

China's Nine-Year Compulsory Education Policy and Rural Women's Education

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doi:10.56397/JARE.2024.09.09

Abstract

Globally, education is often regarded as a basic human right. In order to guarantee this right, many countries have adopted various measures to ensure universal access to an inclusive and fair quality education, without leaving anyone behind. The UNICEF (2017) Convention on the Rights of the Child provides tenets of the child's right to education, education should focus on the all-round development of children's personalities and promote mutual understanding, tolerance, friendship, and peace by respecting their personal cultural backgrounds. The draft UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO 2015) involves ensuring an inclusive and fair basic education and providing lifelong learning opportunities for all (Webb et al., 2017). The implementation of compulsory education and the comprehensive development of a modern education system thus are importance to countries such as China. In fact, the implementation of the compulsory education policy in contemporary China is regarded as the main task of the government, which means that the "right to education" is a top priority (Chang, 2010). However, although various levels of governments are making significant efforts to promote the development of compulsory education in rural areas, there is still a major gap in terms of the quality and attainment within China education, especially along urban-rural divides. Children from impoverished backgrounds, typically rural areas, have a much higher risk of dropping out than their urban peers after completing elementary school. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to present the difficult situation rural women find themselves in concerning education. It proposes two research questions that 1) Does China's nine-year compulsory education policy include initiatives to address gender inequalities, such as the higher rates of illiteracy amongst rural women and girls, and what evidence is available on the extent of the policy's effectiveness in this regard? 2) How are issues of gender inequality experienced by rural women and girls in China in the context of the enactment of the nine-year compulsory education policy? Analysing the implementation of China's nine-year compulsory education policy in rural area, whilst investigating the inequality that rural women suffer.

Keywords: compulsory education policy, rural women's education, China

1. Introduction

Globally, education is often regarded as a basic

human right. In order to guarantee this right, many countries have adopted various measures to ensure universal access to an inclusive and

fair quality education, without leaving anyone behind. The UNICEF (2017) Convention on the Rights of the Child provides tenets of the child's right to education, education should focus on the all-round development of children's personalities and promote mutual understanding, tolerance, friendship, and peace by respecting their personal cultural backgrounds. The draft UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2015) involves ensuring an inclusive and fair basic education and providing lifelong learning opportunities for all (Webb et al., 2017). The implementation of compulsory education and the comprehensive development of a modern education system thus are importance to countries such as China. In fact, the implementation of the compulsory education policy in contemporary China is regarded as the main task of the government, which means that the "right to education" is a top priority (Chang, 2010).

Furthermore, investment in women's education is often seen as a key policy for both social and economic development of a country. There is a widespread phenomenon in many developing with differences in literacy and education according to gender, which are widely regarded as undesirable. In terms of fairness, they might be seen as inherently unfair and contribute to further gender inequality in income, work, and social status. Considering the huge contribution of female labour to developing economics, insufficient female education can be regarded as a constraint contributing to low productivity and economic growth. In addition, women's low levels of education might have important social costs because of special externalities in terms of reduced population growth, improved children's health, and more general family investment in children. Given the potential significance of gender gaps in education for development, it is best to understand how such inequality was created in order to inform more appropriate policy responses in the future (Song et al., 2006).

In 1986, the Chinese government enacted the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China, since then, this nine-year compulsory education policy ensures the government covers tuition fees for all students from the primary to junior secondary education level. In order to help more students from poor rural areas, the government launched a new

policy initiative in 2006, which says elementary and junior high school students in rural areas no longer need to pay tuition or miscellaneous fees, and all school fees will be completely exempted (Yi et al., 2012). However, although various levels of government are making significant efforts to promote the development of compulsory education in rural areas, there is still a major gap in terms of educational quality and attainment within China, especially along urban-rural divides. After completing elementary school children from impoverished backgrounds, typically rural areas, have a much higher risk of dropping out than their urban peers (Tan, 2019). This reflects that although the education policy has been promulgated to reduce the direct cost of education, it is still not enough to solve the problem of dropouts caused by poverty and the rising opportunity cost (Chang, 2010).

Under such circumstances, rural women in China are located on the periphery of China's education development and placed in a worse situation than males (Wesoky, 2007). According to data from 1997, the majority of China's illiterate population was rural women: illiterate women made up 71% of the 164 million illiterate people (Li, 2004). By 2003, 15.85 percent of females, and 6.12 percent of males, were illiterate in China, meaning the number of illiterate women was nearly three times that of men (CDRF and UNDP, 2005). Furthermore, girls in rural China have lower school enrolment (Song et al., 2006) and they are more likely to drop out of school than boys (Wesoky, 2007).

Continuous in-depth studies of rural compulsory education policy and its impact on Chinese rural women thus need more attention. The enactment of a policy contains both complex macro and micro factors, whilst implementation at a practical level is often fraught with unexpected difficulties (Ball, 1993). As mentioned, compared with rural male compulsory education and urban education in China, rural female compulsory education is undoubtedly the weakest part in the national education system, and the current situation regarding the compulsory education rural women have received is not optimistic. There are factors of traditional gender discrimination as well as reasons for policies and regulations to consider when examining this topic (Liu, 2009; Wesoky, 2007). A well-rounded and careful analysis of the current situation of rural

women's education and the causes for it thus will help promote the development of Chinese compulsory education, enhance the entire country's education system, and promote the deepening and development of national education (Liu, 2009). However, there are few systematic academic articles that seek to analyse the educational issues concerning women in rural areas of mainland China. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to present the difficult situation rural women find themselves in concerning education. The theory of policy sociology will be used to analyse the implementation of China's nine-year compulsory education policy in rural area, whilst feminist theory is adopted to investigate the inequality that rural women suffer. Specifically, the causes of rural women's education problems are explored, followed by the proposal of potential solutions. This will be achieved through interviewing four Chinese adult women from rural regions about their education experiences.

1.1 Research Question

In order to review the nine-year compulsory education policy critically, there must be investigation of to what extent this policy is effective in Chinese rural women's education as well as research on issues related to rural women receiving nine-year compulsory education in China and related causes and further potential solutions, is necessary. As such, the main questions of this study will be:

- 1) Does China's nine-year compulsory education policy include initiatives to address gender inequalities, such as the higher rates of illiteracy amongst rural women and girls, and what evidence is available on the extent of the policy's effectiveness in this regard?
- 2) How are issues of gender inequality experienced by rural women and girls in China in the context of the enactment of the nine-year compulsory education policy?

The structure of this study is as follow. In Chapter 2, a literature review will be conducted to outline and discuss the current situation of Chinese rural women receiving and completing nine-year compulsory education under the nine-year compulsory education policy, as well as the introduction of related theoretical frameworks. Chapter 3 will explain the methods and data used to address these two central

research questions. A critical review of related education policies that aims to understand Chinese rural women and girls will be conducted in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will show findings that emerge from the data and as well as a detailed and critical analysis. Chapter 6 will summarise the key findings, provide potential recommendations as well as make a conclusion of the whole study.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

Since the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China implemented the "Reform and Opening up" policy in the 1970s, the Chinese central government has issued a series of education policies to implement and promote rural compulsory education (Li, 2020). In the 40 years of development from 1978 to 2019, the goal of compulsory education for all has been adjusted and changed under different circumstances. Specifically, "The Rural Household Contract Responsibility System" plays a fundamental role in rural compulsory education by promoting social and economic development. Under this leading educational policy, the Chinese central government has implemented several policies to strengthen education to support rural students' access to education as well as to improve the quality of rural teachers. After the reform of the tax system, financial investment in rural compulsory education increased, and a new mechanism at the "county level" was developed based on the proportion of responsibilities. After the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the central government of China launched the national "Educational Poverty Alleviation Plan", which reflects the national will to make a long-term plan to help children of poor families receive fair and quality education as well as increase the enrolment rate of rural students in rural areas, blocking the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Li, 2017; Ministry of Education and the State Council, 2018).

However, due to the high poverty rate and the high opportunity cost of studying in rural areas, there are still concerns related to compliance with current compulsory education regulations in China (Liu & Rozelle, 2020). Empirical research indicates that the dropout rate in poor rural areas in China is higher than in developed

urban areas, and family poverty is one of the main factors related to dropout (Chang et al., 2016). Although reforms to exempt tuition fee have a significant impact on the enrolment rate of students, especially for middle school students (Chyi & Zhou, 2014; Shi, 2016), due to the recent increase in unskilled wages, the opportunity cost of staying in school has risen, especially in the middle school stage (Chen et al., 2017). Therefore, the increased opportunity cost of staying in school provides further incentives for students to drop out of school and join the labour force (Liu et al., 2020). Within such circumstances, women in rural areas are more likely to be ignored and in a much worse situation in terms of receiving nine-year compulsory education.

In the next part, more specific current situation and problems of rural women receiving compulsory education will be introduced and discussed.

2.2 Rural Women and Compulsory Education

The first prominent problem that Chinese rural women facing is that the level of nine-year compulsory education for rural women is insufficient. According to data from the 2018 National Census, among the illiterate population of China over six years old, 27.68% are males while 72.32% are females, of which rural females account for 42.3% of the whole female illiterate population (Ministry of Education & the State Council, 2018). This shows that there are a large number of illiterate females in rural China. At the nine-year compulsory education stage, many girls fail to receive normal compulsory education due to the gender discrimination, as more educational resources tend to be for men, causing the low education levels of rural women and limiting their further personal development (Liu et al., 2020). Coupled with the prevalence of multiple births in rural areas, girls are less likely to receive high quality education, and the cycle continues, causing long-term adverse effects on social development. Furthermore, the proportion of girls in nine-year compulsory education in rural areas of China is relatively low. By 2008, only less than 40% rural women had received and completed the nine-year compulsory education (Li, 2017). The previous 2006 Population Census has shown that the gender structure of the total Chinese population is basically stable at 51.5 (men) to 48.52 (women) (Shou, 2006). According to the ideal proportion of gender access to school model, the proportion

of male and female students at all levels and types of schools should be similar to the gender structure. However, the actual situation is that women account for only two-thirds of that of men at the compulsory education stage (Liu, 2009).

