

Patriarchal Norms and Their Impact on the Academic Performance of Rural Female Students in the Wumeng Mountainous Area

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Abstract

Humans cannot have a fair society without fair education. But old ideas about men being better than women still affect how girls are educated in rural parts of the Wumeng Mountainous Area. These ideas widen the gap between boys' and girls' schooling. This research examines how traditional ways of thinking, financial constraints, and local social structures limit what female students can do in school. The researcher used both surveys and interviews with 814 people and found that unequal learning resources, too much housework, and safety risks are the main problems. These issues push many girls out of school, or they stay in school but do not really learn. The results show that specific policies to break these barriers are required. This will help make education more equal for girls in the region.

Keywords: patriarchal values; rural female students; educational inequality; dropout rates; Wumeng Mountainous Area

Introduction:

The Wumeng Mountainous region is on the border of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. It has been poor for many years. Local schools are not well-developed. The mountains make it hard to travel. The economy grows more slowly than in other areas. Clan customs are still strong. Many people leave to work in other places. All these things make the social situation in this area unique.

Past studies about men being better than women and rural schooling have mostly focused on abstract theories and broad national trends (Liu et al., 2016). Family financial status shapes gender gaps in rural education (Yao, 2006). Migrant work affects left-behind children's education but overlooks gender differences (Jiang, 2007).

In recent years, researchers have begun to focus on the struggles of girls in rural schools. "Non-poverty dropout" among rural junior high students in Yunnan is influenced by cultural and community factors (Chen, 2020). Factors behind nominal, low-engagement enrollment among vocational students (Zhao, 2004) in western China do not apply specifically to Wumeng (Jia & Liu, 2023). This project expands prior research by closely analyzing how patriarchal attitudes (Wang, 2015; Zeng, 2014.) shape girls' academic performance in this particular region, addressing a gap in existing literature.

The researcher carried out a questionnaire with 814 people, including local parents, teachers, female students, and community residents. Findings indicate that gender inequity has not faded on its own, even with social progress. Neither reform and opening-up nor past family planning policies fully eliminated the preference for sons. In fact, smaller family sizes often mean limited resources go disproportionately to boys.

Girls are frequently assigned housework and sibling care from an early age. Long, unsafe journeys to school, paired with inadequate support on campus, push many girls to leave school early. Some stay enrolled but lose motivation to learn, a pattern widely called pseudo-

enrollment. Pinpointing the origins of these problems and designing effective solutions is vital to maintaining anti-poverty progress and stopping the cycle of deprivation across generations.

Research Methodology:

Mixed Methods Research Design: This research uses a sequential explanatory mixed-methods framework. It combines quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative interview content. This forms a complete understanding of the research topic. The quantitative section relies on a large-scale questionnaire to find trends and statistical relationships. The qualitative segment uses one-on-one interviews to uncover hidden causes and contextual details that numerical data cannot fully capture.

Stratified Random Sampling: This study selected 814 participants from the Wumeng Mountainous Area through stratified random sampling. Participants were divided according to their provinces (Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan), school stages (primary, junior high, senior high), and specific grades. This grouping method helped improve sample representativeness and lower the bias caused by improper selection. Table 1 shows the specific distribution of respondents in terms of regions, school types, and grades.

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Region, School Type, and Grade Level¹

Category	Distribution
Region	Yunnan: 32%, Guizhou: 35%, Sichuan: 33%
School Type	Primary: 45%, Junior High: 35%, Senior High: 20%
Grade Level	Balanced representation across all grade levels within each school type

Triangulation Strategy: To boost the credibility and stability of our research outcomes, the researcher adopted triangulation as a core verification strategy and combined questionnaire findings, interview transcripts, and official documents for data triangulation. The researcher invited several researchers to take part in data gathering and sorting to realize investigator triangulation. Also, the researcher merged quantitative measurement with qualitative interpretation to achieve methodological triangulation.

Data Analysis Procedures: The researcher analyzed quantitative data with SPSS 26.0, did descriptive statistics, correlation tests, and logistic regression. This helped to find key factors linked to academic performance and dropout likelihood. Interview-based qualitative materials were transcribed word-for-word. The researcher further examined them via thematic analysis to extract consistent patterns and core themes and then merged evidence from both strands to form a full, cohesive understanding of the research issue.

