

An Analysis of Structural Inequality and Social Mobility among Ethnic Minority Women in China

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Abstract. Ethnic minority women in China occupy a unique social position shaped by the combined forces of gender, ethnicity and regional development disparities. Although national efforts in poverty alleviation, ethnic education reform and labour market expansion have improved overall conditions, minority women continue to face unequal access to educational resources, limited employment mobility and deeply embedded cultural expectations that restrict their life choices. This study examines these challenges through the analytical perspectives of Gender Role Theory and Connell's gender and power framework, with the aim of identifying the structural mechanisms that shape women's opportunities and constrain their social mobility. Drawing on secondary data and two illustrative case studies, Huaping Girls' High School in Yunnan and the employment experiences of Mongolian women in Inner Mongolia, the study explores how educational interventions, community perceptions, local labour markets and cultural norms interact to influence women's trajectories. The findings show that targeted educational support can significantly enhance minority girls' access to higher education and long-term development, while rapid socio-economic transitions may intensify tensions between modern labour demands and traditional gender expectations. The study concludes that meaningful progress in promoting gender equality among ethnic minority women requires coordinated policy interventions, community engagement and culturally informed strategies that address both structural inequities and local social norms.

Keywords: ethnic minority women, gender inequality, education, employment, China

1. Introduction

In recent years, discussions on gender equality and inclusive development have gained significant momentum across the world. Although there has been considerable advances in enhancing the levels of women education, labor force participation and social visibility in China, ethnic minority women continue to be the victims of gender, ethnic and regional imbalance. They therefore, live their lives under an assortment of structural limitations, such as inequity in the allocation of educational assets, job prospects and institutionalized traditional gender principles, which tend to limit their social movement and total well provisions [1,2]. Despite a growing body of research on the topic of gender and development in China, the life experiences of ethnic minority women have not yet been well reflected in the mainstream field of academic and policy discussions.

This realization of the ethnic minority women situation is essential in both looking at gender inequality and the larger objectives of poverty alleviation, rural regeneration and balanced regional growth in China. They depict the working of gender expectations and power relations in other cultural contexts as well as the interplay of socioeconomic change and tradition over time in determining the opportunities available to women. In the meantime, recent efforts including the reform of ethnic education, poverty reduction efforts and regional labour market plans have been emerging as new opportunities that allow ethnic minority women to increase their opportunities, although their success is not uniform across the regions [3]. This paper will discuss the modern life of ethnic minority women in China, their primary challenge in life, and how the gender theory may be used to explain the mechanism behind the formation of these inequalities. This paper will be based on the analysis of the structure constraints and new avenues to empowerment through theoretical discussion and two case studies, the practice of ethnic minority women employment at Huaping Girls High School of Yunnan and Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. By examining these instances, this paper attempts to make contributions to the current Chinese discourse regarding gender justice, the development of ethnic minorities, and inclusive policy formulation.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Gender role theory

Gender role theory suggests that society builds what are considered the normative expectations of men and women regarding what behaviors, responsibilities, and identities are “expected” of each [4]. These socially constructed roles of men and women are embedded in the family, taught in schools, reinforced through cultural beliefs and practices, and recognized in community institutions, such that they are often invisible, yet widely recognized in day-to-day life. In many ethnic minority areas in China, these gender roles are also shaped by local culture, religion, and rural livelihoods. Women usually have responsibilities for the family, children, and community support, while men bear external labor roles and decision-making roles [4].

Such expectations shape ethnic minority women’s lives in many ways. For instance, limitations on women’s freedom of action, early marriage traditions, and family-based division of labor frequently lead to low levels of education and limited formal employment opportunities. Additionally, gendered expectations may facilitate women’s absence from public decision-making, thereby reducing women’s collective bargaining power. Thus, gender role theory offers a useful starting point for understanding how deeply ingrained gender norms can limit women’s opportunities when policies or cash transfers are present.

2.2. Gender and power

According to the theory of gender and power developed by Cornell, the structural approach is aimed at three dimensions of gender division of labor, gender power division and the division of emotional and social relationships that are interconnected [5]. These dimensions define gender as a power system and make the allocation of resources, power, and symbolical value systems in the society systematic. These aspects play out in minority communities, whereby there are inequalities in access to education, restrictions in job choices, and differences in access to decision-making. The division of labor in gender is also seen through the confinement of the minority women to low-income jobs or the informal jobs which are usually shaped by both the structural and cultural norms. The division of gender power emphasizes the disadvantageous role of women in making the family decisions and

leading the community reflected in vicious circle of marginalization. Investment organization also demonstrates emotional standards, like conformity expectation, humility or familial ascendency which further inhibit female actions and goals.

