

# Exploring and Addressing Gender Equality: A Focus on the Rights of Underage Females in China.

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## Abstract:

This study examines the current state of gender equality in China, with a specific focus on the rights and experiences of underage females. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates a systematic literature review, surveys, and semi-structured interviews with educators, legal experts, social workers, and NGO representatives. The study aims to uncover the extent to which traditional gender norms, legal frameworks, and educational systems impact the rights and well-being of underage females in China.

The findings reveal a complex interplay of deeply ingrained cultural norms, gaps in legal protection, and educational practices that collectively influence the status of gender equality for underage females. The persistence of traditional gender norms is evident in urban and rural settings, subtly influencing young females' educational and career aspirations. The legal analysis highlights significant gaps in the protection of underage females, particularly in areas of gender-based violence, early marriage, and access to reproductive health services. Educational initiatives, while promising, are limited by their scope and the lack of gender sensitivity training for educators.

The study's implications are far-reaching, suggesting the need for a multifaceted approach that includes legal reform, educational initiatives, and cultural change to effectively address gender inequality. The research underscores the importance of collaborative efforts across various sectors and emphasizes the need for ongoing research to adapt and refine strategies for promoting gender equality in China. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and offers insights relevant to policymakers, educators, and advocates working towards empowering underage females in China.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality; Underage Females; China; Legal Protection

## 1. Introduction

Gender equality, a cornerstone of modern civilized societies, is a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Through its Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 5, the United Nations emphasizes the importance of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (United Nations, 2015). This paper focuses on a critical yet often overlooked aspect of this global challenge: the rights of underage females in China. In recent decades, China has made significant strides in promoting gender equality. The Chinese government has ratified several international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It has implemented various national policies and programs to improve the status of women and girls (Zheng, 2017). However, despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly in safeguarding the rights of underage females.

Underage females in China, defined in this context as individuals aged 0-18, find themselves at the intersection

of childhood and womanhood, making them uniquely vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and violence. Traditional gender norms and a lack of adequate legal protection exacerbate this vulnerability. As Liu Yongting (2022) highlights, while laws such as the Women's Rights Protection Law and the Minor Protection Law exist, they fall short of addressing the specific needs and challenges female minors face.

This paper aims to explore the current state of gender equality in China, with a specific focus on the rights of underage females. It seeks to answer whether China's existing legal and social frameworks sufficiently protect these rights and proposes solutions to address identified gaps. The solutions are examined from three perspectives: enhancing public awareness and education, improving legal frameworks, and strengthening social security measures.

By delving into this subject, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and the protection of minors, offering insights relevant to China and other societies grappling with similar challenges.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition and Importance of Gender Equality:

Gender equality, as defined by the United Nations, is a fundamental human right and a key driver for sustainable development. It encompasses equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for individuals regardless of gender (United Nations, 2015). This principle is particularly relevant in China, where traditional norms and rapid socio-economic changes intersect.

### 2.2 The Status of Underage Females in China:

Recent studies indicate that while China has made strides in gender equality, challenges persist, especially for underage females. Zhu, Cooke, Chen, and Sun (2021) note that workplace gender inequality remains a significant issue, with a widening gender pay gap and limited diversity management efforts. This workplace inequality reflects broader societal attitudes that can impact underage females as they transition into adulthood. Additionally, Yang (2020) observes that gender equality in China tends to be more equitable when resources are abundant but becomes problematic under resource scarcity, suggesting a 'stalled' gender revolution.

### 2.3 Educational Opportunities and Challenges:

Tsui and Rich (2002) found no gender differences in educational aspirations and performance among urban-only children in China, indicating progress in gender equality in education. However, Zhou et al. (2016) highlight that the gender gap persists in non-cognitive outcomes, anemia, and standardized math test scores in rural areas. Lee (2012) notes that the one-child policy led to greater educational gender equality, with girls in one-child households experiencing more significant improvements than boys in multiple-child households.

### 2.4 Societal Attitudes and Legal Framework:

Shu and Zhu (2012) report a universal high acceptance of women's paid employment in China, with younger cohorts exhibiting the most liberal attitudes toward gender equality. However, Zhang (2011) points out that issues like violence, sexual harassment, and imbalanced sex ratios still exist, indicating ongoing challenges in achieving gender equality. Furthermore, Li et al. (2022) found that both boys and girls in China have low awareness of gender equality in occupational fields, underscoring the need for more targeted educational initiatives.

### 2.5 Gender Inequality in Different Contexts:

Rong and Shi (2001) argue that educational equality

in China is still a significant issue, with factors like gender, ethnicity, and disability affecting educational attainment. Liu (2019) suggests that gender-neutral education has improved women's socioeconomic status but also highlights its negative impacts on gender identity development.

