

Gender Discrimination in Fertility and Family Rearing in the Contemporary Chinese Family

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Abstract. In contemporary China, gender discrimination remains common in the context of childbearing and family rearing, particularly in rural areas. Despite social progress, the traditional son preference continues to influence when families make decisions, resulting in insufficient investment in the education and family investment of girls. Gender discrimination and gender equality is a significant area of research in the present era. The study indicates that there has been some progress in addressing the underlying causes of gender discrimination in the country. However, there is a lack of consensus on the specific factors contributing to gender discrimination within the family, particularly about childbearing and family upbringing. This study aims to elucidate the manifestations of gender discrimination in reproductive attitudes, family educational investments, and parenting styles, and to analyze the impact of these factors on children's emotional, social, and academic development. Accordingly, this paper examines sexism in fertility attitudes and family parenting by synthesizing and analyzing existing literature. The findings demonstrate that gender discrimination not only affects girls' educational opportunities and mental health but also has adverse consequences for mothers. To promote greater attention to gender equality at the familial and societal levels, this paper puts forth policy interventions and cultural shifts that could facilitate more equitable family-rearing and educational environments.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, fertility, family rearing, education investment.

1. Introduction

In contemporary China, gender discrimination is markedly evident in the context of fertility and family rearing. The preference for male children, particularly in rural areas, has a significant impact on family decisions regarding childbirth and educational investments. A paucity of systematic reviews on gender discrimination is evident, particularly concerning comparative studies between rural and urban areas. In the previous literature, for instance, Xuan L has examined the relationship between gender inequality and the social background in China [1], while Hannum E., Kong P., and Zhang Y. have investigated the impact of rural poverty on educational investment inequality [2]. Despite these insights, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that analyze and focus on the original gender discrimination and inequality in different aspects inside the contemporary Chinese family and compare gender discrimination in fertility and family-rearing between families in rural and urban areas. Most of the research in this field either focuses on the economic background that influences son preference or the unequal distribution of educational resources, without providing an integrated analysis. Furthermore, few studies have addressed the overall impact of these discriminatory practices on children's emotional, mental health, and social development. Therefore, this paper aims to address these gaps by revealing the status of gender discrimination in childbearing and family rearing within contemporary Chinese families, focusing on its impact on children's development. The study is organized into three main sections: gender discrimination in fertility, gender discrimination in family rearing, and the effects of these forms of discrimination on children's development.

2. Gender Discrimination in the Idea of Fertility

Gender discrimination can be determined as unequal treatment or behavior based on different genders toward individuals [3]. It involves refusing those individuals to get the same rights, opportunities, or welfare due to their gender, which can be revealed in many areas, including

education, recruitment, and fertility. Among family fertility in China, gender discrimination is generally presented as a preference for giving birth to a boy instead of a girl. The idea of son preferences appearing in fertility is caused by several factors.

2.1. Gender Discrimination in Parents' Fertility Attitudes

The traditional perception of son preference has a negative impact on parent's attitude towards fertility, which is a type of gender discrimination in the family, that still exists in some rural areas like mountainous areas and even some urban areas in China. Many indications demonstrate that parents who have the view of son preference would keep giving birth to a child until they have a son, this decision has a significant influence on the reproductive decision-making [4]. In addition, one reason that parents prefer to son is males or boys are commonly considered as an important factor in continuing family bloodline, for example, the last name of the family, while girls are considered as outsiders or strangers to the family because they will marry to another family. Moreover, some families have concerns about dowry for daughters. After marriage, daughters typically cease to reside with their parents and instead become part of their husband's family. This transition often results in a reduction in the support they can expect from their parents. Consequently, some families opt for boys to circumvent the associated financial burdens and social pressures. In certain families, particularly those with family businesses or property, parents may favor boys to ensure the continuity of the family business. Additionally, there is a perception that girls are less suited to trade than boys, based on the assumption that boys consistently perform better than girls in similar roles, despite evidence to the contrary. All the above are reasons for parental attitudes about childbearing.

