

# Women Rights Issues in Western China and Southern Sudan

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the problem of lacking education in two regions: western China and southern Sudan. The paper will mainly discuss three problems that young women face: the role that discrimination in the workplace plays in such villages, the role that family plays in promoting education of males more than females, and the problem of school bullying.*

## Keywords

Women rights, Education, Discrimination, Family, Workplace, Gender inequality

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## 1. Introduction

In 2005, a girl named Rashida was born in Dingxi, a poor region in northwestern China. Dingxi has long been one of the most poverty-stricken regions in Gansu province, and China as a whole. The region's economy is based on the agricultural and natural resource industries. The area hosts three hundred plus Chinese medicinal plants and herbs that are exported along with dried exports such as walnuts and wild apricots. Despite her family's poverty, she grew up with a thirst for knowledge and a curiosity about the world. However, she does not yet know how many difficulties she would face as she grew up. Rashida's brother was not asked to do farm work like Rashida but has been fully supported by the family to go to school. By contrast, the family was opposed to Rashida completing her education, and encouraged her to drop out of school as soon as possible to help the family to make ends meet. This transition to a place of work often results in other forms of discrimination in that context.

In the short years that Rashida did attend school, it was not easy. The teacher often used violence to solve the problem, leading to the intimidation of classmates. She would often be bullied by the boys. Moreover, relatives in the family advised Rashida not to continue studying, saying that girls do not need to study so much; they just need to marry. The family's lack of support for her, teachers who demonstrated preference in educating males, and the local community discrimination against women made her a slave in this poor mountainous region. Her only recourse was to get married and have children at the age of fifteen or sixteen years old.

This story about Rashida illustrates the challenges that many women continue to face in poor areas in different regions of the world today. These challenges include family, bullying at school, and discrimination in work. There is tremendous pressure for women only to remain in school until marrying age, which is usually about fifteen or sixteen years old. Rashida's story is not representative of northwest China only, but also illustrates the challenges for many young women in rural settings throughout the world. For example, young girls are forced to drop out of school as they reach the age for marriage, bullied by boys and even teachers at school, and discriminated against for pregnancy in the workplace.

With the rapid development of society, more people are becoming aware of the issue of gender inequality in regions such as western China and southern Sudan. However, in the poor rural areas of western China in the twenty-first century, many women are still unable to receive the education they deserve due to lack of educational resources and gender discrimination. Women in South Sudan face the same problem in many cases. Lack of education for women in both regions is a crucial issue that needs to be fixed as the society keeps developing quickly. Whether a woman is educated or not is important for the whole family, because studies show that a well-educated woman can impact her children and the whole family since she is the principal provider

of care that the child needs as the child grows up. According to a case study on the Impact of Educated Mother on Academic Achievement, “Academic performance of highly educated mother’s children is better than those whose mothers are not well educated. The evidence shows that 87% children, whose mothers are educated, are academically successful while the ratio of academically unsuccessful ratio was only 13 percent.”<sup>[1]</sup> Therefore, educating women is a problem that needs to be noticed and solved in order to make the society better. In this paper, barriers that post challenges for women to receive education will be discussed along several different avenues. My paper will examine the challenges of discrimination and bias that women are often presented within their family, school and finally the workplace. Furthermore, this paper will compare the problem of lacking education for women in western China and southern Sudan.

## **2. Analysis**

The problems of lacking education that women face in western China stems from the family dynamic within the traditional Chinese culture where males carried the honor of the family name and were seen as the core of the family. For this reason, women were viewed as secondary and often looked over or unwanted. This mentality of thinking towards females is ingrained in Chinese culture, especially in western China, where the traditional folk atmosphere is stronger than that in the eastern China. For example, some Chinese rural areas have such a custom that women are not allowed to eat at the table, they can only squat or sit in the kitchen to eat. Such customs have lasted for thousands of years.

Historically, a woman's role in the family dynamic was one of servitude. There were extremely strict doctrines in place, doctrine established in the Confucian era, that clearly divided not only the role between the man and woman but the hierarchy of importance between the two. Confucianism established a patriarchy in which women held no roles of authority and were powerless against men. Within Confucian literature, called *The Analects*, the five relationships are stressed which are father-child, ruler-subject, husband-wife, elder-brother - younger brother and friend-friend. Males were deemed the prize. If a woman could not give birth to a male, she was seen as damaged. (Le, 2019) It was the expectation that women were to be subordinate to men. Daughters were expected to be subordinate to their fathers. Wives were expected to be subordinate to their husbands. From youth, girls were trained for their role of wifedom. Education was not anticipated nor was it a requirement. The role of the woman was to remain at home in service to her husband and family. Her desire was to be pleasing only unto her husband. Therefore, the advancement of self was rejected and not embraced.

