

The Impact of One-Child Policy on Chinese Women

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Abstract

China's one-child policy has had many beneficial effects on women, especially Chinese urban women born between 1980 and 2000. Due to the influence of traditional Confucian values, which give men a higher social status than women, society has generally disregarded women's rights. Women have been expected to stay home to take care of their families.

The one-child policy affects society in multiple ways. On the one hand, it has had the effect of providing women with an opportunity to have higher education and obtain better jobs, especially in urban areas. Women can now compete for equal social and financial status. On the other hand, because many women have received better and higher education, their attitudes toward marriage have changed. They are no longer satisfied by having a happy family. Now, they also want a successful career.

Therefore, urban women with good jobs and salaries are more critical about choosing husbands and less eager to get married. Society now includes more and more cases of "gold miss"—voluntarily single adult females. Besides this outcome, the one-child policy has another unintended consequence. It has intensified what is known as the "missing girls" problem—a prenatal sex selection process whereby females are aborted. As a result of this, China has a sex ratio imbalance favoring males. (Avraham, 2008, p. 87-88)

Introduction

The Chinese government formally implemented the Population and Family Planning Law in 1982. Contrary to popular belief in the West, the law does not forbid every family from having more than one child. The guidelines of Chinese family planning policy are late marriages, later births, and fewer babies. (Zhenghua J and Lingguang Z, as cited in Li Wei-xiong, 1998, p. 28) In the urban areas, couples are encouraged to have only one child. But in rural areas, if the first child is a girl or a disabled child, couples may have a second child.

Due to the one-child policy, China has been able to successfully control its rapid population growth. The family planning program and policy likely prevented around 300 million births between 1970 and 1994. (Li Wei-xiong, 1998, p. 28) Because of economic development, people's living standards have improved and society is now capable of providing better educational resources and facilities.

However, the one-child policy has created a demographic challenge as there is now a noticeable aging of population. China may lack labor power in the future.

Benefits to Chinese Women

Because of Confucian values, China has a long history of discrimination against females, Families and society has favored male because males are considered more valuable and significant than females. Hence, since 1949, the government has made many efforts to raise the traditionally low status of women, but discrimination against

females continues to be a problem in China. (Li Wei-xiong, 1998, p. 32) Though China's Constitution states that "Chinese women enjoy equal rights with men in respect of politics, economics, social and family life," reality has fallen short of that promise. (Li Wei-xiong, p. 33) The one-child policy is one of the legal enforcements to change this situation.

Educational Opportunities

Because of the one-child policy, families places higher expectations upon their children. Parents want to support children by giving them access to a better education. Well-educated people have more consumption capacity and higher living conditions. This incentive encourages more children to pursue higher education.

Although the purpose of one-child policy was not to improve women's status, it does create more opportunities for girls in urban areas to receive higher education. It forces families to change their traditional concepts about sons being the only hope for the entire family. Many couples in urban areas have to accept the idea that their daughters offer the only hope of supporting the family. Parents depend on their daughters to support them in the future. Therefore, daughters in urban areas are encouraged to pursue higher education, which offers them a path leading to a successful career. The improved status of women can be seen in most fields of work. Society generally respects well-educated or competent women. We can tell from the Table1 that women constitute a high percentage of the students receiving education.

Table1**Basic Statistics on Students by level and Type of Education (2007)**

Item	Total Enrollment	Graduates	Females as % of Total
Doctor's Degree	222,508	41,464	34.07
Master's Degree	972,539	270,375	47.19
Regular Undergraduates and College Students	18,848,954	4,477,907	49.12
Regular Senior Secondary Schools	25,224,008	7,883,143	47.26
Regular Junior Secondary Schools	57,208,992	19,568,428	47.33
Regular Primary Schools	105,640,027	18,701,708	53.48

Source: China Statistical Yearbook. 2008. China Statistic Press.

