Intersect, Vol 18, No. 1 (2024)

Closing the Gender Education Gap: How Industrialization Improves the Position of Women in Rural China

Cameron Hong

Abstract

In much of rural China, traditional neo-Confucian gender ideologies limit women to domestic work with less household decision-making power and financial independence than their male counterparts. Industrialization in China has transformed work in these rural households; the consequential evolution of the gendered division of labor significantly impacts female education rates. This paper examines the historical and contemporary effect of industrialization on the ability of women in rural China to attain an education and, consequently, the overall gender education gap in China. This paper concludes that the gender education gap will continue to close as the industrial sector expands in China. It proposes policies to minimize institutional bias, challenge the gendered division of labor, and improve rural families' socioeconomic standings. As such, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how technological development impacts gender equality in education.

Introduction

“Women hold up half the sky.” Mao Zedong’s famous statement conveys the significance of female inclusion for China’s success. Despite the rise of female representation in the workplace and educational institutions during Mao's regime, women never achieved complete social equality. Many reforms enacted by the Chinese Communist Party were patriarchal. For example, men remained the beneficiaries of land grants after the implementation of land laws. Despite the Party's efforts from the 1950s to the 1970s, traditional neo-Confucian gender ideology promoted patriarchal family structures (Li, 2000). Today, the Confucian belief of female inferiority extends to Chinese society, where women are often limited to

unpaid, domestic work with less household decision-making power than their male counterparts (Jacka, 2019). There is a pronounced gender gap in rural areas, as evidenced by the prevalence of son preference and disparities in educational attainment between girls and boys (Shen, 2021; Wu, 2012).

However, the industrial development of Su village in the southeast of Jiangsu Province illustrates how such a landscape is undergoing dramatic change. The "Sunan" model of industrialization involving state direction resulted in the expansion of enterprise and accompanying jobs. Moreover, a growing emphasis on education in hiring makes career opportunities more accessible to women. This development encourages young women to pursue factory work. For the first time in years, residents perceive women in Su village as independent wage earners. By reflecting upon changing opportunities for women in Su village, we shed light on the broader significance of industrialization for gender equality. Though the relegation of household duties to older women offers some complexity, Su village exemplifies a general trend across rural China. Industrialization can increase opportunities for women and aid them in their defiance of patriarchal norms (Gaetano, 2019).

One defining feature of patriarchal norms in China is "son preference." Son preference discourages the education of daughters in rural, lower-income families. When families only have the means to send some rather than all children to school, factors such as institutional gender discrimination and internal gender bias often drive parents to send sons instead of daughters.

Industrialization challenges this preference and closes the gender education gap by transforming work and family life. The mobilization of rural Chinese women to off-farm jobs increases the value of female education because many skilled jobs require, at the very least, a basic level of schooling (Lee, 2014). Moreover, wages from off-farm work heighten women's financial and decision-making power, who are less likely than men to prefer their sons (Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011). Urban migration improves household socioeconomic status, and, as financial resources become less limited, families are less likely to exclude select children from education (Lee, 2014; Shen, 2021). Furthermore, workers are surrounded by increasingly modernized views of gender after moving to urban areas for work. Thus, traditional perceptions of gender roles, such as those seen in a patriarchal Confucian ideology, become less relevant with industrialization (Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011). Young girls gain more opportunities to attain an education.

Industrialization in rural China has, in large part, occurred through township and village enterprises, or TVEs (Kumar 2008). TVEs are managed at the local levels of rural communities. These enterprises have economically uplifted rural Chinese towns, in addition to increasing female employment: 45% of coastal TVE employees are female. Other regions with less developed TVEs have significantly lower female employment, at around 25%. Some scholars are further investigating TVEs that have successfully stirred economic development in rural China, to find relevant lessons for industrialization in other developing nations. This paper will instead focus on the effects of industrialization on gender equality.

By diminishing son preference, a primary cause of the overall gender education gap, the industrial movement of workers from the farm reduces gender educational disparity. Son preference declines due to a greater rate of return on female education, increased financial power of women, higher socioeconomic statuses of families, and modernization of gender role perceptions with rural-to-urban migration.

