal culture puts more value on the birth of boys and girls. The son preference has affected the education investment on girls, and the evidence in this study shows that even though the situation has improved, there is a need for civic education in China’s rural areas. Because the competition for resources, especially in cases where the firstborn was a daughter and the secondborn was a son, was disproportionately distributed in favor of sons, it affected the overall educational attainment of daughters. By studying the OCP and analyzing its impact on the investment in girls’ education in rural areas of China, this paper makes an important contribution to the development of rural women’s

education and even modernization in China today, and it can serve as a source of inspiration and reference. On the one hand, the equal rights of men and women in education can be taken more seriously, which will contribute to the development of Chinese society and material and spiritual civilization. On the other hand, it can be seen that there are still many areas in rural China that still need civic education. Furthermore, there are some limitations in this paper, such as the lack of primary data due to the lack of field research. Therefore, for future research, it is possible to go to the field or conduct in-depth interviews with relevant people to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the paper and data.

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