

Legacy of the One-Child Policy: Marriage Dilemmas in Urban and Rural China

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Abstract

China's one-child policy, the family planning policy enforced in 1980, continued for almost 36 years and created a lasting impact on both China's declining total fertility rate (TFR) and its sex ratio imbalance. This paper discusses the marriage dilemma caused by the one-child policy and its separate outcomes in urban and rural areas. In urban areas, the expense for childbearing, the equated monthly installment (EMI) payments, and the self-consuming nature of marriage contributed to the declining marriage rate as well as the TFR. In rural settings, the surplus of single men due to the entrenched "son preference" created a demand for the bride-trafficking market, an industry of purchasing a bride as a form of property. In this paper, I conclude that the marriage crisis and its side effects are the legacies of the one-child policy, and the Chinese government needs to craft effective approaches in addressing these problems.

Keywords: modern Chinese society, human trafficking, leftover women, marriage dilemma, one-child policy, Yujia Gu

1. Introduction

China's one-child policy, the family planning policy enforced in 1980, continued for almost 36 years and created a lasting impact on both China's fertility rate and its sex ratio imbalance. This paper discusses the marriage dilemma caused by the one-child policy and its separate outcomes in urban and rural areas, which gave rise to multiple government policies enforced in the 21st century. By restricting the reproduction rate to one child per household, the government intended to limit the population growth in China and thus raise the GDP per capita. In urban areas, the implementation of the one-child policy was easier to monitor and control: state-owned institutions could dismiss employees who had more than one child and the government could issue heavy fines, normally 10-20% of the household's income, to pressure families into following the birth-control regulations (Zhang, 2017).

For poor families, having multiple children was unaffordable, which, influenced by the societal favoring of boys over girls, resulted in the curtailment of girls' educations. However, the one-child policy benefited single daughters, as they no longer had to compete with brothers for resources. This triggered a trend of daughter preference among urban families. Girls tend to achieve higher academic status than their male counterparts — almost 53% of the top-scoring students across China's 31 provincial-level regions are female — and are more likely to get white-collar jobs (Kim & Fong, 2014). In addition, women now contribute more than 41% of the GDP growth in China, a larger percentage than in other countries (Vanham, 2018). Thus, with sufficient educational resources provided to them, more women have become well-educated and earned higher social status, resulting in a shortage of men with equal or higher social status. The traditional concept that insists women "marry up" has therefore posed a difficulty for women at the top of the social ladder, who struggle to find matching partners (Better Educated, 2016). These 7 million "leftover" women — who have assets and status — constitute a considerable proportion of China's unmarried population in urban areas.

In contrast, rural areas have experienced an entirely opposite situation. Rural families generally have an avid son preference, as males tend to perform better than females in farm work — agricultural productivity in male-headed households is 44 percent higher than that in female-headed households — and daughters are expected to join their husband's families after marriage, making no further contributions to their natal families (Barr, 2020). In order to support the labor market with sufficient manpower, the Chinese government softened

the restrictions for rural couples, allowing them to “have one son or one daughter plus one additional child” (Palacios-López & López, 2015). This policy has effectively reduced the rate of sex-selective abortion and abandonment of daughters, yet the sex ratio at birth (SRB) remains steep in rural areas. According to an estimation, more than 10% of males born after the imposition of the one-child policy will not be able to find a spouse, and surplus males will reach 30 million between the ages 20 and 49 by 2025 (Jiang, Feldman, & Li, 2014). As the competition for women in rural areas has intensified, men with low social status and low income have been left out and unable to marry. These men have had to “buy” wives from cities or border countries to carry on their bloodline and to enhance their social prestige, which has given rise to bride trafficking in rural areas.