Historical Context of Industrialization in Rural China

The historical effects of industrialization on the gendered division of labor and socioeconomic statuses of families in rural China are crucial to understanding the role each has in closing the education gap. Mao's policies dramatically increased female labor force participation, ultimately providing an avenue for economic independence and financial intra-household leverage. The socialist government reasoned that the mobilization of women out of the home would eliminate the patriarchal nature of the previous system and expand the state workforce (Song, 2017). The cooperative movement in the 1950s facilitated the involvement of rural women in agricultural labor (Hershatter, 2019). In the late 1950s, more women worked in sectors left vacant by men who shifted to industrial occupations. Women entered the nursing and education sectors (Li, 2000). Around 1970, China almost achieved near-universal (around 90%) female workforce participation (Song, 2017). As women were increasingly employed, they attained more social independence. Yet, they were still responsible for domestic work, often restricting them from working for the same length of time as men (Hershatter, 2019). Furthermore, female labor in agricultural collectives was valued lower than the corresponding work of men (Song, 2017).

Women experienced greater equality during Mao's period of socialist reform due to the Chinese government's perception that the elimination of gender and class inequality were intertwined causes (Song, 2017). For example, the government intervened in higher education institutions to include political ideology, family background, and work experience as entrance criteria. This inclusion was favorable to female applicants and, consequently, increased enrollment rates (Li, 2000). The Communist Party advocated for education-for-all and sought to extend education to rural areas. Subsidies and other redistributive educational policies eventually accelerated enrollment, lessening the overall rural-urban divide in education from 1949 to 1966 (Tao, 2006). Efforts to reduce gender inequality during Mao's rule also included the Marriage Law, which outlawed arranged marriage and advocated for women's economic independence. The new right of women to file for divorce may have been the most significant feature of the Marriage Law. It challenged the traditional family structure in which the male "head of the household" had sole authority (Li, 2000).

During post-reform industrialization, some government policies harmed rural women and their access to education. In the 1980s, the Chinese government deemphasized gender equalization programs such as the Marriage Law, reviving patriarchal perceptions of labor. Women's work became increasingly dismissed as "inside," "light," and "unskilled" (Song, 2017). From the 1980s to the early 1990s, the Chinese government's industrialization policies harmed rural areas through extractive agricultural policies. The state reduced agricultural prices to encourage investment in industrial sectors, which, combined with the exclusion of peasants from welfare, worsened the rural economy and socioeconomic standings of rural citizens (Song, 2017). Chinese citizens saw a decline in overall female education enrollment from the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s to the 1990s (Li, 2000).

The government started to address rural areas' needs from the 1990s to the 2000s by implementing new policies, such as ones that removed the agricultural tax (Song, 2017). From 1991 to 2018, female employment in nonagricultural sectors increased from 43.4% to 75.8% (Shen, 2021). Additionally, over the past few decades, gender inequality in Chinese education has noticeably decreased (Lee, 2014).

