

EWC ENTRIES

Title

One Child Policy in China

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Word Count

1002

Abstract

This topic provides a comprehensive and balanced account of China's family planning policy, known as the "One-Child Policy", which was implemented in 1979. It discusses the contextual background of the policy, the general rule under it, the implementation, resistance, and enforcement. It also notes various criticisms over the policy and its impact on China's social structure and social practices, including several unintended outcomes. The One-Child Policy has now been abolished. From 1 January 2016, any married couples in China shall be allowed to have two children. However, the implications of this policy shift remain unclear.

Main Text

China's family planning policy, often known as the "One-Child Policy", was implemented in 1979. It aimed at curbing overpopulation to alleviate social, economic and environmental problems. The policy is recognised as "virtually the only way" China could control its population as it was "implemented against a background of tradition which calls for large extended families" (Brahm 1996, 54).

While the rules under the One-Child Policy had a number of exemptions as well as regional variations and it has been amended several times since first introduced, the general rule was that one child was permitted to an urban family and that rural families might have a second child if the first one was a girl and the mother-to-be had reached a certain age. To implement the policy, sex education programmes were widely provided across the country, contraceptives were freely distributed in every state organisation, work unit, and street residents' committee, and couples were taught the methods of birth control as a prerequisite to obtaining a marriage certificate.

There were a series of benefits for married couples who had complied with the policy. For example, maternity allowance is 98 days in China, whilst an additional 30-day leave was provided where a couple had a "late marriage" under the policy if they were the *Singleton Family Certificate* holders. On the other hand, penalties were available for breaching the rules, such as losing state benefits, fines, and naming and shaming where public sector cadres were "offenders."

The One-Child Policy has not been implemented without resistance, which typically occurred in rural areas where sons are preferred to daughters. Resistance took various forms, including illegally removing contraceptive devices, leaving their usual residence to give birth elsewhere, refusing to pay fines, or even assaulting birth planning officers. Policing internal migrant workers, who have no stable places of working and living, was challenging. By

contrast, the policy implementation did not seem to be problematic in urban areas where many couples had even begun to limit births before the policy came into force.

The One-Child Policy has been viewed, often by the Western observers, in negative terms. Initially, the Chinese Government was questioned for its commitment to equality. It was firstly argued that to put the onus largely on women to prevent pregnancy was unfair, and secondly, it was wrong to permit rural families to try again if the first child was a girl as by doing so it endorsed the traditional gender preferences for boys. Thirdly, the policy was criticised to represent an intrusion into women's conjugal lives and that, most seriously, it had led to violence against women: some women whose pregnancies were unauthorised were forced to take abortions; those who gave birth to daughters were sometimes abused by husbands and parents-in-laws (Bailey 2012). Fourthly, easy availability of abortion services, female abandonment, and infanticides were identified as "evils" of the One-Child Policy. Furthermore, the policy was pointed out to be the cause of instances where girls were sold or given away in preference to male children (Brahm 1996).

In contrast to a stream of criticisms, Grivoyannis (2012) claims that the policy reduced the dependency rate and increased domestic savings that were then needed for economic growth. For Pan (1993), who argues from a sexological perspective, the One-Child Policy had helped sever the historical link between sex and procreation in China.

Undeniably, the One-Child Policy has had a profound impact on social structure and social practices in China and it has generated some unexpected outcomes. Firstly, sex-ratio imbalances are believed to be a result of a combination of the traditional gender preferences and the use of ultrasound for gender selection – both were unavoidably connected to the One-Child Policy. Secondly, China is rapidly ageing as a consequence of the policy. This means that China's labour pool is shrinking due to a falling working population, which will hurt economic growth. It is also argued that the policy has shaped the lifestyles of the Singletons grown under it. Yu (2014) forges a link between Singleton identity and consumption practices. In fact, apart from receiving all the affection and economic spoilage from their parents and grandparents, as the sole focus of their families, Singletons are placed upon with the hopes of entire families for their educational achievements, which are associated with future social status and successes. Furthermore, Singletons bear the legal obligation to look after their ageing parents, and given the welfare system is still patchy in China, their potential burden can be considerable.

The family planning policy – the resulted sex-ratio imbalance in particular – has also been tentatively linked to crime. In the popular media, it is asserted that the surplus of young men could have an effect on crime. However, evidence is lacking to establish the causal link between an unbalanced sex-ratio and a corresponding upsurge of crime. In child trafficking literature, the One-Child Policy is identified as a criminogenic factor and thought to have facilitated the illicit trade by stimulating the demand for children, boys in particular, and also by creating the supply market of surplus and 'unwanted' babies (Shen 2015).

To respond, China re-designed the family planning policy. The One-Child Policy has now been abolished and from 1 January 2016, any couple shall be allowed to have two children. While the implications of this radical policy shift are unclear, its impact on individuals and Chinese society as a whole should not be underestimated.

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Key Terms

Population control, human rights, impact, crime, abolition

Cross-references

ewac0216 (Gender and International Human Rights Issues)

Author Mini-Biography

Anqi Shen is Reader in Law at Teesside University, UK. Her main research focus is in the areas of organised crime, gender, youth, crime and justice, the legal profession, judicial culture and sentencing. She is the author of *Offending Women in Contemporary China: Gender and Pathways into Crime* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).