Bride traffickers not only target women from southern China, but also those from Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, North Korea, and Myanmar, where girls are tricked by brokers who promise employment in China (Beech, 2019). In recent years, public awareness of women’s rights reached a new height as a video exposing the maltreatment of women in rural areas went viral on social platforms. In the video, a woman was chained to the corner of a room, wearing worn clothes and eating rotten food as her husband proudly talked about his eight children (Wang & Dong, 2022). This woman had been kidnapped from Sichuan, a province in southwestern China, and forced to give birth to eight children to improve her husband’s status among other villagers. Public outcry intensified and festered on the internet for a few weeks. Yet, before a proper explanation regarding the woman’s identity was given, the government successfully turned the public’s attention to adulating China’s “so-called” glory in the Winter Olympics, leaving this crucial women’s rights issue unresolved (Yuan, 2022). In recent years, the Chinese government, urged by the public, has increased efforts against bride trafficking. China’s Ministry of Public Security launched a year-long operation addressing the trafficking of women and children in March 2022; so far, 1198 missing women have been found.

This paper concludes that the one-child policy worsened sex ratio imbalance and imposed different marriage dilemmas on urban and rural households. In urban areas, the growing number of leftover women will result in a shortage of kids born to well-off families in the next generation and a decline in China’s total fertility rate (TFR); in rural areas, the population of poor rural men with urgent demands for wives will increase in coming years, intensifying the bride trafficking crisis (Yang, Jiang, & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2022). In order to address the marriage dilemma, the government has to diminish the financial and mental burdens on newlyweds by fairly distributing educational resources and lowering costs involved in marriage and childbirth. Meanwhile, the “Two-Child Policy,” originally expected to mitigate the declining TFR, proves ineffective (Myers, Wu, & Fu, 2019). The Chinese government thus needs to contrive a better solution in response to the marriage and demographic crisis.

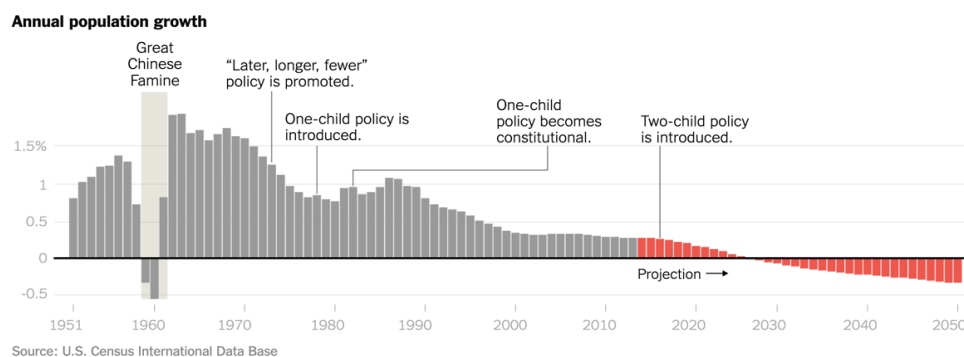


Figure 1. Annual Population Growth

As shown in the graph, China’s TFR has been declining since the Great Famine and the trend lasted until the constitutionalizing of the One-Child Policy. After a slight increase between 1980 and 1990, the Population growth dropped as the One-Child Policy became more strictly enforced. However, the declining TFR would negatively hurt Chinese economy as well as population sustainability. Thus, the government decided to implement the “Two-Child Policy,” which, according to the graph, was not effective in boosting China’s TFR.

2. History of the One-Child Policy

The concept of population control originated in the 1950s and 1960s when the total population in China reached 600 million and Deng Xiaoping (China’s vice premier in 1952) encouraged increased use of contraceptives.

Considering how rapid population growth would negatively impact economic growth, the renowned Chinese economist and educationist Ma Yinchu proposed “New Population Theories” that advocated for family planning in the years 1955-1957 in order to improve quality of life (Zhang, 2017). However, this was not the perfect time for such a proposal. At the dawn of the Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong (President of the People’s Republic of China between 1949 and 1976) believed that a large population would facilitate industrialization and agricultural production. As a result, he criticized Ma as being a “rightist” and evoked a national condemnation targeting Ma’s population control theory. China’s TFR continued to grow in the following years, reaching 6 births per woman with a total population of 800 million in 1969 (Banister, 1987). The country’s economic stagnation worsened, along with a huge decline in average living quality. Thus, the slogan “Later, Longer, and Fewer” prevailed, advertising for delayed marriage, elongated intervals between first and second children, and restricted childbearing per household (Zhang, 2017). Although China’s TFR dropped significantly from 5.8 births per woman in 1970 to 2.7 births per woman in 1979, the birth control policy in the 1970s was mostly voluntary. Finally, in 1980, Deng Xiaoping, a devoted proponent of family planning policies, rose to power and established a more coercive form of population control: the One-Child Policy (Feng, 2015). Its establishment, along with the “Open Door Policy” that redirected Chinese business to western markets and foreign trade, marked a new era of economic reform and social advancement (Howell, 1991).

