

Understanding the Dimensions of Educational Inequality in China: Urban-Rural, Gender and Economic Factors

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Abstract:

Educational inequality in China is a complex issue deeply rooted in historical, social, and economic contexts. Disparities in educational opportunities and quality arise from factors such as urban-rural divides, gender biases, and economic inequalities. This study aims to explore the dimensions of educational inequality in China, focusing on the impacts of urban-rural differences, gender disparities, and economic factors on educational opportunities and outcomes. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, the study conducts a comprehensive review of academic articles, government reports, and relevant literature to analyze the causes of educational inequality and the effectiveness of current interventions. The findings reveal significant disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of educational resources and opportunities, with urban schools benefiting from superior infrastructure, qualified teachers, and more funding. Economic disparities further restrict access to quality education for low-income families, while gender biases in rural areas exacerbate educational inequality for girls. The study identifies critical gaps in investment, infrastructure, and support systems. To address these issues, it is recommended to increase investment in educational resources, improve infrastructure, and enhance support for teachers in underfunded regions. Additionally, strengthening social support networks, simplifying financial aid processes, and improving the effectiveness of education poverty alleviation programs are essential. These measures will help reduce educational disparities, promote fairness, and support social mobility across diverse population groups.

Keywords: Educational inequality; urban-rural divide; gender disparities; economic inequalities; Hukou system

1. Introduction

Educational inequality refers to the unequal distribution of academic resources, opportunities, and outcomes across different socioeconomic, gender, ethnic, and geographic groups [1]. It manifests in various forms, such as disparities in access to quality schooling, differences in academic achievement, and unequal opportunities for higher education. Educational inequality has profound long-term effects on both individuals and society. At the individual level, it may limit career opportunities, reduce lifetime earnings, and impede personal development [2]. At the societal level, educational inequality fosters social stratification, constrains economic growth, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and disadvantage [3].

In China, educational inequality has deep historical roots, shaped by various social, economic, and political changes. Historically, geographic location played a significant role in educational access, where urban areas often possess superior facilities and resources compared to rural areas.

The hukou (household registration) system further exacerbated this divide by limiting people's movement and access to public services, including education [4]. Additionally, cultural norms and gender biases have traditionally prioritized male education, resulting in gender disparities in educational attainment [5]. Furthermore, while boosting economic growth, the economic reforms, and opening-up policies in the late 20th century, have widened the gap between rich and poor, as well as urban and rural areas, exacerbating educational inequalities. Despite significant progress in expanding access to basic education, challenges persist, especially for marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and children from low-income families [6]. Disparities in educational quality, resources, and outcomes remain as a critical concern for policymakers and educators in China.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze various dimensions of education inequality in China, with a focus on urban and rural disparities, gender differences, and the impact

of economic inequalities. The paper examines how these factors shape educational opportunities and outcomes between urban and rural areas, with particular emphasis on infrastructure, teacher quality, and the distribution of resources. Additionally, the paper explores gender disparities in access to education, achievement levels, and retention, considering both socio-cultural and economic factors. Moreover, the essay investigates how family economic status affects educational opportunities and pathways to social mobility. The overall goal of this paper is to understand the interplay between these dimensions of inequality and to provide insights for policymakers to foster a more equitable educational environment in China. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, drawing primarily on secondary data and existing literature to explore the dimensions of educational inequality in China. This research involves a comprehensive review of academic articles, government reports, and other relevant documents to gain insights into the factors contributing to educational disparities across different regions and demographics within the country. Through this comprehensive literature review, the study aims to identify key themes, patterns, and trends in educational inequality, offering a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and potential solutions.

2. Factors Impact Educational Inequality

Urban-rural educational inequality in China is driven by a complex interplay of social and economic factors. The disparities between urban and rural areas, along with social stratification, are the primary drivers of inequality. The differentiation of the urban and rural household registration system, known as the Hukou system, coupled with the widening economic gap, has exacerbated institutional barriers and deepened social class distinctions [7]. The stability of this system links children from diverse social backgrounds to varying levels of educational resources, perpetuating persistent inequalities in urban and rural education [8].

2.1 The Overall Manifestation of Educational Inequity

The urban-rural dual structure established by the Hukou system has led to extensive social stratification, which has been further intensified by the intergenerational transmission of educational advantages, unequal access to schooling opportunities, and challenges in acquiring social capital. Social capital refers to the value derived from networks, relationships, and norms within a community or society that facilitate cooperation and trust. Consequently, privileged groups in urban areas benefit from greater ed-

ucational opportunities and access to high-quality educational resources, while disadvantaged rural populations are frequently marginalized [9]. Under a decentralized educational management framework, economic disparities are often manifested in the inequalities of social infrastructure support. Urban areas, characterized by socialized production, have more substantial funding and higher-quality educational systems compared to rural areas, which are predominantly characterized by smallholder production [10]. Moreover, urban residents are more inclined and financially capable of investing in educational services. Additionally, economies of scale have led to a higher concentration of educational funding in urban areas.