The Career Women

Now many women have joined the employment market and become successful. The one-child policy reduces the number of years a woman spends bearing and raising children. As a result, women have more time to pursue careers, including higher positions in companies and governments. (Lawrence, 1987, p. 323) Chart 1 illustrates that from 1995 to 2004, the portion of women took senior positions in the state-owned enterprises increased, from 7 percent to 13 percent. Meanwhile, the overall portion of male employees declined, from 63 percent to 57 percent. This noticeable change is partly attributed to the fact that more women in the past 10 years have received advanced education (as shown in Table1). These highly educated women are more competitive in the workplace. In addition, women are seen as being

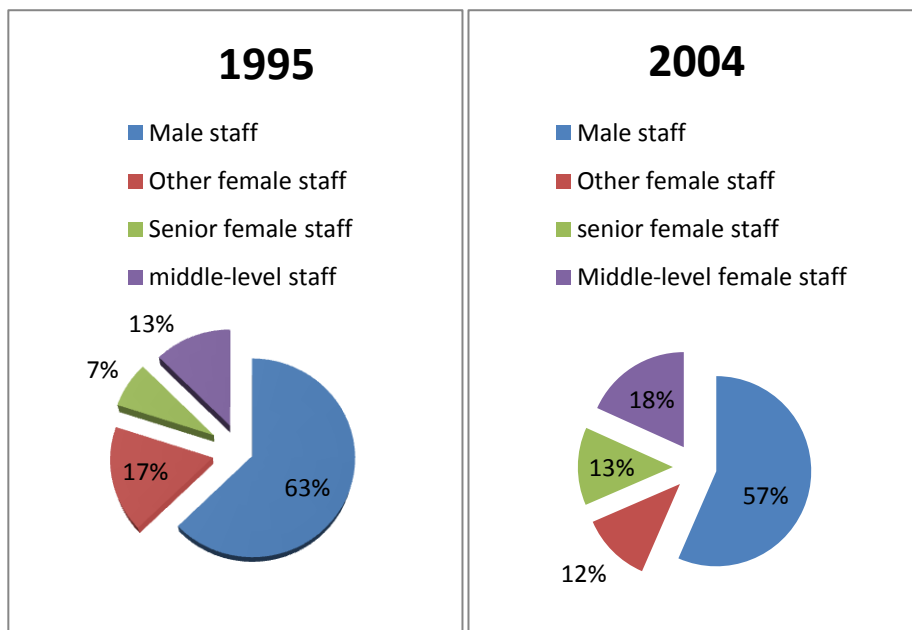
more suitable for jobs in the service sector. Indeed, the service sector views women as being ideal employees. (Vanessa. 2002, p. 1099)

Furthermore, many women are succeeding in the workplace because the one-child policy changed their lifestyle values. They no longer have to rely on their families as providing the only meaning for their lives. Many are now motivated to successfully devote themselves to their occupations. (Lawrence, 1987, p 323)

Chart 1

Female Skilled staffs in state-owned enterprises

(Data based on Understanding the Affluent Consumers of China.2007.)



According to some parents, daughters represent their hopes, and their daughters' happiness and future become the most important purpose for the family. In order to help their daughters pursue happiness and a bright future, parents do not insist on

instilling traditional concepts in them. Parents would rather inspire their daughters to honor the family by becoming successful in both their education and career.

Unintended Consequences

Everything has two sides. The implementation of the one-child policy has made the existing demographic problem of the aging of the population worse and brought new problems including the “Gold Miss” phenomena and the “missing girls” problem.

The Aging of Population

Because China lacks a social security system, the child becomes the main supporter of the family when parents retire. Today, the percentage of China’s elderly population is growing while the number of its youth is decreasing. (See Chart 2) As China increasingly becomes an aging society, the burden of supporting elderly relatives increases for children. As a result of many families having only one child, physical and financial burdens often now fall on the shoulders of one individual within an extended family.