3. Overview of the Marriage Crisis

3.1 Start of the Urban Marriage Crisis

After the imposition of the One-Child Policy, the SRB in China demonstrated an inverse proportional growth compared to the declining fertility rate (Pew Research Center, 2015). The social pressure that forced couples to adhere to traditional values of “son preference” and the constraint on family-size led to widespread sex-selective abortion, resulting in a higher birth rate of male infants than female infants (Attané, 2009). On the other hand, the one-child policy, although resulted in steeper SRB, allowed singleton daughters to avoid competing with their brothers for resources, especially in education. In the past, families with multiple children would not send their daughters to school in order to save money; however, with the one-child policy in place, the educational expenses per household alleviated, allowing more singleton girls to receive equal education as their male counterparts. As shown in a study conducted by Xuan Jing — a postdoctoral researcher in economics at the Ohio State University — men and women born in 1980 (after the implementation of the One-Child Policy) had almost equal levels of schooling (Institute of Social Science Survey, 2022). This statistic indicates that the One-Child Policy, by controlling the birth rate to one child per household, allowed daughters to receive more parental attention and support in furthering their educational achievements. Moreover, after the start of the birth control policy, the number of female students involved in primary, secondary, and tertiary education increased significantly, even outnumbering their male counterparts in college enrollment rates. According to the World Bank collection of development indicators, the proportion of female students in tertiary education in China rose from 2.47% to 52.74% between 1994 and 2016 (China, 2016). China’s Gender Parity Index (GPI) of tertiary enrollment also steadily increased from 2010 to 2020 (Final Statistical, 2021). Since girls tend to take more initiative academically and behave more obediently in schools, they are more likely to score higher in exams and pursue bachelor’s degrees as compared to their male counterparts, making the return on educational investment in girls relatively stable (Kim, Brown, & Fong, 2018). Correspondingly, the child preferences for most urban families shifted from favoring sons to favoring daughters. The cultural expectation demanding a groom’s parents purchase the neolocal residence when their children get married also contributed to parents of girls having less financial burden and more money to support their daughters’ education. The surge in the population of educated females has set the stage for them to start climbing the social ladder, paving the way for more elite women to emerge in Chinese society.

Women’s increasingly strong performance in education made it more difficult for elite women to find matching partners and resulted in a sharp increase in the population of “leftover women” (*sheng-nü*), a term coined by the government in 2007 that describes unmarried women over the age of 27 (To, 2015). Unlike in western societies — where single, unmarried women can be viewed positively as expressing a form of “individuality” — the patriarchal society in China blames these women for having “overly high expectations” (To, 2013). Chinese society also puts pressure on women who do not conform to their traditional domestic roles, namely taking care of their families and becoming housewives. The stigma of being leftover has pushed some women into forceful marriage, even stirring a nation-wide matchmaking movement (Yang, 2011). However, as feminist ideals have become more widely accepted in China in recent years, more women have challenged the conventional perception of marriage and rejected being labeled as “leftover.” They claim that the word “*sheng*” has two definitions and should be considered as “victorious” rather than “leftover,” because being single and unmarried

is not shameful (Tatlow, 2013). Indeed, women have embraced the right to postpone marriage and spend more time learning and working, becoming financially stable and “living the life they want” (Maria-Vanderhorst, 2018). According to Bill Powell’s report for *Newsweek*, the average age of Chinese women getting married rose from 26.4 in 2007 to 27.4 in 2015; in Shanghai, the average age for women to get married exceeded 30 years old for the first time in 2014 (Powell, 2016). This delay in marriage may have also been caused by adolescent-born fears due to intensive parenting. Witnessing their parents making huge sacrifices in time, money, and even personal interest to support the family, some teenagers, especially girls, become dissuaded from the concept of marriage. According to a survey conducted in 1999 among eighth graders and ninth graders, 22% of female respondents (n=190) and 14% of male respondents (n=180) wanted to stay unmarried their whole lives; 39% of female respondents (n=186) and 15% of male respondents (n=176) also resisted the idea of having children (Yan, 2021). To many children, the parenting they experienced negatively impacted their perception of marriage as self-consuming and tiring.