Secondly, rural girls have poor persistence in receiving nine-year compulsory education. In the process of popularising nine-year compulsory education for rural children, although the government has stepped up efforts to increase girls' enrolment by requiring all school aged children attend school in the *9-year Compulsory Education Law*, the enrolment rate is still lower than that of boys (Li, 2004). In addition, while the gross enrolment rate of girls has increased relatively, it is difficult to sustain their school attendance, as many rural girls leave school shortly after enrolling because of family financial difficulties, the influence of a patriarchal ideology, as well as insufficient school facilities, ensures girls are always seen in a subordinate position in Chinese society, especially in poor and underdeveloped areas, which leads to the rural girls' low rate of receiving and finishing nine-year compulsory education (Song et al., 2006). According to UNESCO's definition of universal compulsory education, "universal" means the gross enrolment rate must reach 100%. Thus, in the implementation of compulsory nine-year education, it is inevitable that do everything possible to improve the gross enrolment rate at the nine-year compulsory stage while ignoring the pupil's follow-up long-term studying (Li, 2020). In China's vast rural areas, especially in older, minority, border and poor areas, people are struggling to maintain basic living standards, meaning children's education is a lower priority (Liu, 2009). Therefore, the girl in the family is likely to face the fate of dropping out of school. Many of girls enrol in school, but due to the improper implementation of measures and lack of well-facilitated schools, they are forced to leave. Furthermore, at the current nine-year compulsory education stage, the proportion of rural women who dropout makes up the vast majority of the total dropout rate. The following set of data can give us a clear understanding of the severity of the rural girls' drop-out situation (Yi et al., 2012). In 1987, girls were 83% of the rural children who dropped out. By 1995, this statistic decreased to 66.4% (Song & Tan, 2004). The recent statistics show

that girls who dropped out of primary school and secondary school account for 58.52% of the total dropout; girls who drop out of primary school account for 59.01% of the total, while they account for 58.37% of the total who dropped out of secondary schools. This reflects the worrying status of rural women receiving nine-year compulsory education (Liu et al., 2020).

In the following part, I will investigate some potential reasons that lead to the worsening situation of rural women receiving education, more specifically from the perspective of policy implementation and influence of rigid conventional cultural and social factors. According to Liu (2009), the imperfections and drawbacks of rural women's nine-year compulsory education have many causes. Such as unbalanced social and economic development among different areas, imperfection of policy measures, as well as outdated personal and social ideologies. First of all, in terms of the implementation of a series of compulsory education related policies, the budgetary expenditure on junior secondary education is generally low in mainland China. In terms of the actual return on education, the return on elementary education is relatively higher, faster and more direct than secondary education or even higher education, especially for developing countries (Li, 2007). According to statistics, the world average rate of social return on elementary, middle and higher education is 20.0, 13.5, and 10.7, respectively, though China's intervention in compulsory elementary education is seriously insufficient (Li, 2007). According to statistics from UNESCO in 2010, the ratio of the average daily education expenditure on higher education students to GDP per capita in China is 1.93, but the ratio of elementary schools students is only 0.05 (Li, 2020). The country not only has deviations in the distribution of education stages, but also has a serious imbalance in the distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas, which is a prominent problem currently. As a result, the distribution of rural schools is unreasonable, the opportunities for enrolment are obviously transferred to the cities, and the teaching facilities in rural areas are obviously behind the cities. Under such a problem, gender inequality and poverty interact, and female children in rural areas have become the most direct and serious victims of the imbalance (Wesoky, 2007). Secondly, education laws and

regulations are not strong enough to ensure women's education in current Chinese society. In the legal provisions for women's education, such as *Women's Rights Protection Law*, there is no clear related law and regulation to protect rural female children's right to go to school. Moreover, most of the content in current laws is relatively principled and abstract, lacking supporting implementation rules and regulations with many defects in operability. In addition, there are many blind spots in terms of women's education protection, among which the problem of older girls is prominent (Li et al., 2020). According to the *9-year Compulsory Education Law* (Ministry of Education, 2007), school children often refer to those under the age of eighteen and over six. Since school education has the characteristic of continuity and older children are more likely to find relatively high-paying jobs, age might be a key factor in dropping out of school. It is thus more difficult for older girls who drop out of school back to the first grade stage even under the official support or charities' funding (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2008). All of these reasons contribute to the difficulty of compulsory education for girls. Third, the problem of education system cannot be ignored. Under the test-oriented education system that has been emphasising the rate of enrolment for a long time, the existing research has shown that many rural women feel that their families and schools have no hope of moving to the further education stage, due to their poor academic performance, which leads many of women who have poor grades to leave school early to go home to farm or go to work directly (Song et al., 2006).

In addition, China's education system is a male-centred educational model; men have always dominated in receipt of education resources, with women receiving restrictions from the family at the same time, as the feudal gender inequality consciousness is ingrained in the minds of most rural parents (Liu, 2009). Importantly, conventional Chinese thought contains the Confucian motto that 'it is a virtue to make women without ability' (Judd, 1994). The gender differences in literacy and education are widespread in many regions in mainland China and particularly in peasant households (Song et al., 2006). For instance, Sen (1990) includes China among several other Asian countries as these places have strong pro-son biases that manifest as a phenomenon of

“missing women”. Such prevalence of male or pro-son prejudice in rural Chinese households gives women an illusion that their gender determines that they are not part of education; men are always regarded as potential successes and women are in a subordinate position that might explain why girls have less opportunities to receive education than boys (Song et al., 2006). The family might simply value the welfare of the son rather than the welfare of the daughter, as parents think that girls will belong to other people’s family sooner or later and believe that a good marriage is better than a good academic qualification. Under the belief that letting girls’ study is spending money that would be spent on others, most rural girls drop out of school or help with housework at home (Liu, 2009). Similar arguments may be applied to generally explain the lower education level of women in developing countries. If women’s return on education is lower than that of men, it is reasonable that even though a family attaches equal importance to the welfare of boys and girls, girls receive less schooling (Psacharopoulos, 1994). Wage employment in rural areas has a significant difference between men and women, and more men participate in the workforce than women. If women are more confined to activities that are less connected to formal education (such as farming), then the family’s monetary benefits from girls’ education would be lower than with boys’. It is hard to argue that direct education costs for girls might also be higher than boys due to the commonly mixed sex in school in most of rural areas in China. However, if girls do more or more effective work for their families, then their chances of enrolling may be considered to have a higher opportunity cost (Song et al., 2006). In addition, scholars also suggest that gender inequality interacts with poverty, as previously mentioned. For example, Behrman and Knowles (1999) found in a study of Vietnam that the income elasticity of the demand for education for girls is higher than the demand for boys’ education. Appleton (1995) found that the gender difference in entering secondary school in Cote d’Ivoire mainly appeared in the poorer quarter of the population. The pattern might occur that families prioritise boys’ education (because of the pure parent-child prejudice or perceived higher returns) and only invest in girls’ school if they have sufficient income. This issue in education investment can also be

applied to rural areas in China. As scholars Lina and Simon (2006), in their study *Why Do Girls in Rural China Have Lower School Enrolment?* found, the gender gap in enrolment rates is particularly pronounced in poorer households in China. Due to the influence of the conventional patriarchal family concept, we discussed previously, the investment in education for women is much smaller than for men, and the reduction of women’s educational opportunities is also the cause of the higher illiteracy rate among women than men. Older boys from poor families still seem to be able to go to school while it is much harder for older girls return to schools after they drop out (Song et al., 2006). Conversely, because of the lower social status of women, women are more discriminated against and even less able to obtain education opportunities. Therefore, in this vicious circle, a large number of rural girls find it hard to receive the normal nine-year compulsory education (Liu, 2009).

Furthermore, rural women themselves also have thoughts of despising themselves, as they continue to accept the indoctrination of the idea that women are not as good as men (Liu, 2009). Influenced by this idea, rural women are content with the status quo and lack a self-improvement consciousness and learning motivation and learning initiative are therefore eliminated (Liu, 2009). They also believe that it is right for men to dominate outside, and women only need to do the household work. Therefore, many rural women drop out of school at a very young age to help take care of their younger sibling at home. The notion of male superiority and female inferiority penetrate their thinking, which makes it is normal to think that rural women should be limited to housework and caring for children (Wesoky, 2007). Inability to receive a proper education leads the rural women top a lower social status. Fan (1994) gave an example where uneducated women in a village can only succumb to humiliation, be beaten by their husbands and not dare to make these issues public, while well-educated women have different standards and can control their own living situation and marriage, as well as being financially independently.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Generally speaking, this dissertation will use two theoretical frameworks, namely critical sociology and feminist theory. First of all, since the dissertation topic aims to analyse and investigate the situation and problem of rural

women's education as well as some further potential solutions under the implementation of nine-year compulsory education policy, it is important to analyse and understand how a government implements a series of more specific related policies and the impact of these policies on rural women's education. It is widely known that the formulation of education policies does not happen in a vacuum or bubble, it is affected by a series of competing influences, which can be roughly summarised as social, political, economic, technological, religious, and cultural factors (Forrester, 2016).

When faced with complex national conditions and an increasing population in mainland China, the Chinese government enacted the nine-year compulsory education policy. However, during the implementation of the policy, some issues emerged. One of the most concerning issues is education received by rural women. This dissertation will therefore firstly use critical policy sociology, drawing from wider social factors to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of the nine-year compulsory education policy, especially considering its influence on girls living in rural areas. The term 'critical policy sociology' usually contains several concepts, including policy analysis, policy science, implementation study, and evaluation study (Regmi, 2017). Educational policy researchers have regarded the critical policy sociology approach as a useful research theory for analysing education policy in recent decades (Regmi, 2017). This theory is often concerned with issues related to value, politics, history, and discursive practice, which allows education policy researchers to critically study the relationship between different groups, in particular with the aim of understanding the questions of "who has had an impact on whom", and "identifying who made decisions during decision-making process" (Kogan & Bowden, 1975, p. 19). This theory also guides education policy researchers to not only regard education policy as a static non-political process but encourages them to explore how to highlight certain issues in education policy through navigating other possible future needs for certain interest groups (Gale, 2003). Consequently, critical policy sociology theory encourages researchers to use multiple research methods, strategies, and critical lenses to discuss the making and implementation of education policy. Through producing such critical theory,

policy researchers aim to promote education policy's commitment to the pursuit of social justice and equality at different levels, including local, national, and even global levels (Regmi, 2017). Therefore, critical policy sociology theory will guide the way that I investigate the influence of a series of nine-year compulsory education policies geared towards women living in remote and rural areas in mainland China and analysing my empirical data deriving from fieldwork from a variety of perspectives. Also, in terms of reviewing literature, I adopt critical policy sociology theory and thus reference some literature that contain global education situations, researching more possibilities for girls' education at an international level.

