



In the People's Republic of China, girls now have more schooling than boys

Girls now have more schooling on average than boys in the People's Republic of China, reversing the age-old tradition of sons being better educated than daughters.

One driver of change is China's rapid economic growth over the past several decades, which has raised female literacy and living standards, leading to females receiving more schooling. Government policies limiting families to just one child and requiring them to send all children to school are also major factors.

A survey of educational attainment of respondents from three generations within one family shows that the gap between the schooling of boys and girls has been narrowing, so much so that girls now have more schooling on average than boys. The survey also reveals that the younger generation receives more schooling than their grandparents did.

The change is most apparent in urban areas.

Among the youngest respondents, women on average had more schooling than men, receiving 12.45 years of education against 12.28 years for men. But among their parents' generation, men averaged 9.4 years of schooling compared with 8.32 years for women.

The oldest among the respondents showed the biggest gender gap: men had more than twice as many years of schooling on average—4.34 against 1.98 years for women.

Change in rural areas has been slower.

In the grandparent generation, men had an average of four times as much education as women. The gap narrowed in the parent generation, with men receiving twice as much

education as women. The gap was narrowest in the youngest generation, with men receiving just 15% more education than women—8.58 years against 7.46 years.

The survey also showed a dramatic rise in educational attainment across three generations. Urban respondents' average length of education rose from 2.83 years among the oldest to 12.36 years among the youngest. Rural respondents' average length of education rose from 1 year to 8 years.

The high rate of illiteracy in the oldest generation is astonishing. Among those born in 1923 or 1924, nearly 60% of urban respondents and as many as 80% of rural respondents are illiterate. Rural women have it even worse, with 90% of them illiterate compared with 62% for rural men. By comparison, 95% of adults in the United States in the 1920s could read and write.

China's rapid economic growth, averaging close to 10% per year since 1989, is a big factor in the country's gains in education. The growing economy means there are more resources to finance education and more jobs for the educated, particularly women. A more educated populace, in turn, contributes to economic growth.

Economic growth also means modernization, which brings with it changes in attitudes, particularly in the preference for sons. China's preference for boys led the country to having one of the most imbalanced sex ratios in the world and, consequently, boys receiving more education than girls.

The most recent data put the ratio at 1.15 boys to girls at birth and 1.17 boys to girls up to 14 years of age.

The preference for sons has been attributed to numerous cultural norms but is likely also due, at least in part, to parents' expectation that sons will earn more than daughters and more likely live close by, unlike daughters, who traditionally live nearer their husband's family.

Because of their strong preference for sons, families devoted fewer resources to daughters than sons. Studies have shown worse health outcomes for girls than for boys, less financial support, and less investment in schooling.

But a 1986 law mandating 9 years of schooling for all children contributed to the rise in schooling among girls. The law primarily affected rural areas, where only 4 to 6 years of schooling had been required. The law was rolled out gradually across provinces, beginning in the most economically advanced areas, covering all children who had not reached grade nine.

China's one-child policy, implemented in 1980, also contributed significantly to the gains made by women in education. Couples with daughters can no longer try for a son, leaving the parents to spend their income on raising their daughter. Raising just one child rather than several also allows greater resources to be directed toward education.

Of the two policies, compulsory schooling had the larger impact, was significant only in rural areas, and benefited rural women the most. This is not surprising as schooling in urban areas was already higher than required.

The one-child policy, instituted nationwide but more strictly enforced in urban areas, had nearly equal positive effects on schooling for males and females and for rural and urban areas.

These results show that both policy and economic growth drive schooling attainment.

This episode is based on [research](#) done for the Asian Development Bank Institute by Kathleen McGarry, professor and vice chair in the Department of Economics at UCLA and a research associate at National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Xiaoting Sun, a PhD candidate in the Department of Economics at UCLA.

Listen to podcast

- <https://soundcloud.com/adbinstitute/prc-girls-now-have-more-schooling-than-boys/>

Read the working paper

- <https://www.adb.org/publications/three-generations-changing-gender-patterns-schooling-prc>

Know more about ADBI's work

- <https://bit.ly/2Q7FMXZ>
- <https://bit.ly/2zzBgHH>