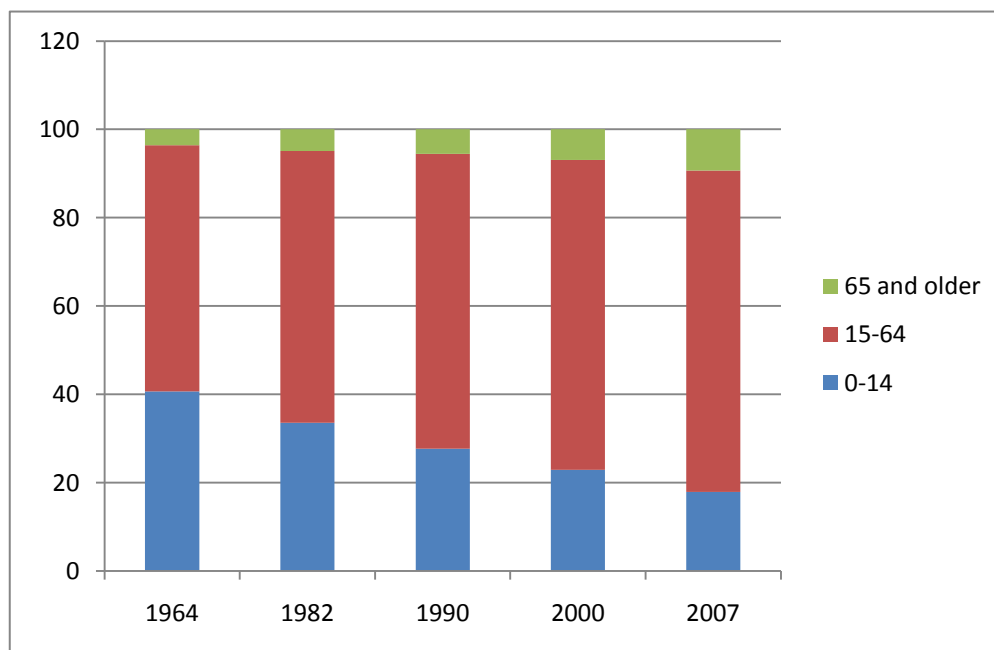
Under Chinese traditional values, sons are expected to support their retired parents and all elders in the family who do not have other relatives to support them. Two new phenomena started appearing after the one-child policy was put in place. The first is that women aborted female infants. The other is that families started relying on female children to support the family in future. (Lawrence.1987, p. 318)

Consider that some married women work full-time while also taking care of multiple sets of retired or elderly couples—their parents, husbands’ parents and potentially some grandparents. Sometimes, parents live with the couple, increasing the daily care-taking responsibilities. While the one-child policy does release these full-time working women from some childbearing responsibilities, the policy also increases the heavy burden of taking care of elderly parents.

Chart 2

Population by Age group in 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2007

(Data based on China Statistical Yearbook. 2008)



Although one-child policy promotes gender equality, the process is so slow that married women are still considered to be responsible for household issues. The situation is even worse for full-time working mothers who need to take care of children and elders. Many couples choose to give money to their parents or hire

someone else to take care of elders. These choices, to some extent, require women to keep working in order to balance the family budget.