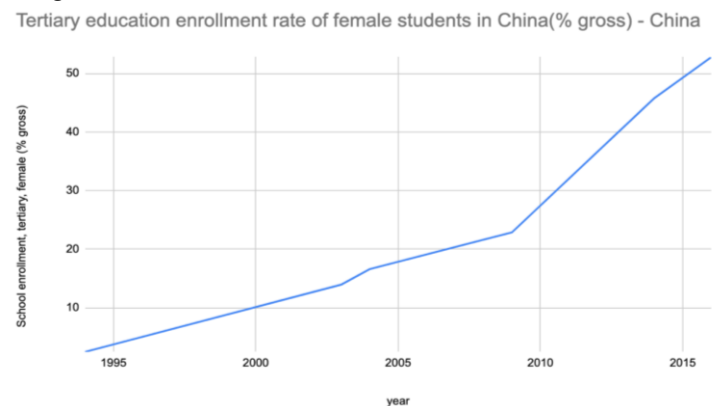


Figure 2. Tertiary education enrollment rate of female students in China

In addition, for some unmarried women, living with their parents is considered a better option than getting married. According to a survey conducted in urban Dalian between 2014 and 2015, 85% of the 101 unmarried respondents lived with one or more parents. Since most surveyed young adults had higher incomes than their parents, they would typically pay for household expenditures, yet this was still considered a better deal than paying expensive rent on their own. The money saved from housing could be spent on traveling and improving life quality. Thus, the option of living with parents also dissuaded many women from stepping into marriage, after which they’d have to take on the huge financial burden of housing, EMI payments, and any potential costs associated with having a baby. In fact, marriage is burdensome both financially and emotionally. Between 2010 and 2020, the divorce rate in China has increased from 2 to 3.36 per 1000 inhabitants (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Some young adults are concerned about post-marriage conflicts triggered by disparity in family wealth, education background, and parental disapproval. Thus, unwilling to take such risks, some women or men would rather maintain temporary relationships that fulfill their sexual and emotional needs while also avoiding the troubles accompanying marriage.

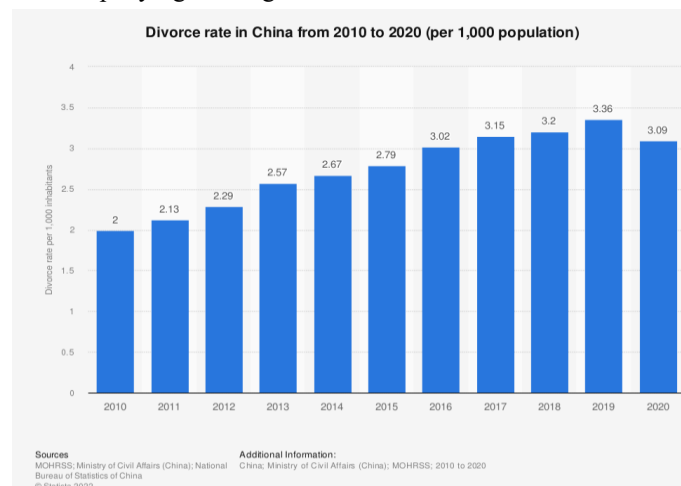


Figure 3. The Divorce Rate in China from 2010 to 2020 (per 1,000 population)

External factors, such as films, books, and songs that promote the concept of eternal love, also exacerbate the difficulty of a successful marriage. In a 2010 Pew Research Center Survey, 84% of unmarried people expressed the belief that love is an essential reason to get married (Pew Research Center, 2013). This expectation has led to raised standards for future partners beyond socioeconomic suitability — a “Mr. Right” or “Mrs. Right” who embodies the most ideal aspects of a partner. Many romance series brainwash their audiences, particularly young adults, into believing in true love and encourage them “not to yield to marriage” before encountering a person as perfect and charming as the characters who appear on television, further reducing the likelihood of marriage. As marriage becomes more widely accepted as a romantic relationship, it stops being an obligation or a matching game based on materialism, which was part of the traditional Chinese concept of marriage. Therefore, some women choose to delay or refuse marriage if they fail to find a matching partner to establish a romantic connection with.