In addition, feminist theory will also be applied as a complementary framework. Feminist theories provide an analytical framework for understanding the differences between women's position and experience in the social environment in comparison to men's. Liberal feminists, for example, believe that women have the same abilities as men in moral reasoning and agency, and they recognise the 'patriarchy', pointing out that the long-term dominant position of men is motivated by the sexist division of labour, which has denied women an opportunity to express and practice their abilities in the public sphere (Norlock, 2019). Feminist theories also propose the notion of gender oppression, which goes further than the theory of gender differences and gender inequality, holding that women are not only different from, or being treated unequally compared to, men, but that they are being oppressed, required to act subservient and even abused by men (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Apart from these, feminist theory also emphasises the importance of women receiving education. The theory points out that proper education and training will enable women to think clearly and wisely about their situation, which will reduce the possibility of them being deceived and blindly obedient and become less likely to forget their own interests and goals and become slaves under the control of a patriarchal society (Donovan, 2012). Therefore, based on these viewpoints, this dissertation adopts feminist theory to investigate and discuss more specific issues in education and focuses on gender as Chinese education, in particular that of rural women, has been influenced by the Chinese traditional ideology of patriarchy, seeing the

different future plans that well-educated women have compared to those who are uneducated. Furthermore, the feminist theories will also be used to analyse the deeper reasons why women make up the larger portion of illiterate people in China, why there are more girls than boys in rural areas that drop out of schools as well as why rural girls are less likely to enrol to in school (both primary and secondary schools), despite the universal enactment of the nine-year compulsory education policy in mainland China.

2.4 Summary

In summary, since the implementation of the *Nine-year Compulsory Education Law* in 1986, both Chinese elementary and junior secondary education has advanced by leaps and bounds as men and women alike have enjoyed the right to receive compulsory education, not only legally but also in practice. Nevertheless, in the sector of universalising nine-year compulsory education in remote and rural areas in China, gender differences continue to exist to varying degrees and rural women face various problems in receiving and finishing nine-year compulsory education. Based on the previous literature review, the current educational situation of Chinese rural women and some reasons that cause them to be more likely to drop out of school have been proposed and discussed.

In the following chapter, the specific research method of this study will be introduced in detail. Then, Chapter 4 will critically analyse the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education policy from various angles and discuss the particular regulations that aim to promote and ensure the rural women receive and finish nine-year compulsory education. In Chapter 5, an empirical study will be conducted to research deeper reasons that place rural women in a more vulnerable position in terms of receiving nine-year compulsory education and propose some potential measures to solve such problems.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, I present a discussion of methodological and ethical considerations associated with this study, which includes details of the research process.

3.1 Literature Review

In the previous chapter, I conducted an initial literature review to explore my topic and inform

my research questions. In this part, I have drawn upon a wide range of existing literature, especially that of research completed on how the nine-year compulsory education has been implemented in rural areas in China. Research will now also be sought to identify reasons that may cause rural women in mainland China to be less educated, even after the enactment of the nine-year compulsory education policy. This will be explored from political, cultural, and social angles (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). For instance, an article from Song, Appleton, and Knight (2006) called *Why do girls in rural China have lower school enrolment*, examines the effect of poverty, intra-household decision-making, and school quality on educational investments (enrolment decisions) and learning outcomes (test scores and grade promotion) of girls in Chinese rural regions, will act a central text. This is because the article allows for further exploration of any hidden reasons that are behind the lower school attainment in rural China by girls. Therefore, this resource could act as a guide to open the door to explore and discuss other complex social phenomena that are related to rural girls' education. However, some literature is likely to have limitations, such as being published a long time ago or influenced from some external factors. Thus, it is vital to reference different documents and attempt to select the most up-to-date published works so that the latest ideas are included. Moreover, such an approach is likely to produce multiple and wider perspectives. Consequently, if good document sources are found, especially given their efficiency and cost-effectiveness to the researcher, the advantages offered by this method clearly outweigh the limitations (Bowen, 2009).

In addition, this review led me to the following research questions:

- 1) Does China's nine-year compulsory education policy include initiatives to address gender inequalities, such as the higher rates of illiteracy amongst rural women and girls, and what evidence is available on the extent of the policy's effectiveness in this regard?
- 2) How are issues of gender inequality experienced by rural women and girls in China in the context of the enactment of the nine-year compulsory education policy?

Below I will discuss how I implemented my

study.

3.2 Methodological Approach and Research Design

As researching problems of Chinese rural women in receiving nine-year compulsory education and the related gender inequality issues they are facing is a comprehensive social topic, simple quantitative data cannot fully reflect how the nine-year compulsory education policy is implemented and how it affects rural women in China in practice. As such, this dissertation will be a qualitative study, which combines the critical analysis of policy contexts with an empirical study including face-to-face interviews. Qualitative study refers to a type of research that explores real-world problems and provides deeper insights. Unlike quantitative research, which collects numerical data points or intervenes or introduces treatment methods, qualitative research helps generate hypotheses to further investigate and understand quantitative data (Tenny et al., 2021). Qualitative research collects participants' experiences, opinions, and behaviours. It answers how and why instead of how much or how many (Tenny et al., 2021). Therefore, this dissertation will use qualitative research methods to critically analyse the policy text by using critical policy sociology theory, and then use semi-structured interviews, applied with feminist theory, to analyse the qualitative data. The research will collect and analyse first-hand qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews with four Chinese rural women. These interviews, conducted via the internet, will focus on some specific personal experiences to analyse the issues of these rural women's education under the nine-year compulsory education policy from their own experiences. The research uses NVivo 11.0 software to conduct qualitative analysis of collected relevant interview data embedded with grounded theoretical analysis methods to code and analyse the interview data, including determining the subject of analysis, marking the data, categorising the data according to the mark, and data summary and induction (Geo-Jaja et al., 2007). Furthermore, quantitative data from published material will be used, as appropriate.

3.3 Critical Analysis of Policy Texts

The development of rural women's education is inseparable from policy support and assistance (Liu, 2009). In order to have a more detailed and profound understanding of the difficulties rural

women face in receiving and completing their nine-year compulsory education, as well as the causes of these problems, it is necessary to analyse specific relevant policies. Through the analysis of these specific policies, we can understand which aspects of rural women's education problems have been improved, but at the same time we can also find deficiencies in related education policies. Such critical analysis can provide ideas for finding potential solutions to the compulsory education problems of rural women in the future.

Thus, in the critical analysis policy text, I will focus more on the sub-policies of the main nine-year compulsory education scheme that are specifically aimed at Chinese rural girls and women, based on the previous literature review. Furthermore, some specific initiatives embedded with various laws will be chosen and discussed in detail, applied using critical sociology policy theory to analyse both the positive and negative effects of these specific policies from social and cultural perspectives, addressing the effectiveness of nine-year compulsory education policy in helping rural women have more equal opportunities in school and to reduce their rates of illiteracy.

3.4 Empirical Component

3.4.1 Fieldwork Design

Apart from conducting the critical analysis of policy texts, in order to gain the latest and reliable information about the situation and to gain specific examples of how the policy has influence women's past, present and future, empirical research will be conducted as well. Therefore, I chose to use one of the qualitative research methods, namely face-to-face interview, to explore issues of gender inequality and whether the government enacted more educational policies to address these issues. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing policy, interview was moved to an online format, conducting the online interview via zoom.

Traditionally, the face-to-face interview is characterised as synchronous communication in time and place. Because of this simultaneous communication, the face-to-face interview approach allows for taking advantage of social cues. The interviewee's social cues (such as voice, intonation, body language, etc.) can provide the interviewer with much more extra information, which can be added to the

interviewee's oral answer (Opdenakker, 2006). Since I want to investigate the attitudes and perspectives of rural women towards nine-year compulsory education, their voice, intonation and body language are very important as reflections of their true thinking. Furthermore, the interviewees' responses towards such synchronous communication are more spontaneous, without extended reflection, as online face-to-face interviews allow the interviewer and respondent to directly respond to each other's words and acts (Opdenakker, 2006). In addition, since some of the interview questions are open, such as those related to drop out issues, might be sensitive and interviewees may find it difficult to answer. The visual interview can help the researcher keep an eye on the condition of the interviewees, noting whether they have uncomfortable reactions, allowing the researcher to notice and intervene to stabilise them immediately, and then terminate the interview at the proper timing.

More specifically, the design of the online interview is semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews are one of the most commonly used research methods in social sciences and amount to a combination of structured interview and unstructured interview (Edward & Holland, 2013). Although structured interviews have a series of strict questions that do not allow people to divert their attention, semi-structured interviews, in contrast, are open and allow new ideas to be proposed during the interview process based on what the interviewee said (Edward & Holland, 2013). Furthermore, for interviewers, the construction of the semi-structured interview allows them to have a general understanding of the interviewee. It can help researchers draw objective comparisons between interviewees, which is a benefit for conducting qualitative research. For the interviewees, because the unstructured part of the semi-structured interview gives them more space to ask for clarification and allows their ideas to flow freely, interviewees usually feel less stress during the interview (Smith, 2020).

However, in order to make the results reliable, researchers need to spend enough time on preparing and conducting background research before actually starting the interview. As semi-structured interview allows people to express their ideas freely, interviewers need to plan the interview questions carefully to ensure that they can get the answers they want, which

also requires the interviewer to have good communication and interview skills (Keller & Conradin, 2020). The whole interview process should be around 60 minutes and can be longer, depending on the willingness of the interviewees, which enables both researcher and interviewees enough time to communicate and get in-depth responses. The design of the interview questions will connect to the previous literature on the topic. Therefore, the data being sought in the present study related to participants' personal education experience. They could also reflect on the nine-year compulsory education policy and how this policy influenced their daily life. In addition, they were asked if they had any brothers or sisters and whether they experienced any unequal treatment in terms of accessing education during the compulsory education period. Their answers help to understand deeper and more specifically the situation surrounding Chinese rural women's educational experience. Thus, evaluating how the nine-year compulsory education policy aims to address gender inequality issues in terms of receiving education and to what extent it helps and influence women's education in rural China is the aim of the study.

3.4.2 Data Generation

As for collecting data in empirical research, this dissertation mainly uses purposive sampling, purposefully selecting four adult women from two specific regions in mainland China that all have rural backgrounds. The main goal of purposeful sampling is to focus on the specific characteristics of the population of interest, which will best enable answering the given research questions. The sample studied does not represent the population, but it fits the qualitative research design (Lund Research Ltd., 2012). More specifically, this study takes a two-pronged approach to sampling (i) will be the snowball sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method which identifies cases of interest from people who know cases that are information-rich; and (ii) direct advertisement using social media such as TikTok, Weibo, WeChat where potential participants will self-select (Dudovskiy, 2018). Participants were chosen from two contrasting areas as previous discussed; two from largely rural areas and two participants from a more urban district with smaller pockets of rural areas, to explore if the experience differs in the

two area types. Because this research is time limited and China has a large population, in order to target accurate groups and select participants more conveniently, the research population is narrowed to these two typical regions, which could represent a most disadvantaged area in China compared with other more advanced rural area. Then contact was established with one or two potential cases from the sampling frame and these initial cases might have ability to identify more cases (Dudovskiy, 2018).