2.2. Gender Discrimination in the Idea of Fertility in Social Values

In traditional Chinese social concepts, the men usually have the right to inherit property and land and can get a dowry when a woman marries into a family; while when a woman marries, she will take the property away, which is related to the dowry culture in China for a long period. Therefore, in terms of family fertility, parents will prefer to have boys, which can bring more benefits. Even in modern society, there are still a lot of remains of traditional social values about the gender roles of males and females. For example, in ancient China, there were some views like "Husband guides wife" from Confucianism "men go out to work and women stay at home" and many other patriarchal values, which are important causes of fertility discrimination in society [5]. Additionally, modern social values also include the advantages of men in the workplace, such as it is easier for men to achieve leadership positions or to engage in high-paying careers than women when they are in the same situation. Some research also suggests that the average salary of men is greater than women at the same level [6]. At the same time, in the social environment, especially in some rural or mountainous areas, people often think that having a son is a very "honorable" event. Only boys can be regarded as the true offspring of a family, and families without male descendants will be laughed at. These are all social values factors that lead to gender discrimination in fertility.

2.3. The fertility pressure of mothers under the gender discrimination of fertility view

In current social values in China, there is a fertility expectation for women, in which their main role is to be a mother and take the main responsibility of care in marriage and family life. China's fertility policy has a process from one child to three children. These policies reflect the change of birth control [7]. However, all these policies can show gender discrimination as son preference and put fertility pressure on mothers. During the one-child policy, mothers are always required to give birth to a son, and if the first child is a girl, other family members may decide to kill the girl and force mothers to give birth until they have a son, this action will always occur in some rural or mountainous areas, which seriously harms mothers not only in their physical health but also in their mental health and the imbalanced sex ratio between men and women. During the two-child and three-child policy, the fertility pressures on mothers increased from giving birth to sons to giving as many births as they could, which injured mothers' health. In addition, mothers often must balance work and family when

choosing whether they should have children, which has led to the phenomenon of the “motherhood penalty”, whereby women are unfairly treated in the workplace or lose out on career opportunities because of having children [8].

3. Gender Discrimination in Contemporary Family Rearing

Gender discrimination exists not only in childbearing but also in family rearing in China today, especially in terms of investment in education, the difference in future planning including careers and marriage, and parenting styles.

3.1. Gender Discrimination in Family Education Investment

In many Chinese families, the allocation of educational resources often prefers boys to girls. Cultural beliefs still play a major role in parents' decisions about education investment [9]. Parents often believe that sons will support the family in the future, while daughters will join other families through marriage. This cultural bias leads to unequal educational opportunities, especially in rural and mountain areas with limited economic conditions. Girls often receive less financial support for their education than boys, resulting in lower educational levels and limited career prospects. Regarding the actual evidence of gender inequality in the distribution of educational resources in China, the results of the research analysis indicate that although the gender gap has narrowed over time, the discrepancy between rural and urban areas remains considerable [2]. Girls in rural areas continue to encounter disadvantages, primarily due to traditional cultural preferences for boys as the future providers for the family.

3.2. Gender Discrimination in Parents' Career and Marriage Expectations for Their Children

Parents' expectations of their children's future reflect deep-rooted gender discrimination. Many parents adhere to the traditional view that daughters should prioritize marriage while sons should focus on career success. This view greatly influences parents' expectations of their children. Girls are often encouraged to focus on finding the most suitable partner rather than pursuing ambitious career goals. As a result, this can lead to a lack of opportunities for girls to pursue competitive fields, thereby limiting their career opportunities in adulthood. From parents' expectations of marriage and the limitations on women's freedom, parents usually have the opinion that getting well-married can be a very important thing in their daughter's life [1]. They believed daughters must marry and have children at an appropriate age to ensure the stability of the family and continue the whole family. Some of those parents will require their daughters to marry when they reach a certain age, believing that marriage is an important task in life and women may be considered to lose the value of marriage if they do not marry at the "right" age. From career expectations, parents tend to support daughters to find jobs that are considered "stable" and "suitable for women", such as teachers and nurses [10]. This bias reflects traditional cultural stereotypes of women's work roles, whereby women should avoid high-stress and highly competitive professions. In addition, those kinds of “suitable” jobs can have a positive influence on blind dates for women