3.2 The Marriage Dilemma and Consequences in Rural Areas

Presenting an opposite scenario than the situation in urban settings, the marriage dilemma in rural areas mainly impacts men at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Since agriculture was the primary source of income for rural households, the amount of manual labor per household determined the financial situation for the entire family; thus, the One-Child Policy was enforced less strictly in rural areas to allow more physically capable son to be born and inherit the land to do farm work as they grew up. However, a side effect of the tilted “son preference” in rural area was the worsening SRB, resulting in 114.8 boys for every 100 girls in 2015, approximately 2.5 more boys per 100 girls than in urban areas (UNICEF, 2019). This significant gender gap gave rise to a short supply of marriageable women. According to a survey conducted by Central China Normal University in 2017, single women accounted for 3.62% of the population across 267 rural villages in all 31 provinces, yet single men accounted for as high as 5.92% (Lu, Huang, & Lin, 2021).

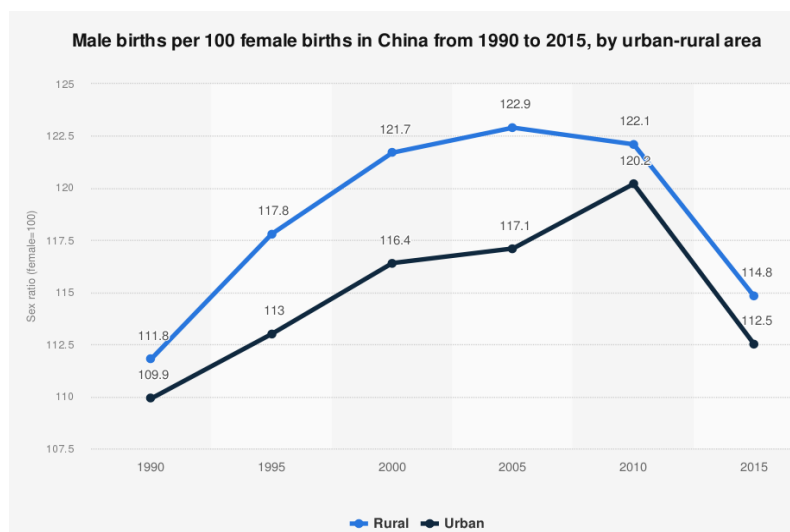


Figure 4. The number of male births per 100 female births in China from 1990 to 2015, by urban-rural area

The fierce competition for wives among men also encouraged rural women to raise standards when finding husbands, because marrying into a well-off family was the most common way for rural women to achieve upward social mobility. Further widening the gender imbalance, other rural women chose to migrate to urban areas and obtain permanent city household registry to break away from their rural identities (Fong, 2022). Since the rate of mistreatment after marriage was higher in rural areas than in urban areas, female migrant workers seeking better lives in cities constituted a significant segment of China’s internal migration (Davin, 1975). According to the 2016 Rural-Urban Migrant Workers Surveillance Survey, around 169.34 million workers from rural areas migrated to cities in search of waged employment, among which 31.7% were women (NBSC, 2017).

The decline in the rural female population has resulted in a severe marriage crisis facing rural men who have neither status nor money. In rural areas, men who don’t have a wife are constantly pressured by their family and humiliated by their neighbors, as wives and children are seen to symbolize a man’s social prestige (Lu, Huang, & Lin, 2021). Therefore, for men who’ve failed to marry women within their villages, the bride trafficking market is their last hope.