3.5 Data Analysis

According to analysis of the policy contexts, we will understand clearly what kind of policies and regulations the government has implemented to specifically help promote rural women's education, as well as recognizing the shortcomings of these policy contexts. Thus, the critical analysis of policy contexts will act as the foundation for the interview data analysis, offering well-rounded theoretical support to analysis of the women's personal education experience to research the further reasons that cause rural women to be more likely to drop out of school and have higher rates of illiteracy.

As different rural women have unique educational backgrounds and experience, the interview data would be varied and chaotic. In terms of coding and analysing the qualitative data gathered from the interview logically and clearly, as well as gaining in-depth information and capturing the reflexive and emotional content of interviewees' narratives, I will mainly base this process on grounded theory (Glaser, 2005; Strauss, 1987). Grounded theory is a relatively mature qualitative research method in the field of education research (Glaser, 2005). Its principle is to extract key themes and core concepts from chaotic qualitative data to construct related concepts or theories (Fleischmann et al., 2014). In accordance with grounded theoretical ideas and thoughts, a thematic analysis of the collected interview data related to compulsory education issues that rural Chinese women and girls have faced under the implementation of nine-year compulsory education policy will be completed, using NVivo 11.0 qualitative analysis software to code and analyse the data (Howton, 2003).

NVivo is an auxiliary tool for qualitative research (Cherotich, 2014). It splits and reorganises the original interview records in the

form of nodes, clarifying the logical relationship through the coding function, exploring the education problems women in rural China have faced, and investigating the causes of these problems under the background of nine-year compulsory education (Murtaugh, 2015). More specifically, the data analysis will include open coding, main axis coding, and selective coding and then do a saturation test to perform coding analysis on the collected text data to extract concepts and categories level by level and then integrate them. When analysing the interview data of key interviewees, the relationship between the categories will be established, finding the common education difficulties that rural Chinese women face, and the cause will become more easily observed (Deterding & Waters, 2021).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

From the perspective of ethical considerations, it is important to bear in mind that ethics is not only a matter to be considered at the beginning of a research project or field survey, but it should also be kept in mind throughout the research process. Researchers should also consider ethics as a primary consideration for any research study (Abed, 2015). In addition, there are no completely safe research methods for both researchers and participants, therefore, ethical issues are situational as the investigation approach changes (Humphreys, 1975). In this research, all interview processes have been described at the ethical review stage and were granted ethical approval from UCL Institute of Education department. However, if participants read the information sheet and feel upset and uncomfortable with any questions asked, even after signing the consent form, they could withdraw at any time and the interview would stop immediately.

4. Critical Policy Review

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a critical analysis of the nine-year compulsory education policy, and its related laws and specific policies as viewed through critical sociology policy theory. Discussion will include whether and how the Chinese government implements initiatives to address gender inequalities, especially in rural areas, during the popularisation of nine-year compulsory education policy from the admission opportunities, education procedure and content, and education results, in an

attempt to reveal the gender inequalities existing in compulsory education from the angles of fairness and gender equality in education.

4.2 Critical Analysis of Policy Contexts

As a developing country, China undertakes the world's largest task of developing education for all, and achieving gender equity in compulsory education is an important prerequisite for this practical development. Therefore, enabling men and women to equally receive compulsory education is the cornerstone of achieving gender equality, as well as the foundation for disadvantaged gender groups to seek development (Song & Tan, 2004). Generally speaking, since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government has formulated various laws and regulations to regulate gender issues in basic compulsory education from various perspectives during different periods of educational development, especially embedded with the "Reforming and Opening up" policy that launched in the 1970s, which is said to have greatly promoted gender equity in education processes (Liu, 2009). First of all, from a legal point of view, on the basis of the promulgation of the *Nine-year Compulsory Education Law* in 1986, the Chinese government then promulgated *Constitution*, *General Principles of Civil Law*, *Marriage Law*, *Inheritance Law*, *Adoption Law*, *Maternal and Child Health Law*, and the new *Criminal Law* which all have provisions that specifically protect the various rights of girls, intending that females have equal education rights and property rights that males have (Compulsory Education Law, 2006). More specifically, Article 4 of the *Nine-year Compulsory Education Law* states that all school-age children and adolescents within the People's Republic of China, regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, family property status, religious beliefs, etc., enjoy the right and obligation to receive compulsory education on an equal basis in accordance with the law (Compulsory Education Law, 2006). The *Women's Rights Protection Law (2018 Amendments)* which proposes to protect women's cultural and educational rights, stipulates that parents or other guardians must ensure that school-aged female children and adolescents receive compulsory education, unless they are approved by the local government to opt out due to illness or other special circumstances. The local government shall criticize and educate parents or other guardians who do not send school-age

female children to school and take effective measures to order them to do so if they resist. Meanwhile, the *Women's Rights Protection Law (2018 Amendments)* also states governments at all levels shall, in accordance with regulations, incorporate the elimination of illiteracy and semi-illiteracy among women into the plan for literacy and continuing education, adopt organizational forms and working methods that suit women's characteristics, organise and supervise the specific implementation of relevant departments, as well as organise women to receive vocational education and practical technical training based on the needs of urban and rural women (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

Secondly, from the perspective of more specific policies and regulations, the State Council formulated the first children's work program after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1992, the *Outline of China's Children's Development Plan in the 1990s*. In 1995, the *Outline for the Development of Chinese Women* was released, both of these regulations are based on international law and the Chinese legal provisions plan, which propose measures for girls' education. In order to promote the development of girls' education in rural areas, especially in poverty-stricken areas, in 1996 the former National Education Commission formulated the *Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Education and the 2010 Development Plan*, this plan further clarified the gap in the enrolment rate of school-age children between boys and girls, urban areas and rural areas, and poor areas and developed areas should be narrowed (Song & Tan, 2004). According to relevant statistics, the education penetration rate for girls in China was 20% before 1949 (Zhen, 2000) while the enrolment rate for girls reached 99.07% in 2010 when the difference between boys and girls was only 0.07 percentage points.

Furthermore, in terms of addressing higher rates of illiteracy amongst Chinese rural women and girls, as previously discussed, the female illiteracy rate was 48.88 percent, whereas that of males was 20.78 in 1982, though the current rates have improved significantly (standing at about two percent for men and six percent for women) (Liu, 2009). Although females are still behind men in literacy, women's illiteracy rates have been falling at a faster rate than those of men. It is believed that it will not be long until literacy rates between men and women are

equivalent (Merchant, 2018).

According to Liu (2009), it is argued that since the beginning of the 1990s, due to the effective implementation of the *Nine-year Compulsory Education Law* and the rapid development of the entire society and economy, under the condition that compulsory education is fully popularised, girls' right to education has been effectively guaranteed, and more girls have equal access to education. But on the contrary, some concerns and problems also emerge from the procession of the specific education policy implementation.

Comparing the data of the two national censuses in 2010 and 2020, under the premise that the education level of children throughout the country is developing steadily, the education level of women in China has been greatly improved and the education gap between men and women has further decreased (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). However, according to the critical sociology policy perspective, it should also be noted that gender equality in compulsory education is a historical category, embedded with changes in the objective environment such as times, regions, and economic conditions, its connotation has also changed accordingly. When China is mainly working toward achieving universal compulsory education, the prior goal of achieving gender equality in compulsory education is to enable more girls to have equal educational opportunities. In areas where compulsory education is basically universal, the meaning of gender equality in compulsory education is not only to allow all children equal opportunity to receive basic education, but to reflect the attitude and behaviour of gender equality in the education process more comprehensively and deeply. In other words, in poor and rural areas where compulsory education is not universal, the goal of gender equality in compulsory education is to ensure that girls have equal educational opportunities. In the process of popularising compulsory education in China, there have been some problems in the gender equity, in terms of the education process and education results.

Based on the previous literature, there are still a certain number of school-aged children in China who have lost the opportunity to receive compulsory education, and most of them are girls (Liu, 2009). Although the net enrolment rate of primary school-age children in China has increased from 96.3% in 1990 to 99.1% in 2000,

the huge population base of primary school-age children in China means the out-of-school rate of 0.9% and the loss rate of primary education of 5.52% cannot be ignored. If taking into account the possible underreporting of dropouts in education statistics, the actual rate of dropouts may be much more serious than the statistics show. In addition to directly examining the gender composition of nine-year compulsory education in various periods, the analysis of gender differences in the length of education of the adult population can also indirectly reflect the gender differences in the Chinese population's compulsory education in recent decades. According to the data analysis of the second Chinese women's social status sample survey, the average number of school years for urban women under 50 in all age groups in China has exceeded nine years (that is, they have completed nine years of compulsory education), and the gender gap is gradually shrinking (National Bureau of Statistics, 2001). However, the average number of years of education for rural women is far less than nine years, and even for women under 30 the average of education is only 7.32 years. The proportion of rural women with an average number of school years less than 9 years (excluding 9 years) is still quite high, reaching 82.5%, 12.8% higher than the same index for rural men (Yi et al., 2012). It is particularly noteworthy that 58.8% of rural women only receive primary school education, 22.8% higher than men, and the rate of rural women receiving junior high school education is also 10% lower than men. It can be seen that women in rural areas have fewer opportunities to receive basic education than men, and universal nine-year compulsory education is still an arduous task (Song & Tan, 2004).

Another concern is that, since the ideology of neoliberalism flowed from Western societies and spread into China in the mid-1980s, China's politics, economics, and culture, in particular the implementation of education policies, were influenced significantly by neoliberalism (Li, 2005). As neoliberalism advocates that social policy is dominated by market principles, privatization, free trade and deregulation, and individualism (Welch, 2013), the Chinese government gradually reduced its intervention in the market, meaning now the wealth cannot be distributed fairly, resulting in a serious income gap between urban and rural areas in

China (Li, 2005). Thus, the rise of neoliberalism has changed the characteristics of Chinese society, from a socialist welfare state to a competitive state (Welch, 2013). The core principles of government influence economic and social policies that then became market-based competition and economic principles (Davies & Bansal, 2007).