In the current generation within rural areas in western China, these same teachings that have been taught from generation to generation have remained. The idea of young women that are ambitious for an educated life is dismissed. This is in stark contrast to urban areas in which young girls have more opportunity. Confucianism plays a weaker role in rural areas than in cities, because in the past few decades, China has experienced urbanization, a large number of infrastructure construction and the development of the real estate market have attracted rural young people to work in cities, leaving only the elderly and children with low education level in rural areas. These old people have experienced the era of the cultural revolution, resulting in the low level of education. Moreover, the reason behind the division in thinking is because wealthier families that have resources that enable girls to attend school will give the opportunity. Rural

areas are poor and without resources that will extend educational tools to girls. As a result, families will opt to invest in male children.

In China, family is the foundation of society. It is the idea that families are to have a collective identity which is filtered through one person, the head of household, the male. The advancement and interest of the family overwhelmingly takes priority and precedence over individual wants. The parental perception is that girls are devalued. The attitudes towards young women are often discriminatory. Therefore, the lack of education faced by western Chinese women is also influenced by the Chinese concept of family. Education is insisted upon males as they are seen to bring respect and advance the family legacy. The choice to send the male to school over the female is in direct response to the overall societal view of women and their role in the family unit. Although in many of the Chinese urban cities, women may hold positions, there is a wide pay gap which is in direct response to the educational gap between the two sexes. The low educational investment into young women is a norm in Chinese culture. The perspective of females in the workforce also contributes to the low educational investment. Parents understand the politics that plague the Chinese workforce. Women are told that they will only work in certain positions. They will only make a certain amount of money, strictly based on the fact that they are female. According to a survey report on the current situation of Chinese women's workplace in 2020, the overall salary of working women is 17% lower than that of men. (Ifeng, 2020) Parents have a clear understanding of the treatment of women and choose to place their investment in the male who has a higher rate of success to bring the family financial prosperity. Males are thought to fuel the economic environment where women are thought to stagnate or hinder progress based on their lack of skill. Statistically, the proportion of women in technical posts is generally lower than that of men. Technical jobs seem to be exclusive to men, showing

obvious characteristics of occupational gender deviation. Even if men and women work in the same work unit, when women's educational level, marital status, age, work experience and other personal characteristic variables are the same as men, the possibility of women's access to power is still significantly lower than men, and the incidence of women's access to power is only 43.3% of men. (cnwomen.com, 2021)

This is in stark comparison to Chinese women in urban areas. This point demonstrates that women of urban origin still have a certain advantage in access to higher education in comparison with women of rural origin. However, in comparison with women students at private institutions, the difference between urban and rural women students at public institutions is fairly small. At public institutions, aside from the top universities, the difference in urban and rural women's opportunities to attend school is on average less than 10 percent (Chinese Education and Society, 2010).

Young Chinese women's education comes from within the home. Due to the ideology of the role of women to serve, elder women are often noted to train the younger women in becoming good wives and mothers. Young women are not empowered and are ill-advised to form a self-identity outside the role within their homes. Education motivates students to form opinions of how they see themselves in relation to the world around them. Education gives hope and an identity that belongs to oneself. Young Chinese women are not given that opportunity due to the doctrine that they are to become who their family, especially the males, have deemed them to be.

Young women in rural Sudan, located in the northeastern region of Africa face similar discrepancies. The area is south of the Sahara. The family structure involves immediate and extended family members. The father is the head of household and the official leader. He is

responsible for all financial responsibilities. Young women are completely regarded as an afterthought, segregated from male counterparts within village events as well as their homes. Women and men are apart from one another. Young women are viewed as inferior to men, therefore, to hold the same space is to suggest that they are equal. Young women commune in group settings with one another. The role of the woman was that she is to tend to the activities of the children and household. The house is considered her domain. However, the woman's main purpose was decided by her husband. Her role was to be a servant to her and his subject to his authority. This ideal of a woman's role was upheld in such a way that most Sudanese women endure female circumcision to ensure that sex was purely enjoyed by the husband. Her complete identity is overshadowed by his perspective of who she is and what she is to become.

Education is not a requirement for young Sudanese women, The husband is the financial provider which stunts the woman's potential to obtain financial independence. (Lutaaya, and Grawert, 1999) A woman is thought to have little to no choice which restricts her education, her independence, and her potential to thrive outside her lineage.

Family, what is to be the symbol of comfort, is a discouraging symbol of tormented doctrine that is a thief to both a Chinese and Sudanese woman's ability to thrive.

In the event that a young Chinese girl can attend school to receive an education, we must examine the difficulties of receiving an education in a society that negates a female's value outside of her home. First, we must understand that in rural China, poverty is overwhelming. Education is not free and comes with its financial burdens on an already strained family income. The young girl who is fortunate to attend, understands her responsibility to not only attend but to also excel and use those learned skills as a tool to assist her family into a more prosperous life.

