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Matching gender disparity in China: achievement and lessons

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Matching Gender Disparity in China: Achievement and lessons

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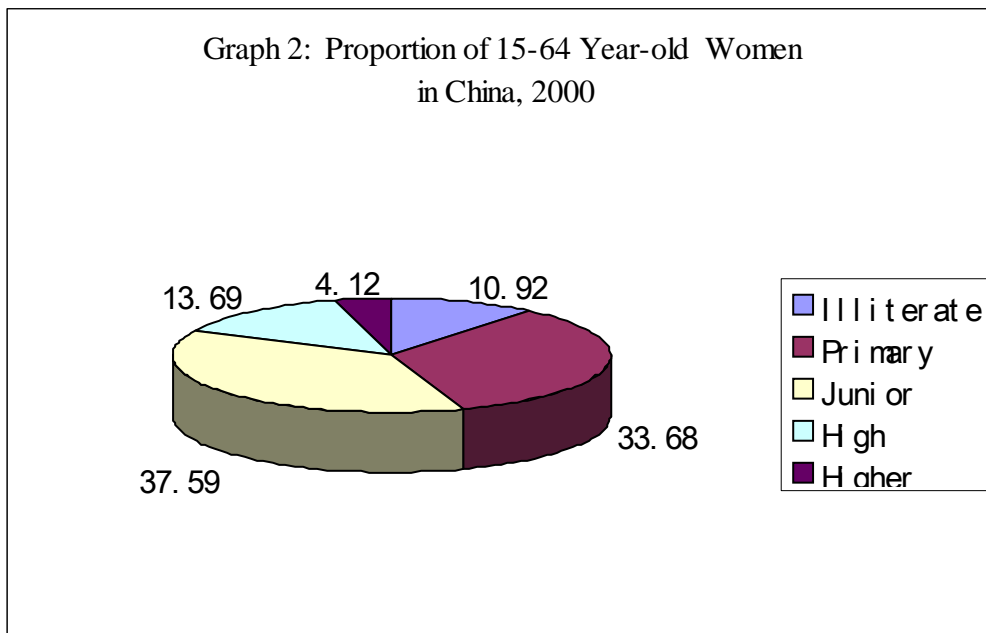
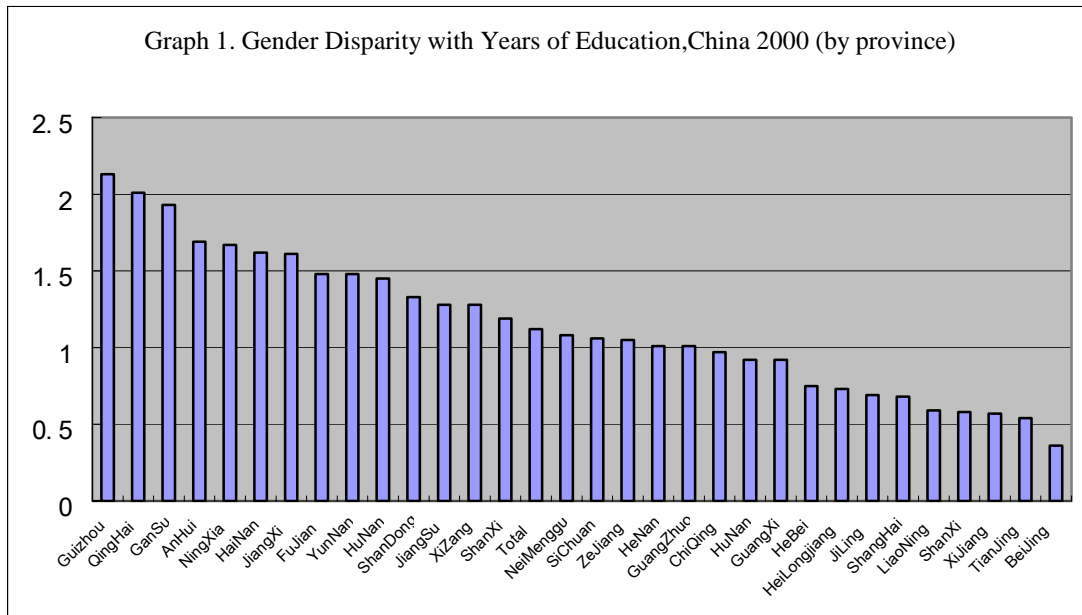
With a conviction that a well-educated populace is the most generative resource for sustainable social development, China has been trying to upgrade the crowded population into productive human resources through equitable expansion of its education system. It is now widely acknowledged that the equal distribution of educational investment determines the whole nation's capacity in the reproduction of its human capital. Education for women and girls used to be fallen behind compared with males. Therefore, the Chinese government has made persistent efforts in achieving equal education provision as a fundamental strategy to gender parity over the last several decades.