Education was once protected from market competition by policies promoted by the Chinese welfare state. The function of education is to serve the public interest and to provide fairness and opportunity to all equally (Welch, 2013). However, under neoliberalism, education has become part of the market, the pursuit of efficiency affects the field of basic education, and compulsory education's pursuit of fairness and universal principles is negated, which affects women's educational rights and opportunities directly and more seriously (Song & Tan, 2004). Colclough (1993), he pointed out that the shortening of the average walking distance to school can significantly reduce the private cost of schooling and it can also reduce the risk factors for leaving schooling for girls. Furthermore, due to education being increasingly influenced by neoliberalism with a focus on promoting high-stakes testing, accountability, and competitiveness (Hursh, 2007), the layout of primary and secondary schools in China has been mainly based on quality, scale, and efficiency. Thus, some rural and disadvantaged areas have merged and abolished village primary schools and teaching sites that used to be near the farmers' homes. As of 2019, there were 160,000 regular primary schools nationwide, a decrease of 1663 over the previous year; among them, rural primary schools decreased by 2,313 (Ministry of Education, 2019). In addition, the country's primary school enrolment was 18.690 million, an increase of 17,000 over the previous year, an increase of 0.1%; among them, and rural primary school enrolment decreased by 2.6% year-on-year (Ministry of Education, 2019). The number of students enrolled in ordinary primary schools nationwide was 105.612 million. However, the number of students in rural primary schools decreased by 0.3% (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Although this has adapted to the trend of a declining birth population and urbanisation since the implementation of China's family planning policy, it has objectively reduced the

number and distribution of schools, geographically making girls farther away from school and reducing their access to educational resources. This makes many parents in remote rural areas worry about letting girls go to school far away from home (Yi et al., 2012). Moreover, as many primary and secondary schools in China in rural and disadvantaged areas are boarding schools (Yi et al., 2012), the lack of female teachers in schools also makes parents worry. In poverty-stricken areas there is a serious shortage of female teachers. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, in 2019 the proportion of rural female teachers in primary and secondary schools in the most disadvantaged provinces in western China did not reach 50% (Ministry of Education, 2020). The serious shortage of female teachers in rural areas has caused most girls to give up school due to insecurity in boarding. Therefore, more female children are actually facing unfavourable educational situations. In essence, this is an educational development trend that widens gender differences (Song & Tan, 2004).

Therefore, although the Chinese government has implemented and kept building up a number of measures to ensure that women, especially rural women, have the right to receive nine-year compulsory education, there are still some gender biases that lead to the unfair implementation of compulsory education. The emergence of these problems reflects the concept of 'policy enactment', which is a grounded explanation of various variables and factors as well as the background dynamic, thereby linking and theorising the explanatory, material, and background dimensions of the policy process (Ball et al., 2012). As the outside contexts are always dynamic, specific, and shift able, the localisation of national policies often faces varying degrees of difficulty. In other words, education policies enacted by the national government are often not simply reproduced as intended on the ground, but re-interpreted and reconstructed in the specific local context (Ball et al., 2012). Thus, this helps to explain that popularising compulsory education and adherence to the principle of gender equality should be consistent in terms of goals, but deviations will occur in specific implementation.

For example, in some impoverished areas, in order to complete the target of the national universal compulsory education scheme, local governments implement the primary school

enrolment policy, which stipulates that if each household has 3 school-age boys, two must be sent to school; if there are 3 girls in the family, at least one must be sent to school for education (Li, 2002). Such local regulations reduce girls' access to compulsory education and have a negative impact on reducing the rural female illiteracy rate. In addition, the current gender equality content of the education laws is relatively principled and lacks procedural supporting regulations, however there is no specific department to supervise the implementation of various laws and policies that target rural women and girls. Such regulatory omission could lead to unevenness in educational resources distribution and school enrolment outcomes. In practice, the mere introduction of written legal provisions without a grounded application cannot play a regulatory and effective role in improving rural women and girls' literacy rate, and it is hard for rural girls to effectively protect their right to education without strong legal and financial support from the national local government (Song & Tan, 2004).

4.3 Summary

Theoretically speaking, specific policies that the Chinese government implemented have made a positive influence on improving rural female enrolment in school, as well as decreasing their illiteracy rate. What we cannot ignore is that rural women and girls still have shorter average years in education than men and the quality and sustainability of rural compulsory education for females cannot be guaranteed. Thus, despite analysing the nine-year compulsory education policy theoretically, in order to combine theories of macro political and social changes with the further analysis of how certain policy puts into the practice, an empirical study is needed (Rata, 2014). Therefore, in the next part, interviews with four rural women from two different regions in China will be presented, shining light on how the nine-year compulsory education policy operates in the daily lives of rural Chinese girls and women, as well as investigating issues that relate to gender inequalities when they receive nine-year compulsory education. This will also explore the further causes for rural women's drop out and some particular difficulties they have faced when they receive nine-year compulsory education.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, specific key themes will be derived from the data and presented in subsections in line with the theoretical categories, which have been mainly applied using feminist theory in analysis of the issues of gender inequality experienced by rural women and girls in China in the context of the enactment of the nine-year compulsory education policy, along with the in-depth exploration of reasons for this.

This dissertation uses grounded theory to code and analyse the four rural female's answers, finding that social factors, family factors, school factors, and personal factors are the main content that influence female students' participation in nine-year compulsory education and cause them to be more likely to drop out of school. The detailed coding process will be attached in the Appendix III.

5.2 Family Factor

5.2.1 Family Socio-Economic Condition and Education Background of Parents

As the initial and most important environment for children to grow up, family has an important influence on children's learning behaviour and academic achievement. The Coleman Report (Barcellos et al., 2014) pointed out that families can influence students' academic performance more than schools and communities. Since then, a series of empirical studies on the relationship between family background and children's academic achievement have shown that family socioeconomic status variables have a significant impact on children's academic achievement, and its influence is even greater than that of school (Barcellos et al., 2014).

Some studies based in Chinese provinces and cities also support Coleman's conclusions. For example, Wang (2014) analysed survey data from junior high school students in Nanjing and found that the socioeconomic status of the family had an important influence on their academic performance. Yin et al. (2012) analysed the data of the "Family and Children Tracking Survey in Gansu" and found that parents' income and education levels have a significant positive impact on pupils' academic performance. On the basis of Coleman's discovery, some studies have further explored the mechanism of family background's influence on children's academic achievement, such as human capital theory, cultural capital theory,

and social capital theory (Wang, 2014). Human capital theory believes that education is an important human capital investment, and the “cost-benefit” measurement is the main principle of family education investment. The difference in children’s educational achievements is mainly caused by the amount of family education investment. Constrained by family resources, parents in poor families usually do not invest enough in their children’s education, which affects their children’s academic achievements (Barcellos et al., 2014).

Based on responses from the interviews, family environment and family economic conditions will have a significant impact on girls’ willingness to receive compulsory education. Rural women and girls might choose not to go to school due to poor family economic conditions, as Participant 1 said:

... one reason is not being admitted to high school, and the other is that family conditions do not allow it. My parents believe that earning money depends on hard work, which is quite hard.

This is because girls believe that continuing to go to school will cause a serious burden on their family’s economy. Such a financial burden will reduce the family’s living standards and even make it impossible for the family to afford normal living expenses. Therefore, in families with low economic status, girls will choose not to pursue compulsory education out of such fears to reduce the burden on the family.

In addition, studies have shown that parents’ education and family income constitute important factors for children’s educational opportunities. Li (2007) classified the factors of parental education that affect children’s enrolment into three categories: educational expectations, cultural capital, and human capital. Parents with high education levels have higher expectations for their children’s education and pay more attention to their children’s education. Encouragement and supervision from parents will increase their children’s learning motivation and aid them to achieve better results.

In the interview, the women stated “... how should I put it, people used to say that most rural women were rural aunts, since people used to be generally not well-educated...”, and:

... my education level is about the same as that of other girls in the village. Basically,

girls of my age don’t go to school after finishing junior high school. They all go to factories to work. There are many factories in our village and neighbouring villages. So, I didn’t think there was anything wrong with this way of life... (Participant 4)

This shows their parents are not only unable to tutor them in their studies due to their poor level of education, but they also believe that education is not important. This has caused girls in the compulsory education stage to lose their enthusiasm for learning, thereby reducing their willingness to continue to pursue education.

5.2.2 Patriarchal Situation in Family

The influencing of gender preference and gender differences in children’s health status can be divided into two categories, one is the rule of fertility stop. The gender of children can affect the family’s fertility decision and family size. The second is the investment of resources in the growth of children. Sex discrimination has resulted in girls being at a disadvantage in obtaining various resources (Jayachandran & Kuziemko, 2011). Barcellos et al. (2014) found that the gender difference in demand cannot explain the gender inequality in the family when allocating resources. The gender preference for males is the main reason for the difference in family investment in childhood education.

Based on the answers of interviewed rural women:

... I’m most afraid of math teacher, because I can’t understand what he taught in the lecture. This is not to say that the teacher is not good at teaching. It’s that my partial subject is too serious... (Participant 3)

This dissertation finds that family preference for sons will cause parents to not care enough about girls, and parents will think that girls do not need to receive much education. Such a family environment will lead to psychological changes in girls, and girls will think that all their peers around them have gone to more advanced areas to work and earn money without receiving complete compulsory education. Under the dual psychological cues of the family and the environment, girls will gradually accept their parents’ patriarchal conception, thinking that they do not need to continue learning, but should pass the opportunity of learning to their brothers. This will reduce girls’ willingness to receive compulsory education.

5.3 Social Factor

5.3.1 Poor Conditions of Rural Areas and Long Distance from Home to School

Many studies have shown that the enrolment rate of students is inversely related to the distance students travel to school (Shi, 2004). UNESCO (2007)'s data on the distance from school to school for rural students in developing countries shows that the distance affects the enrolment rate. If the distance to school exceeds 1 mile, the enrolment rate will drop. The World Bank used geographic information systems (GIS) to conduct a survey of 179 villages. The results showed that the enrolment rate is closely related to the distance to school, and a distance beyond 2 miles the rate generally stays the same (Lehman, 2003).

In the UK, more and more parents are choosing family education or home schooling rather than school education (Shi, 2004). This is because, after the merger of rural elementary schools, they are unwilling to let their children travel to school a few miles away every morning. Particularly in rural areas, the distance between home and school will have a greater impact on gender inequality (Qin et al., 2011). Fan et al. (2009) used a logistic regression equation to conduct an empirical study on basic education needs in rural Ghana. It was found that factors such as the quality of education in schools in the area and the distance between children and schools have an important influence on whether children receive primary education, and it also explains the relationship between students' enrolment and transportation, distance and other factors.

The rural women participating in the interviews also pointed out that the population distribution is scattered due to poor road traffic conditions in rural areas:

... I also encountered difficulties in school, because at the beginning of junior high school, I was very uncomfortable and was very homesick. The emotion of homesickness has affected my ability to listen to the lectures carefully. At that time, my mother sometimes sent me lunch at noon, which relieved my homesickness... (Participant 3)

According to Lehman's (2003) research, when children are asked to go to schools in other villages, the dropout rate of girls in particular will increase dramatically. Large-scale

adjustments to the layout of rural primary and secondary schools have resulted in some students' walking distance to and from school reaching 20 to 30 miles. Although the straight-line distance between home and school is not far in some places, the rugged and winding mountain roads are time-consuming and dangerous. Although students in some places can use transportation, they use more agricultural vehicles and buses. Problems such as overloading and lack of supervision still exist. The increasing distance of schooling and the resulting safety issues have become a gap that parents and students cannot bridge, and this has led to the phenomenon of school dropout (Yu et al., 2009). It is difficult for girls from families far away from school to go to school normally, and many girls choose not to go to school for this reason. Therefore, the long distance between home and school and poor infrastructure in rural areas constitutes one of the reasons why rural girls are reluctant to go to school for education.