The rural marriage dilemma for poor, single men has promoted bride trafficking, in which women are abducted from impoverished parts of China and its border countries. Since the early 1980s and 1990s, the trafficking of women has been especially prevalent in Central Eastern provinces like Henan, Jiangsu, and Shandong. In scholar Xia Chengfu's 1989 paper on the characteristics, causes, and countermeasures of human trafficking in Sichuan, he indicates that human traffickers tend to target female infants and teenage girls who are relatively easy to manipulate and can be sold at higher prices. From 1987 to 1988, the trafficking of female teenagers and infants accounted for 70% of the total human trafficking cases in Santai Country (Xia, 1989). One possible explanation for this trend is that most young victims were products of over-birth. They were illegal and not registered in the local family planning department, so the human traffickers could avoid being fined for taking them.

Once bride-trafficking victims are sent into the mountains, it is extremely difficult for them to escape and navigate through the rugged and treacherous mountain roads. In fact, there exists a huge human trafficking network inside the mountains that gives these victims no chance to disclose the illicit human transactions. In 2007, the renowned director Li Yang made a movie, *Blind Mountain*, that featured cases of bride-trafficking in which the victims tried to escape; yet, after several failed attempts and brutal punishments of gang rape and ostracism, they eventually gave up and stayed imprisoned in the mountains after being forced to give birth (Dargis, 2008). These women, knowing that their little power wouldn't change anything, adapted to the lives in the village — working in the field during the day, cooking for the whole family at night — and their memories of their former life receded. Some women even became accomplices of the traffickers, helping to tame abducted girls (Yang, 2008).

In 2022, a video featuring a woman chained inside a doorless shack went viral on the internet. Facing increased public outcry over bride trafficking due to this video, the Chinese government launched a 10-month special operation to crack down on the abduction of women and children beginning on March 1, 2022 (China launches, 2022). At this year's Two Sessions, the government official concluded two main approaches to addressing the trafficking problem: first, impose harsher punitive measures on buyers and sellers alike (including the death penalty); second, resolve past cases and provide follow-up assistance to victims (Fong, 2022). However, as long as the demand — namely the marriage dilemma for rural men — still exists, the trafficking of women and children will not cease. Therefore, the primary solution to prevent bride-trafficking is for the government to improve the gender ratio imbalance and marriage dilemma in rural areas.

4. Government Policy to Address the Marriage Crisis

4.1 Policies Implemented by the Chinese Government

The Chinese government has made attempts to alleviate the childbearing and neolocal housing expenses that accounted for the drop-in marriage rate in recent years. For instance, China's Ministry of Education released the "double reduction" policy, which cracked down on for-profit tutoring companies and private institutions, thereby easing anxiety for Chinese parents, reducing the workload of students, and countering the "involution effect" (200K layoffs, 2022). However, they underestimated the impact of the One-Child Policy on education. Sending kids off to elite colleges has already become a universal expectation among urban Chinese parents, a wave initiated by one-child families. Shutting down tutoring programs has not dissuaded these parents from striving to offer their kids the best educational opportunities; instead, richer families hire more expensive personal tutors, leveling the price of private tutoring programs. According to the "China K-12 After-School Training 'To Business' Market White Paper 2020," the market size of China's K-12 after-school training is expected to reach RMB 1.4 trillion in 2025 (Wyman, 2020). Thus, the "double reduction" further intensified the anxiety of childbearing: more parents now worry if their financial status will prevent their kids from accessing the limited high quality educational resources. To minimize educational costs associated with raising children, the government would need to contrive a better approach.

Skyrocketing real estate prices in big cities are another major concern for urban couples. Whether or not a man owns property has become a symbol of financial stability and security in modern Chinese society. According to the China Daily Survey, around 69% of single women suggested that their future husband had to own a house before they would agree to marry him, while only 10% accepted rented flats (China Daily, 2017). According to sociologist Sandy To, "Parents of the groom had to pay 'bridewealth' in the form of money or gifts to the bride's parents to make up for their loss of a daughter. The modern enactment of such tradition was a house" (Yingli, 2020). However, buying a house in a city is no easy task for most urban dwellers. As suggested by a survey of Chinese home buyers in 2018, the average age of Chinese home buyers is 29.5; since 90 percent of first-time home buyers depend on loans, monthly repayments generally amount to 50% of their monthly income (People's Daily Online, 2019). To address this issue, the Shanghai Municipal Government suspended the sale of houses to

unmarried foreigners without Shanghai household registration and restricted even married families to purchasing a maximum of two suites, according to Article III of the Notice of the State Council on Resolutely Curbing Excessive Price Rises in Some Cities. This has significantly reduced the number of Shanghai citizens who are eligible to buy homes and lowered the demands on housing while the supply remains constant, thus driving down housing prices to suit those in need. However, it is still unclear whether such an approach will be effective in increasing marriage rates.