This paper intends to highlight the major achievement in gender parity in China since 1990s. Major contributing factors are reviewed to explain for the progress. And finally current problems and proposed strategies are also discussed.

I. Achievement in Gender Parity in Education

The major achievement of China's progress in gender parity could be described with several indicators.

Female adult illiteracy rate and gender difference with years of schooling. Over the decade from 1990-2000, the illiteracy rate in China was dropped from 22.21 per cent to 9.08 per cent. More noticeably, illiteracy among women fell from 31.39 per cent to 13.47 per cent, a decrease of 17.92 percentages. Such a rate, when converted into actual numbers, meant a decrease of illiterates from 181.61 million to 78.30 million, a reduction of 94.31 million over 10 years. The 5th National Census in 2000 revealed the average years of schooling for 15-64 year-olds was 8.83 for men and 7.71 for women, 1.12 years of difference.



Source: Data from the 5th National Census, 2000.

Equitable presentation in primary school enrollment. The gender attribution has been comparable in the total primary enrollment. As indicated in the following chart, there has been a steady increase with girls' participation since 1990s as illustrated that the gender disparity was reduced from 2.1 per cent down to 0.07 per cent.

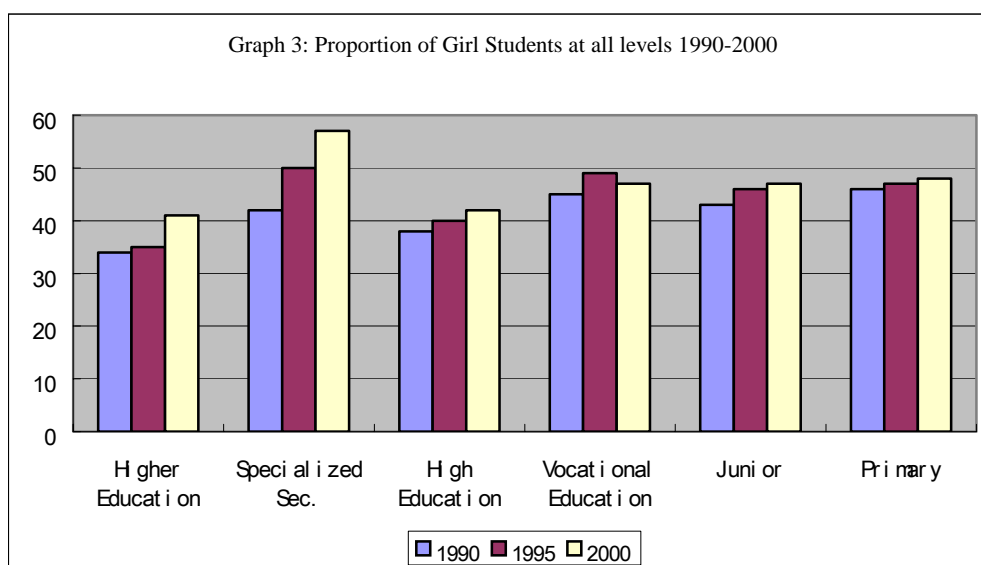
Table 1. Gender Disparity in China's Primary Schools 1990-2000 (NER, %)