Research Ethics Considerations: The researcher upheld strict ethical standards at every stage of the study. All participants provided informed consent. Legal guardians provided consent for students who were minors. The researcher guaranteed all respondents full confidentiality and anonymity, so all personal identifiers were removed before data analysis. The study followed

¹ Source: Compiled by the author based on survey data.

principles of beneficence and non-maleficence to protect participants from any potential harm linked to their involvement.

Regional Reasons for the Persistence of Patriarchal Values in the Wumeng Mountainous Area:

- i. **The Influence of Deep-rooted Traditional Ideas and Clan Culture:** The rugged and remote landscape of this region has helped preserve tight-knit clan relationships. Traditional ideas like “sons support parents in old age” and “carrying on the family line” have been passed down across generations. In many local villages, families without sons often face social judgment. Daughters are expected to marry and leave their birth families (Wang et al., 2012).

Survey data reveal that 63.15% of respondents oppose or strongly oppose equal education opportunities for male and female students. These long-held traditional views directly shape parents’ choices about whether daughters can attend school and how long they can stay enrolled.

- ii. **The Family Planning Policy Encouraged Gender Preference to a Certain Extent:** The family planning policy restricted the number of children per household. It unintentionally strengthened son preference in local communities. With fewer children, many families channeled their resources and hopes mainly into sons. From early childhood, unequal distribution can be seen in daily necessities, living arrangements, and educational support (Li et al., 2024).

Statistics show that 28.01% of respondents recognize “male superiority” as a prominent local problem. Smaller family sizes make limited resources more likely to favor sons. This puts girls at a disadvantage from the start of their education.

- iii. **Dependence on Male Labor in Agricultural Production and Old-age Security:** Most communities in the Wumeng Mountainous Area rely on agriculture. They depend heavily on physical labor. Farming, hauling goods, and other strenuous work have long been seen as men’s roles. Weak social security systems also push families to count on sons to support parents in old age (Zhao, 2016).

Against this background, preferring sons is not just a cultural custom. It is a realistic way to secure family survival. Table 2 shows how families divide educational resources between sons and daughters.

Table 2: Family Educational Resource Allocation by Gender²

Resource Allocation Preference	% of Families
Prioritize sons	44.35
Prioritize daughters	33.17
Equal allocation	22.48

- iv. **Parents’ Low Education Level and Left-behind Family Structure Widen Inequality:** Most local parents have limited education. They lack awareness of gender equality principles (Ou, 2023). With many fathers migrating for work, left-behind female students often take on responsibility for farm work,

² Source: Compiled by the author based on survey data.

caregiving for elderly relatives, and looking after younger siblings. Figure 1 shows the distribution of household responsibilities among female students.³