5.3.2 Dining Environment and Accommodation Environment

Since 2001, rural boarding schools have developed by leaps and bounds, but the diet and nutrition problems of students have not been put in a more important position. This problem has caused a large number of inadequate meals in rural boarding schools, and at the same time, the problem of malnutrition among rural students in poor areas has been revealed (Yi et al., 2012).

In this study, female students expressed the concern that "... it was the poor condition of what I ate at that time. I remember that we can only eat the steamed buns at school..." It reflects the problem that due to the adjustment of the layout of rural primary and secondary schools in some areas, the construction has not been achieved. Blind excessive mergers have caused many rural boarding schools to fail to fully meet the needs of students in various living facilities (Yi et al., 2012). Relevant studies (Niu, 2009) have found that with the adjustment of the layout of rural schools, there is a mismatch in the accommodation and meal facilities of boarding schools in many places, which has caused many problems for boarding primary and secondary schools, especially boarding primary schools. A scholar might find student dormitories and kitchens are very simple, with no exhaust, drainage, water intake, disinfection,

refrigeration, storage and other facilities. Often, there is no fixed place for students to eat, either in the dormitory, in the classroom, or in the yard (Niu, 2009).

In addition to the national and provincial key designated “boarding project schools” and rural boarding schools in provinces with better economic conditions that have special student dormitories and canteens, about 70% of rural boarding schools across the country do not have standard boarding student apartments and canteens (Li et al., 2011). Due to inadequate canteen facilities, many schools cannot meet the needs of students in terms of meals. Thus, if a rural girl is sent to boarding school to study, she may face the dilemma of lack of food and sleep. Such concerns have made many families and girls reluctant to go to schools with poorer conditions, thus affecting the willingness of rural girls to participate in compulsory education.

5.4 Rural Women’s Own Factors

5.4.1 Willingness to Work to Compensate the Demands of Family

Generally speaking, the main purpose of population mobility is to improve living conditions of individuals, and those factors that are conducive to improving living conditions in the places where the population flows into are pulling forces, and the unfavourable living conditions in the places where the population flows out are the driving forces (Yao et al., 2020). In sum, the five primary factors that affect migrant workers are: low rural income levels, no opportunity to make money (thrust factor), lack of development opportunities (thrust factor), and difficulty of life (thrust factor), desire to see the world (pull factor), and high income in the city (pull factor). Therefore, rural girls have the motivation to go to work in more economically developed areas to obtain higher incomes to supplement their families.

According to the interviews, poor family conditions have become an important factor leading rural girls to choose to abandon their studies with the intent to reduce the burden of the family:

... you actually wanted to receive further education, but the family conditions at that time really did not allow it. The teacher once came to my home to persuade me to renew for another year, but I also gave up decisively because I felt my parents were too

tired. (Participant 2)

The important driving force of this factor is the perception of rural girls who believe that giving up school to work can lessen the family’s burden and lead their families to live a better life. In addition, they are also full of expectations for their work and life in the city. This expectation may be caused by their ignorance of the unknown world and lack of corresponding education, and the idea of subsidising the family may be caused by the widespread influence of patriarchal thinking in rural families (Liu, 2009). If the patriarchal ideology in rural areas cannot progress, rural girls may fall into the intergenerational trap of poverty because they have not completed their studies, opting instead to work.

5.4.2 Study Pressure

Through interviews with rural females, it became clear:

... I’m most afraid of my math teacher, because I can’t understand what he taught in the lecture. This is not to say that the teacher is not good at teaching. It’s that my partial subject is too serious... (Participant 3)

and

... the experience of junior high school is that the studies are more difficult than that of elementary school, and there are loads of homework assignments left. The junior high school also has monthly exams, which is too difficult (Participant 4) which reflects that rural female students not only have to face the lack of material conditions under objective conditions, but also bear more schoolwork burden and pressure to enter higher education. The mental stress caused by study pressure and lack of materials can push students into a state of high tension, leading to various physical and psychological problems and a decline in academic performance, which in turn leads to the weariness about schooling and a lack of willingness to continue school.

5.5 School Factor

5.5.1 School Curriculum Is Not Diversified Enough

In rural areas, because of the lack of high-quality teachers and teaching resources, there are many problems in the construction of the curriculum system (Msibi & Mchunu, 2013), such as, firstly, the construction of the misinterpretation of the

curriculum system, the development of random courses, the practice of formal activities, and the construction of an exaggerated system. As a result, the effectiveness of student training is lacking. In addition, the courses in many schools seem to be very effective, and the local courses and school-based courses are very colourful. However, under rational analysis, it has to be admitted that the development of many local courses and school-based courses generally lack professionalism and a scientific foundation. Third, the curriculum lacks value exploration and ignores the needs of students, meaning it fails to assist the students' growth and development. Fourth, the establishment of the school's local curriculum and school-based curriculum did not consider the value orientation of the curriculum and the construction of the curriculum system. The presentation of the curriculum system is merely a patchwork of random pieces of the curriculum or to responses to superior inspections or reflections of the school's characteristics.

From the Participant 4's statement:

... My best subject is Chinese, because there are only two subjects, mathematics and Chinese; the other subjects like music, art, sports, it is difficult to take a lesson. As long as you understand the language, you can do well in Chinese, but math all depends on your intelligence! Why I left school? I left school because I have graduated from elementary school...

We can see the low attractiveness of school for girls echoing previous analysis. These problems may lead to a decrease in the attractiveness of school curricula to rural girls, making them less interested in going to school, and leading to a lack of motivation for rural girls to continue to their education.

5.5.2 Lack of Protection in School

In this study, one of our interviewees (Participant 3) said that

The only difficulty I encountered in school was being bullied twice by senior classmates in the fourth grade. I was too timid to tell my parents. Later, I solved the matter with the help of teachers, classmates and friends. But at the same time, it also makes me feel inferior and introverted and sensitive.

Rural female students may refuse to go to school out of fear of being abused. As a result, their

willingness to participate in compulsory education is reduced. It shows that in Chinese rural schools, there is a lack of protection measures to prevent female students from being violated.

According to some existing literature, there are many female students who have experienced school violence, especially in rural areas, and the perpetrators were mainly school staff such as peers, teachers, principals, coaches, and school bus drivers (Shakeshaft, 2004). This problem might be caused by the insufficient school protection obligations, and the legal responsibilities of the school in supporting female students' mental health are unclear and lack rigid constraints (Wang, 2014; Tao, 2015; Gao, 2006).

5.6 Summary

In summary, according to the findings and analysis of the empirical research, rural female in China experience difficulties in pursuing nine-year compulsory education that stem from social, family, school and personal factors, not only because gender inequality causes Chinese rural women to be less likely to go to school, but also due to financial problem, low teaching quality and a lack of school resources.

In the following section, I will make a conclusion about this study and offer some potential responses to problems rural women face in nine-year compulsory education where previous analysis will also be discussed in detailed.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

In this dissertation, I have sought to explore the situation rural women find themselves in in relation to education, in the context of China's 1986 nine-year compulsory education policy, alongside evidence of disparities between urban and rural areas with rural women more disadvantaged in this respect than men. Through critical review of policy documents and a small-scale exploratory empirical study I aimed to address the following research questions:

1) Does China's nine-year compulsory education policy include initiatives to address gender inequalities, such as the higher rates of illiteracy amongst rural women and girls, and what evidence is available on the extent of the policy's effectiveness in this regard?

2) How are issues of gender inequality experienced by rural women and girls in China in the context of the enactment of the nine-year compulsory education policy?

6.2 Key Findings

It has been shown that China has made great contributions to narrowing the education gap between urban and rural areas in recent years, and has kept building the nine-year compulsory education policy, especially focusing on increasing the rate of rural Chinese women's enrolment in school and the rural compulsory education quality (Li, 2020). However, it seems that rural women receiving compulsory education still face challenges and problems in contemporary China. Although our sample are only from two areas of China and not representative of the whole country, findings still reflect five main difficulties and factors: 1) rural family's feudal notions, 2) low teaching quality in rural schools, 3) financial problems, 4) rural female students' lack of learning awareness, and 5) Increased likelihood to drop out of school than men in rural areas.

Furthermore, through critically reviewing the existing education policies and conducting interviews, we have found that although China's government has fully implemented a no tuition fee policy for several years financial factors still play an important role in rural Chinese women's dropout decisions (Yi et al., 2012). In fact, it is widely known that poverty in rural areas is a complicated issue which contains multiple causes and needs various approaches to solve. Exempting nine-year tuition fees is merely a first step to promote the equity of educational opportunity. This study illustrates the complexity of poverty by showing that despite providing free education, other factors have emerged, including some indirect costs, to remain determinants of an increasing dropout rate, such as boarding or transportation fees and rising opportunity costs. Therefore, there may be a demand for the government to take more effective actions to rectify this situation. Providing positive cash incentives for schooling in rural and poor areas along with scholarships for female students might be one of the possible solutions (Rawlings & Rubio, 2005).

In addition to the poverty and harsh living conditions in most of the rural areas, academic performance and some mental health problems had a large impact on rural female students'

dropout rates. As within a competitive education system as China has, it is likely that rural female students are under too much pressure to study, and poorly performing students and their parents feel that it is more beneficial for them to find a job rather than staying at school. This finding also corresponding to the existing literature that had found rural Chinese students dislike studying (Bama, 2010). As has been found in the interviews, rural female students generally have negative responses to their learning as they dislike a particular subject that they cannot do well in and perceive this to mean failure in their studies. It is hard to say whether the poor performance came first, or the dislike came first; both of these factors create a vicious circle for female students' learning, which even influences their mental health and might end in dropping out (Yi et al., 2012). Relevant departments should pay attention to this situation, and set tutoring and psychological remedial courses that address this vicious cycle in rural schools, which could not only improve the rural female students' academic performances but also potentially help them have a stable and healthy attitude to face the pressure both from life and study, thus avoiding the increasing opportunities costs associated with increasing age that their parents are concerned about. Also, compared with most of the large-scale reforms of China's rote-learning systems that are often proposed in the educational literature, this solution also requires fewer systemic changes (Yi et al., 2012).

Based on the findings through comprehensive analyses that reveal the main problems of rural women in China face under the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education policy and thoroughly stress the gender inequality and other problems that rural women have faced in receiving education from multiple angles. This research also seeks corresponding solutions from the source, putting forward targeted and practical countermeasures and suggestions, so as to find possibilities to solve the problems to promote the development of the education policy, reflecting the fairness of education and helping rural Chinese women to have better personal development in the future.