Based on this framework, it is possible to interpret that the issues of minority women are not caused by their personal or cultural inadequacy, but due to the complexity of the reliance of multiple layers of power relations with ethnicity, regions, and socioeconomic status. It also discloses ways in which institutional changes (e.g. interventions in education or special employment programmes) could be used to fragment existing gender inequalities and empower people.

3. Living conditions of ethnic minority women in China

China has approximately 126 million ethnic minority residents, accounting for 8.9% of the national population, with women making up almost half. Over the centuries, ethnic minority women have gradually gained access to education and employment, but this process has been uneven across regions [6]. Official statistics show that while the gross enrollment rate in higher education for ethnic minority women has increased significantly, it remains below the national average, especially in remote border provinces. Due to the combined effects of geographical isolation, family economic pressures, and cultural factors, the dropout rate among ethnic minority women during the transition from primary to junior high school and from junior high to senior high school remains high [6]. Ethnic minority women have a higher labor participation rate than rural Han women, but they are mainly concentrated in low-skilled sectors such as agriculture, textiles, domestic services, and informal retail. Their advancement remains extremely difficult due to skill mismatches, limited vocational training opportunities, and local labor market issues.

These trends reveal two key issues affecting the daily lives of ethnic minority women. First, there is the uneven distribution of educational resources. In border areas, schools are often poorly equipped, underfunded, and scattered, requiring students to commute or board. Some families, facing financial difficulties, have to focus on their sons' education, leading to a higher dropout rate for girls. Language barriers are another significant factor, especially since most people's native language is not Chinese. This further hinders academic practice and access to higher education, making minority girls less competitive in education and employment. Secondly, there are deeply ingrained gender norms within local cultures. In most minority groups, concepts such as early marriage, childcare, and domestic labor still supersede women's social roles. Religious or cultural customs may restrict women's freedom, hinder their entry into the job market, or confine their contributions more to the home than the labor market, giving them symbolic significance. These intertwined limitations reflect the dual impact of structural differences and cultural customs, both of which jointly determine the life experiences of minority women and, in the long run, their life decisions, choices, and social mobility.

4. Case studies

4.1. Huaping Girls' High School: a model of educational empowerment

Huaping Girls High School that is situated in a remote mountainous area in the Yunnan Province offers a good case study to how educational interventions can change the life course of ethnic minority girls. Before the school was set up, girls in the area had to struggle with intense structural challenges to education. Questions of poverty, travel distance and opportunity costs tended to urge the family to discourage her daughter against schooling, which further solidified the notion that it is

better to send the girl to work than send her to school. These sense of attitudes helped in facilitating high rates of dropouts as well as limited transition to secondary and higher education [7].

To overcome such difficulties, the school developed a vast package of support interventions: tuition-free schooling and free rooming in order to eliminate financial factors; rigorous academic and behavioural control to foster discipline and self-confidence; systematic psychological support system to assist students to overcome trauma or family pressure, or a cultural need. On top of institutional structures, community and philanthropic donations have been important in supporting the school operations which have established a long lasting model of grassroots educational empowerment.

The key to the success of the school is the leadership of Zhang Guimei who relentlessly pushed the idea of getting the community to change their perceptions towards the education of girls. She did a lot of house calls convincing families that she had to send their daughters to school and in many cases negotiated with the parent who was reluctant based on the economic or cultural reasons [7]. Subsequently, the school admiration rates of Huaping Girls are exceptionally high, with the majority of college admissions occurring almost in 100 percent in specific years, which reflects the potential of this targeted intervention in underserved experienced areas.

4.2. Employment challenges and transformations among Mongolian women in Inner Mongolia

The way gender norms, coupled with power structures, interact with the process of economic transformation in the region is seen in the employment conditions of Mongolian women in Inner Mongolia [8]. With the shift away from the traditional pastoral lifestyle of the region towards urbanisation and the growth of the service-based economy, more and more women in Mongolia have started to work in the education sector, the tourism and hospitality industry, and the cultural industry. Nevertheless, even with industrial involvement of more labourers, they are still not allowed to play managerial, technical or decision-making roles. The trend is very similar to the Gender Role Theory, where expectations formed in the society have remained influential in influencing the behaviour and career choices of women. Women in most Mongolian families and societies are still largely linked to nurturing, home organization and community related cultural engagements, and therefore, the problem could be more challenging with long working hours, career growth, or movement to pursue employment.