At the micro level, various individual characteristics significantly influence educational outcomes and contribute to the growing disparity between urban and rural education. Factors such as disability and occupation, along with family background factors such as income and parental education, and cultural attitudes, play crucial roles in shaping decisions related to education [11]. For instance, families with higher incomes and better-educated parents are more likely to invest in quality education, private tutoring, and extracurricular activities, thereby providing their children with better educational opportunities. Conversely, families with limited financial resources or lower levels of parental education may struggle to access or prioritize these opportunities, leading to further inequalities. According to the theory of cultural reproduction, parents' educational expectations, cultural capital, and human capital are internalized into their children's learning motivation and academic achievements. These factors ultimately translate into disparities in educational opportunities, thereby further contributing to the unequal development of urban and rural education [9].

According to the Human Capital Theory developed by economists Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, education is considered a pivotal investment in human capital, significantly enhancing an individual's productivity and income potential [12]. However, disparities in educational opportunities often lead to unequal investment in human capital, especially among individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. These individuals frequently encounter a range of economic, social, and cultural barriers that constrain their access to education and limit their educational outcomes. Such educational inequalities not only impede personal development but also contribute to broader, long-term economic repercussions. Individuals with lower levels of education are more likely to be employed in low-wage and unstable jobs, which perpetuates their socioeconomic status and intensifies the cycle of poverty [13].

2.2 The Concrete Difference between Urban and Rural Education Unfairness

2.2.1 Disparities in educational resources allocation between urban and rural areas

The focus of educational inequality in China has shifted from gender to geography (coastal/inland regions) and ultimately the rural-urban divide. In China, there are significant differences in educational resources between urban and rural areas, which are mainly reflected in the aspects of teachers, school facilities, and education funds. Schools in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai typically benefit from abundant educational resources [14]. These schools have a highly qualified faculty, including many teachers with master's or doctoral degrees, as well as extensive teaching experience. To attract and retain these highly qualified teachers, urban schools can offer competitive compensation and benefits packages, such as housing subsidies and career development opportunities [15]. In addition, the teaching equipment and infrastructure of the city schools are also very advanced, equipped with modern laboratories, computer rooms, libraries, and sports facilities. These schools can also support a wide range of extra-curricular activities and special programs, such as music, art, and science clubs, with adequate funding for education [15].

In contrast, schools in rural areas such as Guizhou and Yunnan are facing significant resource shortages [14]. First, the number of teachers in rural schools is often insufficient, and teachers generally have low qualifications. Due to low wages and poor living conditions, many high-quality teachers are unwilling to stay in rural areas for long, leading to high teacher turnover and making it difficult to maintain a consistent quality of education. Secondly, the infrastructure of rural schools is often outdated [15]. Evidence shows that many schools in Guizhou areas lack basic teaching facilities such as adequate classrooms, science laboratories, and sports fields. Some schools don't even have libraries or computer classrooms, depriving students of essential learning opportunities. Teaching materials are often outdated and difficult to meet the needs of modern teaching.

In addition, the gap in education funding between urban and rural areas is also significant. Urban schools typically receive more government grants and social contributions, which allows them to constantly update equipment and expand facilities. Rural schools, on the other hand, have very limited funding, and many rely on small amounts of government funding and tuition fees paid by parents, making it difficult to maintain basic operations. These insufficient funds not only limit the development of schools but also affect the improvement of the quality of educa-

tion. In conclusion, the difference in educational resources between urban and rural areas is not only reflected in the quantity but also the quality and sustainability. These differences have a profound impact on students' learning experience and academic performance, and to some extent exacerbate the educational inequality between urban and rural areas.

2.2.2 Economic disparities

After decades of disparities in access to educational resources, particularly in distance and home education, a new form of educational inequality has emerged, highlighting the social dimensions of the issues and making it a more pervasive social problem. Historically, access to quality education has been regarded as a pivotal mechanism for mitigating inequality. The 2018 UNICEF report, "An Unfair Beginning: Inequality in Children's Education in Rich Countries" [16], aligns with the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goal 4.1, which seeks to guarantee that by 2030, all boys and girls have access to free, equitable, and high-quality primary and secondary education, coupled with relevant and effective learning outcomes. This report delineates the primary contributors to educational inequality, including variances in parental occupations, immigrant backgrounds, gender disparities, and school resources [1].

Family economic status has a significant impact on children's educational opportunities. For example, high-income families often afford quality preschool education, after-school tutoring, and a variety of extracurricular activities [17]. In cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, high-income families frequently invest large amounts of money in private tutoring and value-added programs, thus providing more learning opportunities and resources for their children [18]. Comparatively speaking, low-income families often face financial pressures to afford additional educational resources, which limits their children's learning opportunities [19]. In rural areas such as Gansu and Guizhou, many families cannot afford additional classes or educational materials, leaving their children at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts.

While family economic status significantly impacts access to educational resources, the challenges faced by children from low-income families extend beyond the classroom. Evidence shows that children from poor families face significant obstacles in achieving social mobility through education. Although education is seen as an important way to improve their socioeconomic status, economic pressures often limit opportunities for these children [17]. For example, studies in Sichuan Province show that children from poor families, despite their hard work, have limited access to higher education and quality careers due

to inadequate educational resources. In addition, economic pressures force these students to make difficult choices between their studies and part-time jobs, further affecting their academic performance and career prospects [18].