Year	Both Sex	Boys	Girls	Disparity
1990	96.30	-	-	-
1991	96.80	-	-	-
1992	97.20	98.20	96.10	2.10
1993	97.70	98.50	96.80	1.70
1994	98.40	99.00	97.70	1.30
1995	98.50	98.90	98.20	0.70
1996	98.80	99.00	98.60	0.40
1997	98.90	99.00	98.80	0.20
1998	98.90	99.00	98.90	0.10
1999	99.10	99.10	99.00	0.10
2000	99.10	99.14	99.07	0.07
2001	99.05	99.08	99.01	0.07
2002	98.58	98.62	98.53	0.09

Source: Department of Education Development and Planning, Ministry of Education. 2003

Indicators on the dropout rate proved also similar, 0.55 per cent for all and 0.61 per cent for girls. (The State Council Office for Women and Children's Affairs, State Statistics Bureau. National Review Report on the Progress of the China's Women Development Guidelines 1995-2000)

Active participation of women in secondary and tertiary education. The presentation of girl students made favorable progress over the 10 year period. The female proportion proves favorable at all levels of education system i.e. 48 in primary, 47 in lower secondary, 47 in secondary vocational, 57 in specialized secondary and 40 in tertiary colleges in 2000. There has been an increase of female enrollment in specialized secondary education mainly due to broad para-professional training programs such as primary school teachers, services and information technologies which are more competitive for urban employment.



Source: The State Council Office for Women and Children's Affairs, State Statistics Bureau. National Review Report on the Progress of the China's Women Development Guidelines 1995-2000.

Strengthened women's participation in community development. Men and women, with same technical and academic competencies, and undertaking the same occupation, enjoy equal payment. Women can take also paid maternal leave. Throughout 1990s, women's employment was undergoing an upward movement. By the year 2000 the total female employment was recorded as 33 million, an increase of 42.4 per cent from 1990. Consequently the male:female pattern with employment reached 55:46 in 2000.

Table 2. Gender Distribution in Employment in China

	1990	1995	2000
Employed (1,000)	639,090	679,470	710,000
Female (%)	45.0	45.7	46.4
<u>Male (%)</u>	<u>55.0</u>	<u>54.3</u>	<u>53.6</u>

Source: <http://www.women.org.cn>

It was revealed from a survey in 16 major occupations in 2000, women employment reached 58% in public health, sports, and social services; 48% in marketing and sales; 46% in education, culture and media; 42% in agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery; and, 18% in manufacturing.

Interestingly the female employment in private sector grew at a much higher rate, reaching 4.5 million, 1.5 times increase than 1995, indicating that women adapt better than males.

Increased women's participation in political affairs and government. At national level,

women presentation in the National People's Congress and the National Political Consultative Conference reached respectively 22 per cent and 16 per cent. With a survey in 2000, women employees amounted to 32% in government and social organizations and women leaders ranked 8 % at provincial level. Besides, more women leaders now play decision-making functions in government management, professional institutions as well as enterprises.

II. Contributing Factors for the Progress

Since 1990s China, affected both with its own exercise of "Open and reform policy" and its exposure to the international expertise, has adopted the major strategy for national development, namely "revitalizing national development with technologies and education" required for the pursuit for sustainable socio-economic development. With such a profound paradigm shift, the human resource development has now been widely acknowledged as indispensable for any national development targets. Therefore, equitable education provision, as a major human capital formality mechanism, has been put on the government priority agenda as a critical area of investment and implementation. To promote such a strategic reorientation, numerous measures have been adopted which can be summarized as four strategies, namely constitutional/judiciary enforcement, government massive interventions, project breakthroughs at grassroots by counterpart stakeholders and regular operation of monitoring and evaluation.