The shift towards urban-based employment, as a result of the abandonment of nomadic or semi-nomadic ways of life, has also generated a sort of two-pronged pressure dilemma among the Mongolian women [8]. On the one hand, urban labour markets require better education, professional training, and full-time commitment. Conversely, the conventional gender roles still place women with the main role of taking care of children, elderly and managing the home. The resultant blend is a hybrid burden: women have to fit the demands of the contemporary urban working environment and at the same time keep the role of taking care of their families and communities as primary caregivers. Also, the opportunities of them to ascend the hierarchy of educational performance are limited by the lack of access to skill-upgrading programmes and the workplace network.

5. Suggestions and policy implications

The results of this paper suggest that structural constraints that affect ethnic minority women in China are based on disparate access to education, and cultural expectations that are gendered, and divisions in labour markets. A multi-level approach is required in order to help deal with these issues in a sustainable and culturally relevant way.

On the national and policy level, it is crucial that investment into education of minority regions should continue. The policies must focus on reducing urban/rural and interregional disparities of school facilities, distribution of teachers and curriculum facilities. The opportunity costs of schooling can also be lowered further by increasing the financial aid programs that include: scholarships, special subsidies, and conditional cash transfers, to the low-income or culturally conservative households with girls. Gender-sensitive employment programmes in the labour sector should be carried out such as vocational training to suit the local industries, support entrepreneurship by minority women and anti-discrimination towards hiring and promotion.

Similarly, schools and community organisations in the local government and institutional level should also intensify family outreach and mobilize leaders in the area to transform the perception towards the education of girls. Based on the example of Huaping Girls High School success, schools in the minority areas can build a complex network of support that is provided to the students through a combination of academic counseling, psychological counselling, and community outreach. In the rapidly changing labour markets, like in Inner Mongolia, the local governments ought to establish open channels to skills modernisation, facilitate flexible working practices, and allow women to work in new domains, like digital services, tourism-related innovations, or cultural economy.

On the community and cultural level, it should be aimed at contesting upon oppressive gender regimes that restrict the liberty of movement of women, their authority to make decisions in life, and their choices. Workshops and media campaigns training and cooperatives of women can enhance the community awareness of gender equality without taking advantage of or condescending local cultures. The trend towards minority women occupying the leading positions in the schools, village committees, or local businesses should be encouraged further and make the imbalance between gender and power described within the frames of the Connellian model.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzed the modern living of the ethnic minority women in China through the incorporation of the gender theory with reference to two case studies representing the two examples. The discoveries have provided the understanding that the struggle of the minority women is, in fact, neither an isolated occurrence nor a mere accident but rather the outcome of the long-standing relationships between gender norms on the one hand and ethnic identity or developments disparities within the region and structural limitations of education system and labour on the other. The Gender Role Theory and Gender and Power framework by Connell can be used to elaborate how the past expectations of domesticity, marriage at a young age, filial duties and community roles continue to enclose the aspirations of women, inhibit their movement, and limit their involvement into the world of the public and economy. These hypothetical viewpoints show that the perpetuation of gender inequality in minority areas is not only by personal ideas but also institutional set-ups and social organizations that favour male dominance, invest more in the education of sons and assign women labour in sectors where it is not paid or lowly paid.

The case of Huaping Girls' High School illustrates that targeted educational interventions can significantly alter the life trajectories of girls in underserved regions. By reducing financial barriers, providing academic and psychological support and engaging families and communities, such initiatives show the transformative impact of prioritising girls' education. The leadership of Zhang Guimei further demonstrates that sustainable empowerment requires continued community involvement and cultural dialogue, not merely resource allocation. In contrast, the employment experiences of Mongolian women in Inner Mongolia reveal the persistent tensions between modern labour demands and traditional gender expectations. Although urbanisation and service-sector

growth have created new job opportunities, caregiving and domestic responsibilities remain largely unchanged. As a result, ethnic minority women often experience a dual burden, indicating that economic development alone cannot achieve genuine gender equality.

Despite these insights, several limitations remain. Regional variations within minority areas are substantial, and the present cases cannot represent the full complexity of local cultural, economic, and institutional contexts. Future research should adopt more comprehensive and longitudinal approaches, incorporating large-scale survey data, ethnographic fieldwork, and cross-regional comparative studies to deepen understanding of minority women's lived realities.

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