Parents' educational background also has a significant impact on their children's educational opportunities [18]. Highly educated parents generally place greater emphasis on education, provide more academic support for their children, and effectively utilize educational resources. College-educated parents, for example, are more likely to help their children with homework and motivate them to set higher academic goals [20]. Parents with lower educational backgrounds may lack the knowledge and resources necessary to support their children's education, which greatly affects their children's academic performance. In rural areas, many parents only complete primary or secondary education, which limits their ability to support their children's studies [19].

2.2.3 Gender differences

The gender gap is an important factor affecting educational opportunities, particularly in rural areas [21]. In these regions, traditional views often prioritize male education, leading to significant disparities in educational access and continuity for girls. For example, survey data from rural areas in Henan Province show that the primary school enrolment rates are 85 % for girls compared to 95 % for boys [22]. The gap further widens in junior high school, where many girls drop out of school due to financial difficulties of their families or parental expectations to stay home and help with household chores [23].

The disparity continues into higher education. Despite efforts by the central government over the past few decades to introduce national policies promoting equal access to higher education for men and women, girls still face more barriers in practice. In some rural areas of Guizhou, for example, less than 30 % of female students who graduate from high school have the opportunity to attend university, compared with more than 45 % of male students [22]. This difference is partly due to gender preferences within families, which often prioritize boys' education and place greater responsibility on girls. Cash-strapped families in particular tend to invest in boys' education, further exacerbating the gender gap [24].

When it comes to career choices, girls are often limited by gender stereotypes and find it difficult to enter the fields of high-paying industries, which are traditionally dominated by men. For example, women are significantly under-represented in fields such as computer science and engineering. This imbalance stems not only from family and societal expectations but also from a lack of supportive environments and policies for women in these fields [25].

For example, some companies tend to hire men, believing that they are better suited to high-intensity work environments. In the job market, this gender gap is further translated into further inequalities [25]. As a result, women often struggle to achieve equal pay and career advancement opportunities, even when they have the same educational backgrounds and skills as men. This gap exists not only in the private sector but also in the public sector and state-owned enterprises, where the proportion of women in senior management is much lower than that of men.

These gender differences not only affect women's personal development and economic independence, but also challenge broader goals of gender equality, equity, and social justice. Therefore, it is essential to improve educational opportunities and conditions for girls, dismantle gender stereotypes, and promote gender equality in educational policies and social environments. Effective policy measures include providing more scholarships for girls, improving educational facilities in rural areas, ensuring safe learning environments, and strengthening support and protection for women in vocational education and the job market [26]. These measures help to reduce gender disparities and promote equal opportunities for men and women in the fields of education and employment.

3. Discussion

The preceding analysis highlights the deep-rooted and multifaceted nature of educational inequality in China, driven by urban-rural disparities, gender biases, and economic inequalities. These factors collectively contribute to the unequal distribution of educational resources and opportunities, which in turn exacerbates social stratification and limits individual and societal development. Given the significant implications of these inequalities, it is imperative to explore actionable strategies to mitigate their impact. This section will discuss potential improvements and policy recommendations aimed at enhancing educational equity across China. To enhance educational opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in China, a multifaceted approach is needed.

First, increasing investment in educational resources is essential. The government should boost funding for schools in impoverished areas by improving infrastructure, providing additional teaching materials, and increasing support and training for teachers. This includes addressing the needs of rural schools by ensuring that their funding approaches that of urban schools, offering higher salaries and housing subsidies for rural teachers, and creating incentive schemes to attract and retain qualified educators.

Second, strengthening social support networks through community organizations and NGOs can provide crucial

academic tutoring, psychological support, and career planning services to children from low-income families. Additionally, simplifying the financial aid application process is necessary. By reducing barriers to applying for student loans and scholarships and providing detailed guidance, more children can access these resources.

Finally, improving the coverage and effectiveness of education poverty alleviation programs is vital. This involves enhancing oversight and evaluation of these programs to ensure resources are reaching those in need and adjusting initiatives based on regional conditions. Moreover, improving the infrastructure of rural schools--including constructing new buildings, upgrading equipment, and enhancing Internet connectivity--along with providing continuous professional development for teachers and promoting collaboration with urban schools, will help bridge the education gap between urban and rural areas.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, educational inequality in China is a complex phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the country's historical, social, and economic contexts. The disparities between urban and rural areas, gender differences, and economic inequities all contribute to the unequal allocation of educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes. Although the government has implemented various policies and programs to mitigate these disparities, significant challenges remain, particularly for marginalized groups.

To create a more equitable educational system, it is imperative to increase investment in underfunded regions, provide robust support for teachers, and enhance educational infrastructure. Strengthening social support networks and streamlining the financial aid application process are also crucial measures to ensure that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to quality education. Moreover, targeted interventions that consider the specific needs of different regions and communities are essential for closing the gaps in educational opportunities. By addressing these multifaceted issues comprehensively, China can strive towards a more equitable education system, fostering social mobility and reducing long-term socioeconomic disparities.

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