2.1 Constitutional and Judiciary Enforcement for Gender Parity

Gender parity is a legitimized fundamental principle in China's social life. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China stipulates that "women should enjoy the equal right with men in political, cultural/educational, social and family life." The Education Law of the People's Republic of China (1995) states that "Every citizen, regardless of their difference in ethnicity, race, gender, occupation, economic status and religious beliefs, should have his/her equal opportunity for education." The Law of the Compulsory Education of the People's Republic of China (1986) asserts that "Every child at the age of six, irrespective of gender, ethnicity and race should have the right to enjoy the compulsory education." The officially released "National Guidelines for the Development of Women (2000-2010)" and "National Guidelines for the Development of Children (2000-2010)", have pronounced the government commitment for women development as to carry on gender equality policy thus to promote women's participation in all aspects of socio-economic development, political, economic, cultural as well as in community and social life. Specific

objectives are defined to

- ensure women to have equal access to employment and equal rights to share economic resources thus to promote their economic status;

- ensure women's political rights to participate in government policy-making and management affairs;

- guarantee women's equal opportunities for education;

- promote women's status of health and average expected life;

- ensure women's legal rights for equal status and social protection;

- improve social and biological environment in favor of the promotion of women's quality of life.

With the education of women the following specific objectives were outlined to fulfill by 2010, namely;

- ensure the full rights for girls to receive nine-year compulsory education. The net enrolment rate of school-aged girls is expected to reach 99%, cohort retention rate over the five-year primary education cycle 95% and the gross enrolment rate at lower secondary 95%;

- upgrade girls' gross enrolment rate at upper secondary level (grades 10 to12) to 75% and 15% for tertiary colleges;

- promote literacy rate among women adults to 85% or above and 95% among 15-50 year olds;

- promote women's involvement and status in lifelong learning and to increase the average years of education of women to be among the highest among the developing countries.

Such a long-term policy has and will exert a positive impact on the China's education provision of women over the forth-coming years.

2.2 Government Leadership in Implementation at National Level

Government has assumed the primary role in promoting gender parity for the nation at large. The most significant program organized by the government since late 1980s was the "Two Basics Project", namely to basically achieve the dual target of universal nine-year compulsory education among school-aged children and literacy among youths and adults by 2000. Such a task was then delegated to the governments at different levels to fulfill following a required timetable. The progression may vary according to the different contexts.

To meet the basic learning needs of children in disadvantaged western part of China, the central government launched a massive education project for children living poor areas during 1995 and 2000 with a total investment of 10 billion yuan RMB (equivalent to 1.2 billion dollars US), the most intensive allocation since the last 50 years. In order to close the gender gap between urban and rural, especially ethnic minority inhabited areas, the Ministry of Education (MOE) proposed a ten-item integrated intervention initiatives in 1996 to enhance the provision of education for the school-aged girls, including

- strengthening government commitment in taking pragmatic actions and exercise evaluation on their performance for the promotion of girls' education;

- promote the society's awareness for the protection of the legal rights of girls for nine-year compulsory education;

- create all possible assistance for girls to attend school, such as girls' schools and classes, stipend, free textbook programs for girls from poor families;

- prepare an increasing number of competent women teachers and school headmasters with special training programs;

- adapt flexible and responsive school arrangement to include girls such as neighborhood location of schools, boarding facilities for girls from sparsely populated areas, private operation of functional schools with government funding support, girls are allowed to bring their younger brother or sister (a duty to help their parents at home) to school and they can also attend the school following their own convenient time. Besides the curriculum contents may be arranged to primarily focus on the language and mathematics in those places where the whole curriculum could not be implemented;

- re-arrange the learning contents to strengthen the functionality of the curriculum as to include the basic life skills such as sewing, embroidering, weaving, cooking and income generation techniques thus to promote the attractiveness of school programs;

- conduct literacy programs for school dropout girls in those extremely under-served communities, and in the meantime, organize literacy training among women youths and adults;

- mobilize extensive community support for disadvantaged girl learners with donations and special aid programs;

- conduct special research and pilot projects for the promotion of girls' education thus to

explore amendable modalities for effective provision; and,

-undertake effective international cooperation with international organizations and development agencies of other Member States.