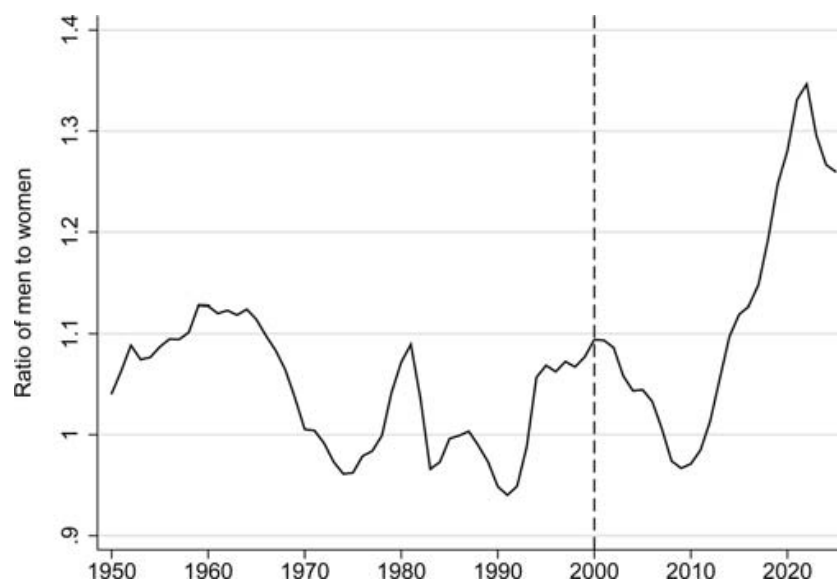
The Missing Girls

Sons are still more preferable in China because Confucian values about gender roles have deeply impacted people's minds. In some ways, the one-child policy and the challenge of being an aging society has reinforced this preference for males.

Abortion is legal in China. Although sex selection is not legal, it is happening in many places in China, mainly in rural areas. This process is likely the reason for China's high sex ratio. For the population as a whole, there are 106 males for every 100 females. For children aged 0-9 years, the ratio is even higher: there are 121 males for every 100 females. (Data based on China Statistic Yearbook. 2008)

Chart 3

Sex Ratio of Marriage-Age Adults in China, 1950–2030



Note: The marriage market is defined as men ages 22–32 and women ages 20–30.

Source: based on data from China National Bureau of Statistics (1982, 2000), as cited in Avraham & Ethan, 2009, p. 403

The consequence of the “missing girls” problem is that around 10 percent of the men who were born between 1980 and 2000 cannot find brides. Even worse, these unmarried men will not have children to support them after retirement. (Avraham & Ethan, 2009, p. 400) The Chinese government predicts that in 2020, probably 30 percent of marriage-age males will not find brides. (See Chart 3)

Aside from that problem, sex selection is harmful to the health of women who abort female infants. Many abortions occur in rural areas occur without good medical care. In addition, it is unfair to the female infants who cannot be born due to their gender. It is ironic that women have abortions to later have sons, but at the same time, these sons have a high risk of not finding brides. Therefore, either these sons have to become excellent when they grow up to attract females’ attention, or their parents will have to prepare houses or other items, such as jewelry or automobiles, to attract wives. An additional consequence is human trafficking. Because it is so hard for males to find a proper wife, trafficking or selling women still exists in China.

‘Gold Miss’ in Urban Areas

The “Gold Miss” phenomenon refers to women with higher education, professional jobs and good earnings who do not have boyfriends, lovers or husbands. They may be beautiful and have high social status, but probably spend more time on their

education and careers. They cannot someone to get married when they reach the suitable age for marriage. They are perceived by males as being too critical or snobbish. Furthermore, women with high status usually want to find a husband with equal or higher status. Unless men are in great condition, such as good financial condition or a good job, women will not choose them. For traditional reasons, urban people, especially women usually do not want to get married to men from rural areas which cause this “gold miss” problem to become even worse.

Conclusion

The one child policy has released women from heavy child-bearing and child-raising burdens; however, it has also limited women’s freedom of choosing family sizes. (Vanessa L. Fong, 2002. P.1099) It can be concluded that the one-child policy has brought great benefits to urban women who can receive higher education and better work opportunities because they have support from their parents. However, a new phenomenon---“Gold Miss” has developed, since women with advanced education and good paying jobs hone difficulties in finding husbands, Opposite to the traditional concepts, women have become the only hope for many urban families. Especially now that China’s population is aging, women are responsible for supporting their retired parents. It is a heavier burden for full-time working women.

Improvement of women’s status has been slow and problematic. The “missing girls” problem is the strongest evidence of discrimination against females. In order to solve these problems, China should provide better safety net for the elderly population. A

social security system would reduce the heavy burden for the younger generation, including working women and unmarried men. Additionally, although abortion is legal in China, sex selection is illegal. The Chinese government, especially the local governments, should devote more of its effort toward prohibiting these illegal abortions and provide better medical conditions for women.

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