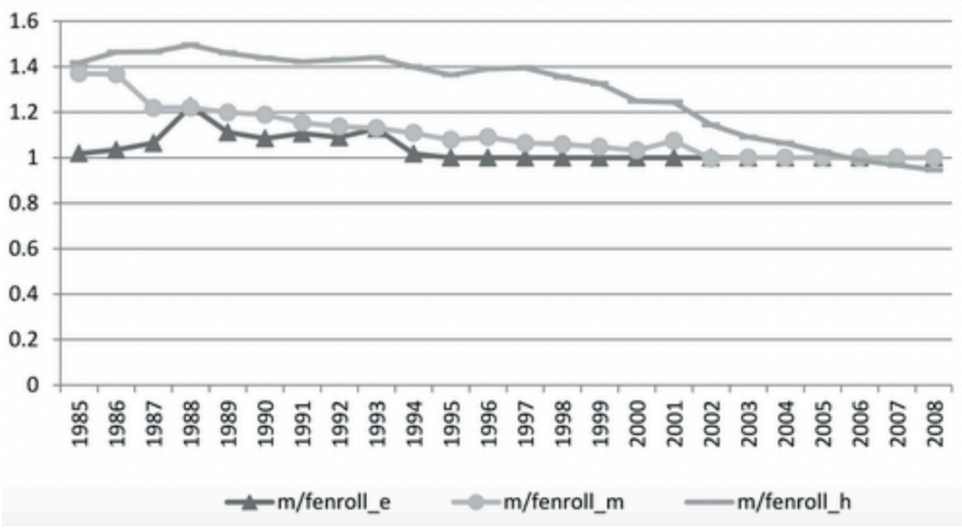

FIGURE 1. Trend of gender differences in school enrollment in China, 1985–2008. Source: Ming Hsuan Lee, "Schooling and Industrialization in China: Gender Differences in School Enrollment," *Comparative Education Review*, May 2014.

Fig. 1 depicts male-to-female enrollment in elementary, middle, and high schools from 1980 to 2008 in China. It reflects a reduction of educational gender inequality over time. Near gender equity by 2008 contrasts with a wide disparity in previous years. Gender enrollment ratios in universities feature a similar trend. In 1982, only 16.5 percent of students at Tsinghua University in China were female (Li, 2000). Since then, the ratio of female to male students has doubled: 34% of Tsinghua students were female in 2018 (China Power, 2018). Although we cannot immediately assume that the improvement of rural industrialization is inextricably linked with a decline in educational gender disparity, the correlation is notable. Regardless, data on school enrollment rates by gender suggests that industrialization has reduced the gender education gap over the past several decades. A 2014 study that examined Chinese province-level data collected from 1988 to 2008 observed the relationship between certain factors, such as geographical location, the dominance of select sectors, and the culture of a province, with known female and male school enrollments. The central purpose of the study was to analyze whether the growth of nonagricultural sectors has a role in reducing gender educational disparity. After it found a higher coefficient for the expansion of the service sector in equations corresponding to female enrollment than that in equations for male enrollment, the study concluded that, by transforming labor market conditions, industrialization does play a role in reducing the gender education gap (Lee, 2014). Understanding the

nature of this relationship is crucial for encouraging gender equality worldwide, with emerging economies currently industrializing at unprecedented levels.

The Effects of a Gendered Division of Labor on the Education Gap

Local and regional marketization have expanded industrial sectors, improving off-farm employment options for women overall. Furthermore, during industrialization, worker shortages occur. This creates demand for female workers (Matthews, 2000). The increase in off-farm employment for rural women from 4% in 1981 to 31% in 2000 exemplifies this trend (Song, 2017). More women are working at male-dominated jobs, contradicting the former restriction of women to "inside" and "skilled" work. Still, patriarchal norms have persisted since the Chinese economy's marketization period started in the 1980s. In some cases, Chinese women were forced to balance their factory work with significant household work. This was especially the case in Bei Village (Gaetano 2019). Ultimately, the modernization of gender roles, which occurs due to more female labor in nonagricultural sectors, weakens this son preference that has persisted to the present day.

To understand trends in rural China, Professor Yang Shanhua's research team interviewed 46 Su village families, specifically focusing on the effect of state-led industrialization on family life. The interviews were conducted across repeated visits to the village from 2003 to 2011. Shanhua's team ensured that interview responses would be unaffected by the presence of an interviewee's spouse by separating couples when possible. Trends identified in many of Shanhua's interviews, which discussed women's migration and shifting caretaking responsibilities, reflected modernizing gender roles. Shanhua found that most women in the village migrate to cities to work in factories (Song, 2017). Despite its long working hours, this new type of work presents women with a feeling of freedom from the village's traditional gender restrictions (Chang, 2009). A "feeling of freedom" occurs for women who work in off-farm sectors because they are empowered. Their autonomy increases ,and their views of gender roles transform to include themselves in how they perceive the workforce. Consequently, women who engage in off-farm work exhibit significantly less "son preference" than those who do not (Shen, 2021). However, traditional gender roles are still prevalent in Su village. With the rise of industrial sectors, the stigma against the

management of rural businesses by women remains (Song, 2017). In light of these problems, some have argued that social norms derived from Confucian values—such as benevolence and harmony—may soon encourage better practices for women in Chinese industry, thus creating an environment more conducive to female employment (Gao 2021).