6.3 Recommendation

This study therefore proposes to eliminate gender differences in rural areas in China within the compulsory education system, concepts, and

content from the perspective of the whole society factor, school factor, family factor, and women themselves factor.

6.3.1 Social Factor

On the one hand, both the central and local governments should continue to promote the nine-year compulsory education policy. In some remote rural areas, the educational investment is still insufficient due to economic backwardness (Liu, 2009). In the next stage of the popularisation of nine-year policy, the education of school-aged rural women should be the top priority. This involves a wide range of aspects, if we want to adhere to the focus of popularising nine-year compulsory education for rural women, we have to start from all aspects of compulsory education, from increasing investment in rural education consistently by the relevant national and regional departments to increasing the state's investment in building rural school buildings and providing more enrolment opportunities for rural children, as well as improving the wages and benefits of rural teachers and making sure they have better contributions to rural education. In addition, education investment should be focused on rural women's education, establishing comprehensive rural women's compulsory education files, and tracking rural women's education experiences so that every rural woman can receive the chance to get into school.

Furthermore, it is necessary to stress legal protection for the enactment of nine-year compulsory education, especially for rural women, and strengthen punishments for behaviours that violate this. Nowadays, many related education provisions have imposed severe penalties on violations of compulsory education. For example, for parents or other guardians who infringe on minors' right to education, the People's Court has the right to revoke their guardianship and establish other guardians in accordance with the law. Parents whose guardianship qualifications have been revoked shall continue to bear maintenance expenses in accordance with the law (Minister of Education, 2019). However, due to the insufficient implementation of such measures and the influence of various social factors, it is difficult for similar measures to protect rural women's rights to receive education. Relevant departments should promulgate more specific laws and regulations based on specific conditions and increase the operability and

practicability of the related law. It is important to see that women as a vulnerable group have been valued and paid attention by many relevant legal provisions (Liu, 2009). For example, as we previously reviewed, the *Women's Rights Protection Law* has emphasised the protection of women's rights in receiving education (Ministry of Justice, 2019). It is also should be noticed that for those remote and rural areas, local government should establish some specific education teams to supervise and inspect these education issues regularly. We should not only enact laws, but also pay attention to their long-term implementation.

On the other hand, the whole society should give strong support to the development of rural compulsory education. Compulsory education is a major event related to the future of a country and as such all sectors of society should pay sufficient attention to it, not only the government ministries. Various methods can be adopted to expand the nine-year compulsory education development channels, such as encouraging donations from society, counterpart support between developed and undeveloped regions, and teacher exchange to share knowledge and best practices between urban and rural areas. The "Spring Bud Program" launched in 1989 that aims to subsidise rural girls' school costs has played a huge role (Liu, 2009). Currently, such activities should be promoted throughout society, so that more social organizations and members of society can participate in caring for rural women's compulsory education. The forces of the whole society have a significant impact on guaranteeing the continuously positive implementation of nine-year compulsory education (Zhou & Song, 2007).

6.3.2 School Factor

At the rural school level, schools should improve the concept and awareness of gender equity in compulsory education teachers and education administrators at all levels. In particular, gender equity in micro-education activities, such as gender equity in teachers' attitudes towards students, expectations and evaluations, educational concepts and teaching methods, etc. Through special training and the establishment of a special reward and punishment system to improve teachers' notions of gender equity, ensure there is no gender bias in the teaching process, increase teachers' care for girls, and cultivate these girls' self-confidence

in learning. It is important to reduce the rate of rural girls dropping out of school due to unfair treatment by eliminating gender discrimination and make sure girls receive the same development and exercise opportunities as boys (Song & Tan, 2004).

6.3.3 Family Factor

In terms of improving and enhancing the out-dated concept of the rural family, we should strive to eliminate the influence of old feudal ideas and backwards concepts. As a need for development in the new era, the traditional patriarchal ideology in rural areas in China should be eliminated as soon as possible to provide more space and possibility for the survival and development of rural women (Shou, 2006). The potential specific measures that can be implemented include: Firstly, using one-to-one assistance or specific support to persuade families who have difficulty in receiving education or applying corresponding legal measures to help children in this family get into schools. Second, the government and social organisations should ensure rural women's employment after they leave school, especially by providing more opportunities for rural women who have finished nine-year compulsory education, which can eliminate parents' concerns about sending girls to school, to some extent. Moreover, at the same time, the media should strengthen the awareness raising campaigns related to the nine-year compulsory education through newspapers, radio, television and other channels, so that girls' parents have a clear understanding of the importance of education, increasing enthusiasm of rural parents and school-aged women to change their traditional ideas.

6.3.4 Female Students Own Factor

Because of the stunted economic development and the long-term traditional culture influences in rural areas, most rural women are deeply oppressed by the feudal patriarchal system, and their own development thus has been severely affected (Li, 2002). Rural women should build up confidence and change the past feudal concepts. According to the interview data, some women mentioned that they feel low self-esteem because they are women, the result of the notion of inferiority of the female position passed down from generation to generation. As rural women, they should change this concept of gender and begin to raise awareness that, in today's society,

women are playing an increasingly important role and the feudal notion that "women's ignorance is virtue" should be discarded (Stamarski et al., 2015).

According to existing studies, it has been found that the higher the level of education, the greater the impact on women's self-improvement, and such impact will be higher than that of men (Bian & Logan, 1996). On the one hand, this gender difference lies in the fact that education improves women's professional status and income more than men's. That is, compared with men, the higher the female education level, the higher the rate of return, which means they can get more resources from work and at the same time pay more attention to the realisation of self-worth and be more likely to cherish that sense of professional achievement. It thus seems that the enlightenment that education has brought to women might be more prominent (Wang, 2019). Therefore, we should more encourage rural women get into school and pursue an education, starting with changing their own ideas and increasing rural women's enthusiasm for enrolling and completing their studies.

6.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, nine-year compulsory education for rural women should enable them to give full play to their potential, abilities, and value. This issue is also a social problem. Apart from the outside, the effectiveness of compulsory education still depends on women themselves (Chen, 2007). The development of this education is not charity or indoctrination, but a two-way interactive activity that starts from the actual needs of the student, respecting their subjectivity and stimulating their creativity. In recent years, the social status of rural women has improved, but they are still a vulnerable group in terms of geography and gender. The outdated gender culture that holds males as superior to females is more internalised in people's consciousness and is accepted by people naturally. Many women who grew up in rural areas have inherited such traditional gender concepts. They have no clear life goals and lack the enthusiasm and desire for new information and new knowledge. Due to their limited vision, their thoughts reflect the characteristics of conformity and dependence, lacking personal and social responsibilities while being more likely to have mental health concerns (Chen, 2007). Therefore, rural women

should overcome the mentality of retreating in the face of difficulty, abandon the idea that “women are weaker than men”, and be liberated from conventional outdated concepts that men should be in the workplace while women should be at home. It is important for rural to women understand the meaning of education and bravely fight for their equal education rights to men, no longer just obeying the conservative ideology. Furthermore, rural women should recognise their self-worth in life and establish this notion with self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement. They also need to actively participate in various education and training activities, improving their personal ability continuously so that they can take part in the market competition and become useful talent that society needs, rather than giving up the opportunity to be educated on the pretext of being born in the rural areas. Only in this way can the challenge of popularising nine-year compulsory education for rural women be truly solved (Yi et al., 2012).

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- refuse to answer any question during the interview without having to give a reason. I would like to record the interview for research purposes only, and only I and my supervisor will hear the recording and see the transcript. Will that be okay? [After interviewee agrees] Shall we start now then — ?

I. Demographic and personal information

Can I begin by asking some personal details, as background — ? Thank you.

- 1) I have your name already, can I take your age? And do you have brothers or sisters? [if 'yes'] How many? Older or younger than you? And what are they doing now? [Get brief details]
- 2) And can I ask where are you living now? [probe] Is this the place you grew up in? [explore briefly] Can you tell me a bit about the place where you grew up — what's it like [i.e., brief description], how you liked it, if you had friends there, did you go to school there? [explore gently, and find out inter alia how many schools there were in the local area, how close they were to where she lived, etc.]

II. Education and Schooling

- 1) If we can move on now to talk about your time at school, can you tell me how long you spent there? [explore] Can you tell me a bit about that time —? For example if you were happy there, what things you liked best, any difficulties you had — ?
- 2) And can I ask if you completed primary school (six years)? [if 'yes'] What were your best subjects? Can you tell me a bit more about this? And can you tell me a bit about how lessons were taught in your school, for example did the teacher stand at the front of the class and have children repeat what they said, or something else? [Probe: to check rote learning or other teaching styles] [if 'no'] What was the last class you completed? And why did you leave school then? [explore] Did you like being at school? [if so] Can you tell me what you liked best about school? Did you have any difficulties whilst at school? [explore] And how did you feel when you left school? [explore] So what did you go on to do after you left? [explore] [If she had to stay home to help the family or similar —] Did your brothers or sisters also not complete primary school? [If they did] What was the reason given for you not completing primary school

Appendix I

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. You might remember from the Information Sheet I sent you that this interview is about rural women's experiences with education, including any difficulties you might have faced in getting an education, what education means to you, and your thoughts on the education of rural girls and women now and for the future. As you know participation is voluntary and you can

and they being allowed to? *[probe in depth]* *[If they also didn't complete primary —]* Why did they leave school then? *[explore]*

- 3) *[if interviewee has completed primary school]* After you finished primary school did you go on to junior high school? *[if 'yes']* Was your junior high school near where you lived or did you have to travel? *[explore — prompting how far away, how she got to school and back, etc.]* And can you tell me a bit about your time at junior high school? *[probe as necessary]* Did you complete junior high school then? And what is the highest level of education you completed? How does this compare with your classmates and other girls from your village? *[probe]* *[If peers studied further than she had]* What is the highest level your classmates and other girls from your village studied? How did you feel when they went on to study further? *[probe]*
- 4) Moving on to talk about education more generally now, can I ask what education means to you? *[probe as necessary]* How important would you say education is for women and girls in rural areas? Can you tell me why you think this? And what does education mean to other members of your family? *[probe, including if this perception is gendered]* Who is the most educated in your family and what is the highest level they have studied? *[explore briefly]*

III. China's Nine-Year Compulsory Education Policy.

Thank you, if we can move on now to the next section, I'd like us to talk about Government policies on education.