3.3. Gender Discrimination in Parenting Styles

Gender-based differential treatment extends to parenting styles, which shows gender discrimination as well. The most encouraging situation is that parents may subconsciously be more protective of their daughters and encourage them to be gentle and quiet while encouraging their sons to be independent. A good example is that parents would buy dolls for daughters and toy cars for sons. Moreover, girls' toys were associated with physical attractiveness and domestic skills, whereas boys' toys were rated as violent, competitive, exciting, and somewhat dangerous [11]. This differential treatment reinforces traditional gender roles, with daughters often socialized into more passive roles, while sons are encouraged to pursue their ambitions. These parenting styles may have a profound effect on a child's self-perception and future ambitions.

4. The Impact of Gender Discrimination in the Family on Children's Development

Gender discrimination in the family can have a profound and lasting impact on children, affecting their emotional, social, and academic development. This impact will both influence the boys and girls in the family.

4.1. Influence on Emotion and Mental Health

Gender discrimination in the family can lead to problems of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem in children, especially girls, who display negative emotional and psychological states when they feel unequal treatment in the family [12]. Concerning self-esteem and emotional distress, children continue suffered to unequal treatment because of gender discrimination. This can result in a diminished sense of self-worth and an increased propensity for anxiety and depression, as they frequently experience feelings of inadequacy and rejection. The internalization of gender norms may lead to boys and girls being forced to insist on the social gender role, which can result in the emergence of mental health issues.

4.2. Influence on Social Contact and Interpersonal Relationship

The phenomenon of gender discrimination has been demonstrated to have a detrimental impact on children's social skills and relationships. This is evidenced by the fact that girls may be deprived of socialization opportunities or self-confidence because of the constraints imposed by gender roles within the family unit. Conversely, boys may be constrained by traditional gender roles, which can lead to the emergence of single socialization patterns. In addition, children may form unhealthy relationships, when boys demonstrate dominant behavior, and then girls learn to tolerate or accept this behavior, which affects their future relationships [13]. Moreover, discrimination can cause feelings of isolation among children who are perceived as “different”, affecting their ability to form healthy peer relationships and social networks [14].

4.3. Influence on Educating Opportunities and Career Planning

Gender discrimination may limit children's educational opportunities and career choices. Girls in prejudiced families may be discouraged from pursuing higher education or certain careers, affecting their long-term development. When children internalize their gender roles, this will limit their ambition, such as they will avoid traditional different gender careers. Girls face challenges in accessing higher education and leadership positions while encountering discrimination that affects their self-esteem, academic choices, and career aspirations [15]. Whereas many women struggle to achieve success in various fields due to gender discrimination, the lack of female role models may decrease girls' motivation and awareness of career opportunities. At the same time, the gender stereotype for boys and girls in the study will limit the possibilities for girls to choose future learning areas.

5. Conclusion

Through research, this paper reveals the far-reaching effects of gender discrimination in childbearing and parenting in contemporary Chinese families. Gender bias not only affects children's educational opportunities and mental health but also their future career development. In this study, it covers nine key points: son preference negatively influences parents' fertility attitudes, especially in rural and urban areas; social values, rooted in traditional beliefs, continue to give priority to male offspring, contributing to gender discrimination in fertility; mothers face significant reproductive pressures due to the expectation of producing male heirs, affecting their physical and mental health; educational investment often favors boys over girls, resulting in unequal educational opportunities, particularly in rural areas; parents' career and marriage expectations reflect gender bias, with girls

often expected to prioritize marriage over career; parenting styles show gender-based differential treatment, promoting traditional gender roles; gender discrimination in families leads to emotional distress and mental health issues for children; social and interpersonal relationships are negatively impacted by gender-based constraints imposed within the family; gender discrimination limits children's educational and career opportunities, especially for girls. The main contribution of this paper is that the integration and analysis of information on fertility and family rearing in contemporary Chinese families is beneficial to future researchers in related fields. The limitation of this study is that it relies on existing literature, which may not fully capture differences across regions in China and some data might be out of date like some literature that has been published for 10 years. In future research, researchers should focus on studies that track the impact of social norms and policy changes on gender discrimination in family contexts.

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