Encouraging women to work in traditionally "male" sectors through industrialization increases the perceived return on female education. The "skilled" nature of male-dominated jobs often requires some prior knowledge or education from workers; this requirement makes it necessary for women to become educated for employment in those sectors. For example, in the 2014 province-level study that observed the relationship of select sectors with known school enrollments, the growth of the equipment and machinery sector corresponded with increased female school enrollment (Lee, 2014).

On the other hand, sectors that still generally employ men and do not require education for employment, such as construction, decrease the perceived return on male education as they expand. Through observations similar to those made for female education, the 2014 province-level study found that steel-related industries were negatively associated with male enrollment in high schools. Parents are more likely to invest in their daughters' education if they know that female education can lead to employment and are less likely to invest in their sons' education if they perceive a lower rate of return. These empirics suggest that transforming the labor market increases female school enrollment and decreases male enrollment, closing the gender education gap (Lee, 2014).

Furthermore, this upward trend of return for female students is crucial for representation in higher education; a perceived lower rate of return on female education than that of male education results in institutional discrimination against women in Chinese universities. Institutional discrimination severely impacts enrollment rates: admissions officers set lower quotas for female students than male students, leading them to judge women under harsher criteria during the admissions process. This discrimination extends to modern-day admissions. Women admitted to the Communication University of China scored an average of 20 points higher on entrance tests than men admitted to the same university, clearly reflecting the gender discrimination that holds women to a higher standard (Dong, 2021).

The Effects of Socioeconomic Status on the Education Gap

When workers shift to nonagricultural work, a new dynamic allows women to increase their power within their families, resulting in greater gender education equality. The urban migration associated with moving off of the farm improves the socioeconomic statuses of workers. The CCP's welfare system is biased toward urban workers and residents, leading to a higher income and elevated place in society (Song, 2017). Industrialization and the subsequent re-entrance of rural women into off-farm work give women more household decision-making power: an increased sum of money that women contribute to the household income provides them the leverage needed to make their voices heard (Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011). A study that used 3,929 migrant household samples from 2008 to 2010 analyzed the influence of a woman's income, education, and migration duration on household dynamics; it found that the probability of the wife being the head of the household increases when she has a higher income or migration duration than the husband (Wang, 2020). Those who are younger and female are less likely to prefer sons. Therefore, by empowering women and providing them the necessary household decision-making power, industrialization reduces the likelihood that the family prefers sons for resource investment (Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011).

Moreover, as both women and men migrate from rural areas to find work in industrial sectors, they are less likely to exhibit son preference. This is due to greater exposure to modernized perceptions of gender as workers move farther from villages (Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011). In addition, parents with a higher income tend to exhibit less son preference because they can afford to invest in all their children. In contrast, those with lower incomes generally invest in their sons because of the institutional and cultural barriers preventing women from financial success (Lee, 2014). The weakening of son preference leads to more equitable investment in daughters and sons, improving the likelihood of girls gaining an education. After observing the relationship of urbanization with school enrollments, scholars in the 2014 province-level study found urbanization to have a positive and relatively large coefficient (Lee, 2014). This demonstrates the profound impact a family's residence in an urban area has on improving their daughter's ability to attend school (Song, 2017). Furthermore, in 2005, there were 2.5% more male graduates than female ones in urban China. On the other hand, male students made up a much greater fraction of graduates in rural China, with a 25.6% lead (Guo, Tsang, and Ding 2010).

Conclusion

It is worth noting that industrialization can harm women. The efforts of older women to care for grandchildren often go unappreciated and left-behind daughters suffer from receiving no education (Chen, 2017; Song, 2017; Jacka, 2019). In Su Village, women were disproportionately kept from managerial positions, presumably a consequence of expectations that they were also bound to household work (Song 2017). Moreover, female manufacturing workers face sexual exploitation, often without viable mechanisms to report their abuse (Jacka 2019).