- 1) You might remember that in my Information Sheet I mentioned China's Nine-Year Compulsory Education Policy —? Can I ask if you had heard about that policy before then? *[if 'yes']* Great! Where did you hear about it? Do you remember how old you were when you heard about this policy? *[explore]* What did you think about the policy? *[explore]* *[If 'no']* Would you like me to tell you a little about it? *[briefly outline policy]* What do you think about this policy?
- 2) And can you tell me how you think this policy is working in your area? *[explore]*
- 3) The education of women and girls in rural areas and the future
- 4) If we can move on now to think about

education in rural areas and the future, what would you say is needed to allow women and girls to get the nine years of free education they are entitled to? *[explore]* How important or not would you say this is?

- 5) And for yourself, how important or not would you say your education experience has been in your present life and for your future? Can you say a bit more about this? *[explore]* If you were to have a daughter what kind of education would you like her to have? *[explore]* What kind of life chances could she have with such an education?
- 6) Back to yourself now, if you had your time again what kind of education would you like to have? What sorts of life chances would that have given you? How does this compare with your present life? *[explore all]*

IV. Other

That's the end of my questions. Before we end, do you have any questions you want to ask me? Or is there anything related to rural women's education that we've not discussed that you'd like to add?

Thank you so much for your cooperation and sharing your experiences and thoughts with me. It will be very valuable for my report.

Appendix II

[Draft advertisement to be placed on TikTok, Weibo, WeChat]

RURAL ADULT WOMEN NEEDED FOR MASTERS RESEARCH AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

China's Nine-Year Compulsory Education Policy and Rural Women's Education

We are looking for adult women from *rural areas of 'X' and 'Y' districts*, aged *above 18 years* old to volunteer to take part in a study of women's experience of education whilst living in rural areas, what education means to them, any difficulties they might have faced in accessing education and their thoughts in relation to girls' education in present-day rural China and for the future. Participation would involve an *interview*, approximately *60 minutes* in length. Interviews will be confidential, and your name will not be used in writing up the research.

For more info, or to participate,

Contact:

Appendix III

Data Coding

1) Open coding of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women in the context of nine-year compulsory education

The purpose of open coding is to explore and study the compulsory education receiving problems among Chinese rural women under

the implementation of the nine-year compulsory education policy. Open coding is the first step in the analysis of the original interview data, and it is also a process of conceptualising the data and recombining it in a new way. Through the code analysis of the collected original interview data of 4 interviewees, the following totally 15 open codes are obtained, the open codes and the corresponding original interview content are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Open coding table for compulsory education issues of rural women in China under the background of nine-year compulsory education

Serial number	Open coding	Extract of interview content
AA01	Rural parents have low educational level and don't pay enough attention to education	"... how should I put it, people used to say that most rural women were rural aunts, since people used to be generally not well-educated..."
AA02	Rural parents are influenced by the idea that men are superior to women	"... my education level is about the same as that of other girls in the village. Basically, girls of my age don't go to school after finishing junior high school. They all go to factories to work. There are many factories in our village and neighboring villages. So I didn't think there was anything wrong with this way of life..."
AA03	Partial subject phenomenon in learning and therefore loses confidence in learning	"... I'm most afraid of math teacher, because I can't understand what he taught in the lecture. This is not to say that the teacher is not good at teaching. It's that my partial subject is too serious..."
AA04	The school has fewer various courses	"... My best subject is Chinese, because there are only two subjects, mathematics and Chinese, the other subjects like music, art, sports, it is difficult to take a lesson, as long as you understand the language, you can do well in Chinese, but math is all depends on your intelligence! Why I left school? I left school because I have graduated from elementary school..."
AA05	Inconvenient transportation to the school	"... I also encountered difficulties in school, because at the beginning of junior high school, I was very uncomfortable and was very homesick. The emotion of homesickness has affected me to listen to the lectures carefully. At that time, my mother sometimes sent me lunch at noon, which relieved my homesickness..."
AA06	The school does not pay enough attention and protection to female students	"The only difficulty I encountered in school was being bullied twice by senior classmates in the fourth grade. I was too timid to tell my parents. Later, I solved the matter with the help of teachers, classmates and friends. But at the same time, it also makes me feel inferior and introverted and sensitive".
AA07	The rural living conditions are tough and has the low demanding for education	"... one reason is not admitted to high school, and the other is that family conditions are not allowed. My parents believe that earning money depends on hard work, which is quite hard".

AA08	Expectations for working and earning money go beyond studying and going to school	"... I gave up and started working and earning money after I left school, hoping that my sister and brother could have a good academic achievement..."
AA09	School is far from home	"... my junior high school is a bit far away from home, every time I go to school, I have to take a car..."
AA10	Rural women living in poverty that their family cannot afford to pay for books and miscellaneous fees	"... the older sister was going to college, and my younger brother was going to junior high school, and I was also going to high school. At that time, our tuition fee was relatively heavier..."
AA11	As family in poverty, does not want to increase the burden on parents	"... you actually wanted to receive further education, but the family conditions at that time really did not allow it. The teacher once came to my home to persuade me to review for another year, but I also gave up decisively because I felt my parents were too tired".
AA12	Easy to be affected by other dropping out students	"... at that time, most of the people in villages did not go to junior high school. Few girls would go to high school and college. Sometimes I heard of a female student who studied well and went to college and now have found a good job. I am very envious. At the same time, I regret that I didn't cherish the opportunity to study".
AA13	The school's geographical conditions are harsh	"... there is a primary school in the town, and the middle school is divided into a south campus and a north campus. The south campus is in a cropland, and the surrounding areas are crops..."
AA14	The conditions of eating and lodging at school are harsh	"... it was the poor condition of what I ate at that time. I remember that we can only eat the steamed buns at school..."
AA15	Excessive academic pressure in school	"... the experience of junior high school is that the studies are more difficult than that of elementary school, and there is loads of homework left. The junior high school also has monthly exams, which is too difficult".

2) Axial coding of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women in the context of nine-year compulsory education

Axial coding is the second stage of grounded theoretical analysis. It further summarizes and merges the concepts and categories that formed in open coding, as well as exploring and constructing the logical relationship between concepts and categories, such as causality, priority, etc at the same time, which can therefore show the organic connection of each part of the material (Soylu, 2011). The main axis coding process aims to extract the keywords of open coding and get more meaningful category concepts (Zhou & Yuan, 2014). The main axis

coding is to further process and analyse the open codes, explore the logical relationship between the open codes, and finally classify the open codes with more relations under the main axis codes, so as to fully described the attributes and dimensions of the each categorise. In the operation of the software, it is used to find out the relationship between the "free nodes" through the Nvivo 11.0 software, and finally abstract the "tree nodes". After the analysis of the spindle encoding stage, the following logical relationship between spindle encoding and optional encoding is obtained, as shown in the table below: a total of 5 spindle encodings.

Table 2. Principal axis coding of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women under the background of nine-year compulsory education

Serial number	Axial coding	Open coding
BB01	Rural parents' feudal and backward thinking influences their willingness to send girls to school	Rural parents have low educational level and don't pay enough attention to education
		Rural parents are influenced by the idea that men are superior to women
BB02	Poor conditions for studying in rural poverty-stricken areas	Inconvenient transportation to the school
		The school's geographical conditions are harsh
		School is far away from home
		The conditions of eating and lodging at school are harsh
BB03	There has no guarantee for women's enrollment in rural areas	The rural living conditions are tough and has the low demanding for education
		Rural women living in poverty that their family cannot afford to pay for books and miscellaneous fees
BB04	Female students don't pay much attention to receiving education	Expectations for working and earning money go beyond studying and going to school
		As family in poverty, does not want to increase the burden on parents
		Easy to be affected by other dropping out students
		Partial subject phenomenon in learning and therefore loses confidence in learning
BB05	School courses are not attractive to girls	The school has fewer various courses
		The school does not pay enough attention and protection to female students
		Excessive academic pressure in school

3) Selective coding of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women under the background of nine-year compulsory education

Selective coding is the process of core categorization (Rees & Young, 2016), which means continuing to analyse and summarise the main axis coding that has been summarised, extract the core categories and concepts, analyse the logical relationship with other concepts, and conceptualise the unfinished concepts, which is also the process of deriving the core elements of the theoretical framework of gender inequality and other factors that influenced Chinese rural

women receiving nine-year compulsory education under the implementation of nine-year compulsory education policy (Zeng, Pang, Zhang, Medina & Rozelle, 2014). The process of selective coding is used to filter out more explanatory and universal concepts, and to interpret the more particular difficult situations that Chinese rural women facing in receiving nine-year compulsory education in smaller categories. The selective coding of influential factors within Chinese rural women's education experience under the background of nine-year compulsory education is in the table below:

Table 3. Selective coding of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women under the background of nine-year compulsory education

Serial number	Selective coding	Axial coding
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CC01	Family factors	Rural parents' feudal and backward thinking influences their willingness to send girls to school
CC02	Social factors	Poor conditions for studying in rural poverty-stricken areas
		There has no guarantee for women's enrollment in rural areas
CC03	Female students' own factors	Female students don't pay much attention to receiving education
CC4	School factors	School courses are not attractive to girls

4) Saturation test of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women under the background of nine-year compulsory education

After completing the three-level coding, the researcher selected two more female students who were in rural schools to conduct interviews around the interview outline to test the saturation of the above-mentioned factors that influence the rural women receiving nine-year compulsory education. Through in-depth digging of the interview data, it did not find new influential factors. The concept of three-level coding, therefore, it can be

considered that the results of the analysis of compulsory education receiving issues and behind causing reasons among Chinese rural women in the context of the nine-year compulsory education have reached theoretical saturation.

5) Findings and analysis of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women under the background of nine-year compulsory education

After the three-level coding, and the information saturation of the analysis conclusion model is tested, the following analysis conclusions are drawn;

Table 4. Findings and analysis of compulsory education issues among Chinese rural women under the background of nine-year compulsory education

Serial number	Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding
CC01	Family factors	Rural parents' feudal and backward thinking influences their willingness to send girls to school	Rural parents have low educational level and don't pay enough attention to education
			Rural parents are influenced by the idea that men are superior to women
CC02	Social factors	Poor conditions for studying in rural poverty-stricken areas	Inconvenient transportation to the school
			The school's geographical conditions are harsh
			School is far away from home
			The conditions of eating and lodging at school are harsh
		There has no guarantee for women's enrollment in rural areas	The rural living conditions are tough and has the low demanding for education
			Rural women living in poverty that their family cannot afford to pay for books and miscellaneous fees
CC03	Female	Female students don't pay much	Expectations for working and earning

	students' own factors	attention to receiving education	money go beyond studying and going to school
			As family in poverty, does not want to increase the burden on parents
			Easy to be affected by other dropping out students
			Partial subject phenomenon in learning and therefore loses confidence in learning
CC4	School factors	School courses are not attractive to girls	The school has fewer various courses
			The school does not pay enough attention and protection to female students
			Excessive academic pressure in school