

# China's Generation Without Women

Beijing's one-child policy resulted in a demographic powder keg

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China's gender imbalance, the result of the one-child policy implemented in 1979, is creating a social time bomb that may threaten the already feeble status of women, who are already losing ground. While attention is focused on disturbing problems like social instability and rising crime resulting from the gender imbalance, people appear to be forgetting the gross injustice that women have long suffered, injustice that is growing both despite and because of their shrinking numbers.

In 2005, the mainland China sex ratio at birth stood at 118 males to 100 females, having already increased from 108:100 in 1981 to 111:100 in 1990. It is substantially above the natural baseline which ranges from 103:100 to 107:100. By the year 2020, there will be 30 million more men than women, according to a report by the State Population and Family Planning Commission.

The social implications are disturbing. A recent media report says that based on a Statistics Canada survey, the rate of robbery offenses for women is just 13 out of every 100,000, versus 110 for men. The same survey shows that men are seven to 10 times more likely to commit serious crimes, including robbery, homicide, sexual assault and car theft, and that women are less likely than men to re-offend or escalate their crimes.

If those figures hold true in China, visitors in 2020 may find a generation warped by a huge gender imbalance, raising questions about what one does with a society where one man in five cannot find a wife. That question appears to highlight Chinese leaders' concerns about the one-child policy creating a demographic time bomb.

A 2006 study conducted by Therese Hesketh of the Institute of Child Health at University College London and Zhu Wei Xing of China's Zhejiang Normal University for the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, found that 94 percent of all unmarried people in China aged between 28 and 49 are males, and that 97 percent of them have not completed high school. Some critics have predicted that the phenomenon of a growing number of young men in lower echelons of society who are marginalized and who have little outlet for sexual energy will lead to higher levels of anti-social behavior and violence.

Other studies have concluded that there is a clear link between sex ratios and violence as a whole and not only violence against women. Young male migrants are thought to be responsible for a disproportionate amount of urban crime, especially violent crime. It is reported that migrants account for 50 percent of criminal cases in the major receiving cities of migrants. The authors also point out that when single young men congregate, there is increased potential for organized aggression.

The study also speculates that as the number of females decreases, their social status may rise as a result. But it is also quick to point out that men, rather than women themselves, are the ones to benefit from women's enhanced value, as men are still masters or custodians of women in some societies, like the rural communities in China. This may explain incidents of kidnapping and trafficking in women in those communities.

From the above study, it can be said that Chinese society is facing or about to face a period of unprecedented male aggression, which would likely render women as victims and women's status even more precarious and vulnerable to subjugation.

But what has caused this gender imbalance in the first place? The proximate cause, of course, is China's one-child policy, which has been in effect since 1979 and which was meant to alleviate overpopulation but which had the unfortunate side effect of skewing the sex ratio by inducing illegal sex-selective abortions, although there is no conclusive evidence suggesting that the sex ratio disparity is a direct result of the policy.

The ultimate cause is the traditional cultural preference of sons over daughters. Sons are considered more valuable for their higher wage-earning capacity, especially in agrarian societies, and they can continue the family line, while daughters are looked upon as economic burdens.

This archaic son-preference mentality is the reason for sex-selective abortions, female infanticide and abandoned girls across China. Spurred by the one-child policy, it may also explain the estimated figure of 34 million to 41 million missing females in the country, according to a 2001 survey mentioned in Hesketh's and Zhu's study.

Directly or not, the one-child policy precipitated the huge gender imbalance. Ending a faulty policy (or the faulty execution of that policy) may not be as hard as changing society's backward and prejudiced attitudes about women and the reluctance to protect women's basic human rights. If male aggression seems to be on the horizon, there is all the more reason for promoting and guaranteeing the safety, welfare and rights of females.

Simultaneous with the ending of the one-child policy, the Chinese government must promote equal social and economic rights for men and women and educate rural communities about women's basic rights to survive and to receive education and health care. Now that China is a major world economic player, the country has no reason to shun its responsibility to uphold women's rights.

When French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir was interviewed in 1976 about her seminal book "The Second Sex" (published in 1951), she said there was a chance that equal rights for women could be achieved in four generations' time. If 20 years make a generation, that ideal social situation would arrive around 2056 based on her estimate. If prompt action is taken now, Beauvoir's prediction may still stand a chance of being realized in China.

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