In practice, the government also maintained a coordinative role for special programs. With the effective coordination of MOE, international donor agencies such as Unicef, UNESCO, UNDP, the World Bank as well as DFID/UK, Japanese Fund-in Trusts, Ford Foundation and many other donor organizations also made their special assistance to the needy girl/women target groups. With literacy programs, government extension offices were put in charge to organize training session by using local education resources. It has been a practice encouraged by the government to give preferential admission to the disadvantaged girls.

2.3 International Collaboration. China's commitment gender parity and on-going endeavors have been positively facilitated with international exchanges such as the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, 1990), the World Summit on Children (1990, New York), the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995, Beijing) and the World Forum on Education for All (Dakar, 2000), just to mention a few. With the government coordination, international development agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, World Bank, bilateral government grants as well as numerous INGOs have operated their special education programs for women and girls. The most recent project initiated in Gansu Province by DFID, UK intends to address the special needs of the ethnic minority girls. The on-going UNICEF-MOE "Child Friendly School Project" also maintains an a particular favor for girl child.

2.4 Gender parity promoted with extensive partnerships.

Gender parity has become a public concern since late 1980s. Starting form 1989, China Children's Foundation initiated a special donation program, "Spring Bud", for girls from poor families. Now the program helps 150,000 dropout girls return to schools each year (Zhou,2003). The American Association of Science, composed of a group of overseas Chinese scholars, initiated "Adopt a rural library" project which has been extended to benefit 25,000 rural schools in poor areas. Education research institutions have played a innovative role for girls' education. Over the 10 years from 1991 to 2000, educational research institutions in Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Guizhou, Yunnan, Xingjiang jointly undertook a series of action research for promoting girls' access and learning achievement in primary education (Zhou, 1995; Zhang, 2003). University

professors also made their own contributions by introducing gender perspectives on the education of rural girls and women, protection of women's rights, gender issues in textbook development, female teacher training, as well as long-term development policies for women development (Zhou, 2003). All-China Women's Federation operates a special school to organize short-term training on income generation skills for rural women, which is now a popular program.

2.5 Monitoring and Supervision Mechanism

There is a forceful evaluation and supervision mechanism for the implementation following the policy-making. Both tasks of literacy for women and schooling for girl children have been acknowledged by law as the obligatory responsibility of the governments at all levels and hence they have to plan for the progress of literacy and basic education in the local community. By the time they declare the success the independent inspector team will accredit their achievement and will make recommendations for reward or punishment. Besides, public media functions increasingly as a powerful instrument for community supervision of gender parity. To educated has been widely accepted as social value and a basic quality for a citizen in today's world. This has become a common sense, which in return affect the education decisions of women and girls as well as males.

Despite of the above reviewed major strategies, China, as the most populous, developing country, is still confronted with serious challenges. Currently there are still 50 million youth and adult female illiterates among the 15 or above, 72 per cent of the total illiterate population. Rural illiterates amount to 78 per cent of the total. Besides, the education status of rural-urban women migrants is fairly limited with 9 per cent female youths and adults have completed lower secondary schooling and 1 per cent for upper secondary while the data of their male peers are 52 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. All these will certainly present a demanding task for the promotion of gender parity in the years to come.

III. Trends for the first decade in 21st Century

Despite of the progress over the last decade as in the case of China, human strife for a desired gender parity remains a long journey. It is our shared vision that gender parity in education should address the totality of human resource development both for women and men that is: to have equal opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills necessary for their strife for alleviation

of poverty and improvement of the quality of life, to ensure their progress and achievement in the learning process which may enable women to become self-motivated actors and lifelong learners thus to participate in the social development. To achieve such a desired gender parity in education requires continued and institutionalized arrangement which will enlist a policy consistence, at community, national and international levels, for gender equality throughout the whole education process; an integration of improved physical environment and teaching learning processes, school and system management; a partnership between government and communities at large; proper match between the densely populated and sparsely distributed communities, between the short-term intervention and long-term continuity. Arrangement should also be made in terms introduction of gender perspectives in both pre-service and in-service teacher development programs, special incentives for girls and women learners. Besides, information and communication technologies could also be utilized to close the “gender gap”.

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