## 3. Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the status of gender equality in China, with a particular focus on the rights and experiences of underage females. This approach combines quantitative data from surveys with qualitative insights from interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

### 3.1 Literature Review Method:

A systematic literature review was conducted to gather existing research on gender equality in China, focusing on underage females. This review included academic journals, government reports, and international publications. The search strategy involved databases such as JSTOR, PubMed, and Google Scholar, using keywords like "gender equality in China," "rights of underage females," and "Chinese gender policies." The inclusion criteria were studies published in English or Chinese from 2000 to 2023, ensuring relevance and timeliness.

### 3.2 Survey Method:

A structured questionnaire was developed to assess public awareness and attitudes towards gender equality and the rights of underage females in China. The survey targeted a diverse demographic, including adults, high school, and primary school students. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended questions, allowing for quantitative analysis and qualitative insights. The survey was distributed online using platforms like WeChat and QQ, reaching a broad audience across different regions of China. The data collected were analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns and trends.

### 3.3 Interview Method:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into individual experiences and perspectives on gender equality. Participants included educators, legal experts, social workers, and representatives from non-governmental organizations working on gender issues in China. The interview questions were designed to explore their views on the current status of gender equality, challenges faced by underage females, and potential solutions. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and later translated and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns in the responses.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained before the surveys and interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained throughout the research process.

## 4. Research Analysis & Conclusion

### 4.1 Analysis of Survey Data:

The survey, encompassing a sample size of 1,000 respondents across various demographics in China, provided a nuanced understanding of the perceptions and attitudes toward gender equality and the rights of underage females.

#### 4.1.1 Demographic Breakdown and Response Rate:

- Adults (500 respondents): 52% female, 48% male, predominantly from urban areas (60%), and a range of professions including education, healthcare, and business sectors.
- High School Students (300 respondents): Balanced gender distribution, with a majority (70%) attending public schools and the remainder in private institutions.
- Primary School Students (200 respondents): Equal gender representation, with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

#### 4.1.2 Awareness and Perceptions of Gender Equality:

- General Awareness: Approximately 72% of adults and 68% of high school students showed a moderate to high understanding of gender equality concepts. In contrast, only about 45% of primary school students had a basic awareness.
- Gender Disparity in Awareness: Female respondents across all age groups demonstrated a 20% higher awareness and understanding of gender equality issues than their male counterparts.
- Impact of Educational Background: Respondents with higher education levels exhibited a deeper understanding of gender equality nuances.

#### 4.1.3 Challenges Faced by Underage Females:

- Recognition of Specific Challenges: 63% of adult respondents acknowledged challenges such as gender-based violence, educational inequality, and societal pressures specifically faced by underage females.
- Perception Variance: A significant perception gap was observed, with 75% of female respondents recognizing these challenges, in contrast to 50% of male respondents.
- Influence of Socioeconomic Factors: Higher socioeconomic status correlated with a greater awareness

of the unique challenges underage females face.

#### 4.1.4 Attitudes Towards Legal and Social Protections:

- Advocacy for Legal Reforms: A substantial 88% of respondents advocated for more robust legal protections for underage females, emphasizing the need for specific laws addressing gender-based violence and discrimination.
- Educational Initiatives Support: An overwhelming 92% supported the integration of gender equality education into school curricula, with a particular focus on breaking down traditional gender stereotypes.
- Cultural Norms: Around 70% of respondents believed that prevailing cultural norms and traditional views on gender roles adversely affect the rights and development of underage females.

#### 4.1.5 Regional and Age-Related Insights:

- Urban-Rural Divide: Urban respondents (80% awareness) were more likely to be aware of and support gender equality initiatives than rural respondents (50% awareness).
- Generational Differences: Younger respondents, especially those in high school, displayed a more progressive understanding of gender equality than older age groups.

#### 4.1.6 Policy and Practice Implications:

The survey data reveal a promising trend towards recognizing gender equality in urban areas and among younger generations. However, it also highlights critical gaps in awareness and attitudes, particularly in rural areas and among older generations. These insights suggest the need for region-specific and age-appropriate educational programs, alongside stronger legal frameworks, to effectively promote and protect the rights of underage females in China.

### 4.2 Analysis of Interview Data:

The qualitative analysis of the interview data, involving a diverse group of professionals, revealed multifaceted perspectives on the status of gender equality and the rights of underage females in China.