However, the subculture in schools is not favorable to young girls. A report in 2016, stated that bullying in rural China was up by 26.10 percent. Although most of the bullying is done to males, because they are the majority, when it occurs to young girls, emotional scars are long-lasting. Young females are often the targets of bullying for a few reasons. The obvious, the family structure that males are preferred to females, perpetuates a superior complex in which Chinese boys unleash hatred of females being in a space that is not made for them. Secondly, girls outperform males in school. Girls are more apt to take schooling more seriously because of the financial burden taken on by their parents. School is viewed as a privilege; therefore, the majority of females understand the accountability in having a chair in the classroom. In many cases, bullying will lead to depression due to the feelings of isolation. Bullying will also bring about anxiety. However, many of the young women who attend school form a sisterhood or a bond and tend to stick together which helps to combat the effects of bullying (Jung Lee, 2014). Also, because young girls tend to outperform their male counterparts, teachers more than likely pay them extra attention and become more involved in protecting them from experiencing these incidents.

Although bullying also takes place in rural Sudan, it happens in a very different context. Education remains inaccessible due to the cultural norms in the nation to maintain traditional gender roles. Early-age marriage is dominant in keeping women from receiving an education. 10.7% of women aged 15 to 49 were married before the age of 15, and 38% were married before the age of 18. (Michelsen, 2017)

Once a young girl is married, her home becomes her priority, and she is under the jurisdiction of her husband. The husbands use financial dependency and physical violence to have their young wives submit to their demands.



The other form of bullying that takes place in rural villages is that of female circumcision. This is the process of removing the female's clitoris from her vagina so that she does not experience pleasure during sex. In many villages, this is seen as a rite of passage before a young woman is married. However, it is often used as a tactic by the male to maintain his rule in the home. Most sexual violence occurs in this way. Painful sexual activities are stopped, but less painful forms of sexual contacts and activities are maintained. Exploring alternatives to penile–vaginal intercourse can be beneficial for the woman. However, such flexibility might be limited in some cultures where vaginal penetration is seen as the only acceptable form of sex (Abdulcadir, 2021).

In many of these villages, these violent rituals and early marriages are not stopped due to the accepted norm that has been passed down through generations.

In the workforce, Chinese women are adversely affected by marriage and having dependent children. They are more likely than men to experience (involuntary, in particular) job exit to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers and less likely to move up in the career ladder (Guangye, Wu, 2021). As rural China faces economic reform, the culture is still inundated with discrimination against women in the workforce. With the resurfacing of old values and capitalism, women are impacted by a huge wage gap, directly impacted by the inequality of education. Due to the disparities in the distribution of education, women are not given elaborate positions in companies. The hierarchy of the family has also played out in the corporate work culture. Men are dominant controls in the workforce. There are women who are highly educated. They are often overlooked, dismissed, and viewed passively when it comes to top-tier promotions and positions.

Due to the high rate of poverty in rural China, both the man and woman in the home are workers. However, the woman is expected to leave her position if she becomes pregnant to focus on raising the children. Society does not embrace the woman who can have a career and raise a family.

The workforce in Sudan is very similar in that the women make up 57 percent. Women hold jobs both in the home and in the field if approved by her husband. However, the family home remains the focus in the many villages. Women tend to lean towards more social roles than labor roles simply because it is more accepted in the family unit.

What would be the solution to the inequality of women in these areas? The easy answer is for men to view women as the equal or at the very least as human. This answer is complex and layered. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UHDR), the root document from which subsequent international human rights treaties have grown, reflects an integrated conception of human rights. The UHDR declares that everyone has civil and political rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and security of the person, to freedom from slavery to freedom from torture, and to freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile. It also declares the right of everyone to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association with others. It sets out the democratic rights to take part in the conduct of public affairs, to vote, and to be elected in genuine periodic elections (Day, 2000). Again, the simple answer is to have males view women as equals. Women should have the ability to have reproductive rights, voting rights, equal pay, etc. Yet, the idea is more psychological than it is logical. In human interaction, there is one that must be superior. The perspective of women must change. The way in which inequality is resolved is by giving all females access to education. Education is power. When a female has knowledge, she can create a life for herself, her family

and contribute to the advancement of this world. Allow women platforms of power and influence. Women are intelligent beings. Women are great nurturers because they are intuitive. In allowing women to have platforms, her voice can reach hearts and provoke thought. The biggest solution to end gender inequality is to stop violence against women. Death should not meet a woman because she wants an education or become her own person. Violence is not a vehicle to keep a woman in submissive harmful positions. Violence against women should be condemned and be subjected to dire consequences.

### **1.2.1 Conclusion**

In conclusion, Chinese and Sudanese women are facing an extreme crisis. In the year of 2021, these women are enduring horrific torture physically, emotionally, and mentally just to be seen as human. The basic right to have an education without ridicule is what most desire. The idea that these women would like to have the ability to be a re-thinking individual outside of family and culture. The horror in having to suppress the truth of who you are and what you need for yourself because you are not seen is incomprehensible. The social and cultural norms are creating generations that are suffocated by the ideologies of their ancestors. Freedom is a right that should not have to be bargained for. Inequality hinders growth. It stagnates progression and it stops the production of creativity in a society. The contribution of women is vast and shouldn't be denied or taken for granted. There is power in the voice of a woman.

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