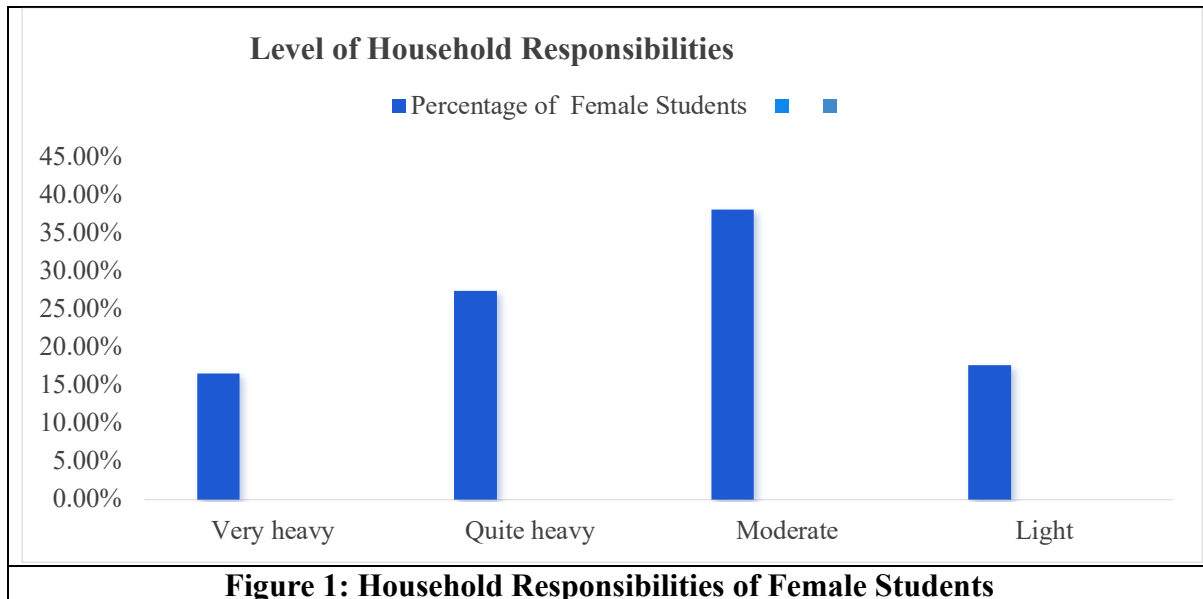


Figure 1: Household Responsibilities of Female Students

- v. **The Influence of Closed Regional Society and Peer Groups:** Villages in the mountainous region are geographically dispersed. Yet social influence within communities remains strong. This leads to the homogenization of values and beliefs among residents. When one student drops out of school, it often triggers a “dropout chain” effect (Jia et al., 2025). This influences other students in the community.

As the belief that “girls do not need education” spreads within communities, female students gradually lose confidence in their academic abilities. Many come to believe that “helping the family or migrating for work is more practical than pursuing education.”

- vi. **Geographical Conditions and School Environment Widen the Disadvantages of Girls:** The mountainous terrain and long distances between settlements create significant safety risks for female students commuting to school. Rural schools often lack sufficient boarding facilities, residential staff, and female teachers. This further increases parental concerns about their daughters’ safety and well-being. Table 3 shows respondents’ satisfaction with school safety management and support for female students.⁴

Table 3: Satisfaction with School Safety and Support for Female Students

Aspect of School Support	% of Dissatisfied Respondents
School safety management	51.23%
Support for female students	54.42%

Negative Impacts of Patriarchal Values on Female Students’ Continuous Schooling

- i. **The Gap in Family Education Investment:** Families demonstrate greater willingness to invest in boys’ education, including paying for tuition, extracurricular classes, and higher education opportunities. In contrast,

³ Source: Compiled by the author based on survey data.

⁴ Source: Compiled by the author based on survey data.

expectations for girls are often limited, with many parents believing “completing primary or junior high school is sufficient” or that “early marriage is more practical” (Wang et al., 2012).

Data reveals that 44.35% of families allocate more resources to sons, compared to only 33.17% who prioritize daughters. Approximately 80% of families maintain resource allocation patterns that disadvantage girls, directly contributing to disparities in academic performance and educational attainment.

- ii. **Too Much Housework Squeezes Study Time:** At home, female students are often responsible for a wide range of household tasks, including cooking, cleaning, caring for livestock, and looking after elderly family members and younger siblings. These responsibilities consume significant time and energy that could otherwise be dedicated to studying (Wang & Liu, 2024).

Survey results indicate that 16.58% of female students describe their household responsibilities as “very heavy,” while 27.52% report them as “quite heavy.” Nearly half of female students experience daily fatigue from domestic work, which prevents them from completing homework and leads to declining academic performance. Over time, this can result in decreased motivation and eventual dropout.

- iii. **Low Self-esteem and Insufficient Support Lead to “Pseudo-enrollment”:** Prolonged neglect and differential treatment can lead female students to develop feelings of inferiority and sensitivity. Over time, many internalize the belief that “I am not as capable as boys.” Schools often fail to provide adequate psychological support to address these issues (Guo et al., 2011; Jia et al., 2025).

Survey results show that only 44.96% of respondents recognize the need for psychological counseling for female students. As a result, many students remain enrolled but disengage from academic activities, leading to the growing prevalence of “pseudo-enrollment.”

- iv. **Family Pressure and Safety Concerns Lead to Dropping Out:** Parents often prioritize sons’ education over daughters’. When girls struggle academically, face financial difficulties, or when parents hold the belief that “girls will eventually marry and leave the family,” they may be pressured to discontinue their education. Table 4 presents the primary reasons for female student dropout in the Wumeng Mountainous Area.⁵

Table 5. Primary Reasons for Female Student Dropout

Reason for Dropout	% of Respondents
Excessive household responsibilities	64.25%
Dangerous commute to school	64.13%
Lack of parental understanding	64.01%
Family pressure to marry early	58.35%
Financial difficulties	52.19%

Even high-achieving girls may be forced to discontinue their education due to family pressures, with safety concerns often serving as a pretext for gender-based discrimination.