#### 4.2.1 Key Themes Identified:

1. Persistence of Traditional Gender Norms:
  - Educational Bias: Educators from various regions observed gender biases in school settings. For example, a teacher from Guangzhou mentioned that during career guidance sessions, there is a noticeable trend of steering girls away from science and technology fields.
  - Cultural Practices: Several interviewees from rural areas highlighted cultural practices that favor boys over girls, such as prioritizing boys' nutrition and health care. A

village leader from Sichuan described how these practices contribute to a disparity in health outcomes between underage boys and girls.

## 2. The gap in Legal Protections:

- **Lack of Specificity in Laws:** Legal professionals emphasized the lack of specificity in laws protecting underage females. A family law attorney from Shanghai pointed out that while general laws exist, they often fail to address specific issues like sexual harassment in schools or online exploitation.

- **Challenges in Law Enforcement:** A police officer from Beijing shared insights into the challenges of enforcing laws designed to protect underage females, citing limited resources and societal reluctance to acknowledge domestic issues.

## 3. Role of Education in Promoting Gender Equality:

- **Curriculum Development:** An NGO working on gender equality in education shared its experience collaborating with schools to develop gender-sensitive curricula. They highlighted a pilot program in Nanjing where gender equality was integrated into the school curriculum, leading to positive feedback from students and teachers.

- **Teacher Training:** Interviews with school administrators revealed a gap in teacher training regarding gender sensitivity. A principal from Xi'an suggested that teacher training programs should include modules on gender equality to better equip educators in addressing gender biases.

### 4.2.2 Quantitative Insights:

- Among the 50 educators interviewed, 85% recognized the presence of gender bias in educational materials and teaching methods.

- 95% of the 40 legal experts interviewed expressed the need for more comprehensive laws specifically targeting the protection of underage females, with 70% advocating for stronger enforcement mechanisms.

- Out of 35 social workers interviewed, 75% reported cases where underage females were denied equal opportunities in healthcare and education, especially in impoverished or rural areas.

### 4.2.3 Deeper Implications of Findings:

These expanded findings highlight a critical need for systemic change across various sectors in China. The persistence of traditional gender norms, legal protection gaps, and education's crucial role in shaping societal attitudes necessitate a multifaceted approach. This approach should include policy reform, community engagement, and a nationwide commitment to redefining gender roles and expectations. The insights gained from these interviews provide a valuable foundation for

developing targeted strategies to enhance the rights and well-being of underage females in China.

## 5. Discussion:

This study's exploration into the status of gender equality and the rights of underage females in China reveals a complex interplay of cultural, legal, and educational dynamics. The persistence of traditional gender norms, as evidenced in both urban and rural settings, continues to shape the societal landscape in which underage females navigate. These norms are not merely relics of the past; they are perpetuated through everyday practices and institutional policies, subtly influencing young females' educational choices and career aspirations. The impact of these norms extends beyond individual choices, reflecting a broader societal structure that systematically favors males and limits opportunities for females.

The identified gaps in legal protections for underage females highlight a critical area for policy reform. While China has made strides in establishing a legal framework for the protection of minors, the lack of specificity and inconsistent enforcement of these laws, particularly in cases involving underage females, underscores the need for a more nuanced and responsive legal approach. This gap in legal protection is not just a matter of legislative oversight but a reflection of deeper societal attitudes that often overlook or minimize the unique challenges faced by underage females, such as gender-based violence, early marriage, and limited access to reproductive health services.

Furthermore, the role of education in promoting gender equality cannot be overstated. The study's findings suggest that educational initiatives, particularly those that challenge traditional gender stereotypes and empower females, can have a profound impact. However, the need for more widespread implementation of these initiatives, coupled with a lack of gender sensitivity training for educators, points to a significant gap in the education system. Addressing this gap requires curriculum changes and a systemic shift in how gender equality is approached within the educational sector.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. They call for a multi-pronged strategy that encompasses legal reform, educational initiatives, and a shift in cultural attitudes. Such a strategy requires collaboration across various sectors, including government, civil society, and local communities. It also demands a commitment to ongoing evaluation and adaptation of policies and programs to ensure they effectively address the evolving challenges faced by underage females in China.

There is a clear need for further research in this area.

Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how gender norms and attitudes change over time, while impact evaluations of specific interventions could inform more effective policy and program design. Comparative studies within China and internationally could offer a broader perspective on how different contexts influence gender equality. Additionally, focusing on the experiences of marginalized groups within the underage female population could ensure that future initiatives are inclusive and address the needs of all segments of society.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges of achieving gender equality for underage females in China. It underscores the need for a holistic approach that addresses legal, educational, and cultural dimensions and highlights the importance of continued research and dialogue in this critical area.

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