Given these drawbacks, this paper reflects upon aggregated employment trends and the potential long-term consequences of industrialization. As the industrial sector expands, it will increase the number of women taking jobs in male-dominated industries and transform the dynamics of families with urban migration. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect a continued closing of the gender education gap as the value of female education increases, the role of a Confucian family structure decreases, and more families have the financial resources to educate all of their children. Some of the policies that would further encourage this closing would be the ones that transform gender quotas in universities to reduce institutional discrimination, break down the gendered division of labor, and improve the socioeconomic standings of rural families. As shown in the example of Su village, certain aspects of industrialization that diminish son preference provide a viable solution for women seeking social independence.

References

Chang, L. T. (2009). *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. Spiegel & Grau.

Chen, M. (2017, March 2). Left-behind girls struggle for education. *China Daily*. www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/02/content_28402209.htm

China Power Team. (2018, June 25). Do Women in China Face Greater Inequality than Women Elsewhere? *China Power.* chinapower.csis.org/china-gender-inequality/

Dong, J. (2021, October 21). As Chinese Women Seek to Crack Male Professions, Schools Stand in the Way. *The New York Times.* www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/world/asia/china-schools-gender-bias.html

Gaetano, A. (2019). Gender and Employment in Rural China by Jing Song

(review). *China Review*, 19(2), 180–185. muse.jhu.edu/article/726729/pdf

Gao, X. (2021). How can Confucian Philosophies Contribute to Gender Equality in Chinese Organisations?

Guo, C., Tsang, M. C., & Ding, X. (2010). Gender disparities in science and engineering in Chinese universities. *Economics of Education Review*, 29(2), 225–235. www.tc.columbia.edu/media/centers/center-on-chinese-education/Congbin-Guo-Mun-Tsang-and-Xiaohao-Ding--Gender-disparities-in-science.pdf

Hershatter, G. (2019). Women and China's Socialist Construction, 1949–78. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 17(12), 1–29. apjjf.org/-Gail-Hershatter/5289/article.pdf

Jacka, T. (2019, January 12). Inside Work: The Hidden Exploitation of Rural Women in Modern China. *Made in China.* madeinchinajournal.com/2019/01/12/inside-work-the-hidden-exploitation-of-rural-women-in-modern-china

Kumar, S. (2008). Rural Development through Rural Industrialization:. Lee, M.-H. (2014). Schooling and Industrialization in China: Gender Differences in School Enrollment. *Comparative Education Review,* 58(2). www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/675380

Li, Y. (2000). Women's Movement and Change of Women's Status in China. Journal of International *Women's Studies*, 1(1), 30–40. vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1626&context=jiws

Matthews, R., & Nee, V. (2000). Gender Inequality and Economic Growth in Rural China. *Social Science Research*, 29(4), 606–632. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0049089X00906847

Murphy, R., Tao, R., & Lu, X. (2011). Son Preference in Rural China: Patrilineal Families and Socioeconomic Change. *Population and Development Review*, 37(4), 665–690. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00452.x

Shen, Z., Brown, D., Zheng, X., & Yang, H. (2021). Women's Off-Farm Work Participation and Son Preference in Rural China. *Population Research and Policy Review*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-021-09676-1

Song, J. (2017). Gender and Employment in Rural China. Routledge. Tao, L., Berci, M., & He, W. (2006). Historical Background: Expansion of Public Education. *The New York Times*. archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/college/coll-china-education-001.html

Wang, Z., Lou, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2020). Bargaining Power or Specialization? Determinants of Household Decision Making in Chinese Rural Migrant Families. *SAGE Open*, 10(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020980446

Wu, Y. (2012). Gender Gap in Educational Attainment in Urban and Rural China. *Chinese Journal of Sociology*, 32(4), 112–137.

www.society.shu.edu.cn/EN/Y2012/V32/I4/112