- v. **Community and School Environment Increase the Risk of Dropping Out:** Community norms that devalue girls’ education gradually erode female students’

⁵ Source: Compiled by the author based on survey data.

academic motivation. Some teachers also exhibit unconscious bias, providing less support and lower expectations for girls compared to boys.

In schools with inadequate safety management and support systems, female students often feel disconnected and unable to focus on their studies. This sense of alienation can ultimately lead to their decision to drop out of school.

Recommended Strategies to Improve the Academic Situation of Female Students in the Wumeng Mountainous Area:

- i. **Change Ideas Through Suitable Local Enlightenment Activities:** Changing deeply ingrained patriarchal values requires more than formal meetings and abstract rhetoric (Zeng, 2014). Interventions must use culturally appropriate methods that resonate with local villagers.

Village radio, wall posters, home visits, and community meetings can be used to disseminate messages about gender equality, emphasizing that “girls can succeed too” and “daughters can support parents in old age.” Sharing success stories of local women who have pursued higher education or achieved professional success can be particularly effective in challenging the belief that “education is useless for girls.”

- ii. **Parental Support and Home-school Cooperation for Mountainous Areas:** Parent education programs should be scheduled during non-farming periods or market days to maximize participation. These programs should avoid abstract theories and instead focus on practical strategies, such as “how to treat children equally” and “how to collaborate with schools to support student learning.”

Establishing effective home-school communication channels is crucial for identifying and addressing issues affecting female students, such as excessive household responsibilities and gender bias. Early intervention can help prevent academic disengagement and dropout.

- iii. **Strengthen the Support System Jointly by Community and School:** Village committees, rural work teams, and women’s organizations should play active roles in identifying at-risk female students and providing timely home visits, counseling, and support.

To address safety concerns during commutes, community-based initiatives such as student escort systems can be implemented. These programs encourage female students to travel to school in groups, reducing risks associated with long, isolated journeys and preventing dropout due to safety concerns.

- iv. **Improve Boarding Facilities and Care System:** Expanding boarding school facilities in townships and towns is a priority, as 68.67% of respondents identified improving boarding conditions as a key need. Schools should ensure sufficient accommodation for female students, strengthen safety management, and provide comprehensive care for students’ daily lives. This can help address issues related to long commutes and safety concerns.

Increasing the number of female teachers and strengthening psychological support services are also essential. Schools should offer practical courses on confidence-building, adolescent health, and safety awareness. Improving school safety infrastructure can create a more secure and supportive learning environment for female students.

- v. **Accurate Financial Assistance and Legal Protection of the Right to Education:** Government programs such as the “Yulu Program,” free tuition and textbook policies, and education grants should prioritize female students. Financial assistance should cover boarding costs, transportation expenses, and living allowances, as 64.25% of respondents identified financial support as a critical need.

Local governments, schools, and judicial authorities should collaborate to enforce compulsory education laws and prevent dropouts. Gender-based discrimination, early marriage, and other practices that violate girls’ right to education should be addressed through legal means to ensure equal access to education for all children.

Conclusion:

Despite decades of reform and opening up and the implementation of family planning policies, patriarchal values persist in the Wumeng Mountainous Area. A combination of factors, including traditional beliefs, agrarian economic structures, weak social security systems, and low levels of parental education

Survey results reveal that over 60% of residents do not support equal educational opportunities for boys and girls. Nearly half of families allocate more resources to sons, and over 40% of female students report having excessive household responsibilities. Dissatisfaction with school safety and support for girls is widespread, with the greatest burdens identified as “excessive household work,” “lack of parental understanding,” and “long and dangerous commute to school.”

Improving the educational outcomes of female students in the Wumeng Mountainous Area requires context-specific strategies that address the region’s unique challenges, such as isolation, ethnic diversity, boarding needs, transportation barriers, and left-behind families. A comprehensive approach is needed, encompassing cultural change, family support, community engagement, school improvement, and policy reform. Only through such efforts can girls’ equal right to education be truly protected, breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and laying a foundation for rural revitalization and regional development.

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