

The Influence of Family Values on Female Students' Access to Higher Education in China

Siyu Yuan

University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Previous studies have extensively explored different gender gaps in higher education among students from different social backgrounds (Zhang, 2022; Li, 2010). However, how family values influence students' capability for higher education has not been explored as in-depth as other framings of inequity. Therefore, as part of my current PhD work, this study employs intersectionality theory and capability approach to reveal how family values shape female students' opportunities through individual experiences. Based on semi-structured interviews with 30 female university students from diverse backgrounds, the study focuses on representative cases. My findings to date demonstrate that traditional Chinese gender norms manifest to varying degrees and forms in families with different backgrounds and emphasize how gender concepts interact with other identities to form the unique strengths or weaknesses of female students. This study illuminates family values' different roles in gender equality in Chinese higher education access in the complex reality of Chinese society.

Full paper

1. Introduction

Although significant progress has been made in gender equality in Chinese higher education over the past few decades, social identity characteristics, such as social class, ethnicity and urban-rural dual division are still the sources of inequality for female students in China (Luo, Guo & Li, 2021). Some studies investigate differences in gender equality in access to higher education among different groups, which shows that females from rural and low-income families are the vulnerable groups (Wu, Yan & Zhang, 2020; Zhao, Tang & Wu, 2022). However, the reasons for the different gender gaps in higher education among groups from different backgrounds need further exploration, due to the lack of empirical evidence on individual experiences. Therefore, my current PhD study seeks to explore how family values, especially son preference and gender norms, are presented in different

families and intersect with other factors to influence female students' higher education opportunities at the micro level.

2. Study

The study employs a qualitative research design, integrating the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989), to develop a theoretical framework which allows for an exploration of both the achievement and opportunities of gender equality in higher education in China, while acknowledging the intersecting identities such as class and ethnicity, that mediate students' experiences. To date, this study has conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with female university students to investigate the opportunities and well-being in and through higher education under the interaction of gender and other identities. The data collected was coded and analysed by thematic analysis. Thematic coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework, integrating deductive codes from capability approach and intersectionality theory and inductive codes emerging from the data. This paper focuses on representative cases of participants from different backgrounds in the wider study to show how family values shape the advantages and disadvantages of female students accessing higher education in different modes.

3. Key Findings

Based on the theoretic frameworks of capability approach and intersectionality theory, this study reveals the differential shaping mechanisms of four types of family values on women's higher education opportunities:

3.1. Structural Deprivation

This is the most classic pattern of gender inequality in Chinese education, typically occurring in multi-child families with a strong son preference and low income. In this model, family values interact with gender, number of children, and low family income, depriving educational resources of female students and limiting their capability to access higher education.

3.2. Implicit limitations

This model is gradually replacing the previous one with the economic development and popularization of higher education in China, which generally occurs in middle-income families with weak son preference. The implicit limitations include conditional

empowerment and gender norms. Conditional investment in females' higher education opportunities is more vulnerable than unconditional investment in male students. In addition, family expectations based on gender stereotypes subtly constrain female students' major choices and mobility.

3.3. Educational gender paradox

This is a special model, which means the intersection of son preference with particular factors, may cause male students to be at a disadvantage in accessing higher education. This counterintuitive outcome demonstrates how intersecting oppressions may inadvertently empower marginalized groups through capability recalibration.

3.4. Intergenerational role replacement

This is a unique pattern that exists in families with a son preference but without male offspring in the new generation. The chosen female is seen as a substitute for the male heir and is required to meet the expectations of families based on gender norms towards males.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study up to this point provides insights into various manifestations of gender inequality in education from the perspective of family values under different intersecting factors. Family gender norms and son preference do not operate in isolation but are intersected with structural factors such as family resources, intergenerational expectations, and gender stereotypes, collectively shaping an individual's capabilities. To date, my study has found that gender inequality is not only manifested in explicit deprivation of opportunities but also hidden beneath surface equality or challenges traditional assumptions through intersectional factors, such as male preference necessarily reinforcing male educational advantages. It means that the realization of gender equality in Chinese higher education requires the deconstruction of the multiple dimensions of family values, promoting policy intervention from resource allocation to gender concept reshaping, in order to weaken its structural oppression. Based on existing findings, this study will further explore the opportunities and well-being of female students in Chinese higher education, in order to reveal the lasting effect of family values on gender equality in the development of capability.