4.2 Policies Implemented in Other Populous Countries in the World

India, the second most populous country in the world, also faced the issue of overpopulation, which hindered its economic growth. Thus, the government initiated the largest government-sponsored family-planning policy (FP) in the 1960s after three five-years plan for controlling population growth all failed (Ledbetter, 1984). Unfortunately, the FP also proved to be ineffective as Indian's population growth in the late 1960s — around 2.3% — remained higher than the global average of 1.75%. Thus, in the late 1970s, the government put more emphasis on contraceptives use and comprehensive health care for women: the condom has been a popular birth control product used by three-hundred million people each year in India. According to India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS), India's TFR has been successfully brought down to 2.159 in 2022, a 0.92% decline from 2021 (Population slowdown, 2021). Therefore, India's family planning policy has proven to be effective in stabilizing the population as opposed to China's irreversible birth control policy that may lead to a demographic crisis. Indonesia, on the other hand, reversed its population control policy to encourage population growth and set a goal for achieving 70 million by 2100 considering its mass consumption industries that require manual labor. In order to promote population growth, the government created a tax deduction system in favor of larger families and provided maternity benefits for women who have up to 5 children (Population Policy, 1987).

5. Conclusion

The marriage crises in both urban and rural areas originated from the one-child policy, which caused a steep gender ratio imbalance between males and females, leaving a huge surplus of single males. In urban areas, “leftover” women face public criticism regarding their decision to remain single and childless; likewise, poorer men in rural areas also undergo public humiliation for not being able to find a wife. If China's marriage rate continues to drop, it will worsen the country's lower-than-average birth rate and result in a demographic crisis.

The Chinese government should consider stronger monetary incentives and subsidies for women to minimize their financial, physical, and emotional losses after marriage and childbearing. Some women refuse to “marry down” to men of less capability than themselves because the sacrifices accompanying marriage and childbirth outweigh the benefits. In addition, although the government has specific laws prohibiting employers from firing employees during their pregnancy, maternity leave, and breast-feeding periods, women often still struggle to keep up with the highly competitive working environment once they return from childbirth and therefore get laid off or experience wage-cuts (Circular of Ministry, 2019). Women who file lawsuits against companies for violating the laws of gender and pregnancy discrimination also mostly just receive a pittance as compensation (Qin, 2019). Thus, if the government were willing to offer stronger subsidies and a guarantee of zero job-loss due to pregnancy, the risk associated with marriage and childbirth would be lower, dispelling the concerns of many women. The government is currently enhancing four main areas: improving medical care to ensure less pain for women during childbirth, making working time flexible for pregnant women, offering subsidies to jobless women, and granting more housing loans to families with more children (Guidance, 2022). Nonetheless, such measures would have to be fully implemented to keep marriage and fertility rates in China from dropping further.

To rural households, the implementation of the “Three-Child Policy” would moderate the gender ratio imbalance by diminishing the need for sex-selective abortion targeting female fetuses. Without a birth limit, many rural households that used to abort girls would consider saving them and counting on the next child being a boy. After the start of the “Two-Child Policy,” SRB has declined to normal levels; the liberalization of birth control policy has also stimulated population growth of women and narrowed the gender ratio imbalance so that poorer men can anticipate a higher chance of marriage without depending on the bride-market (Fan, Xiao, Zhang, Wang, & Wang, 2020). The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has warned that a decline in birth rate and increase in life expectancy would lead to a severe crisis: a lack of workforce to support the overall population (Green Paper, 2019). Therefore, to prevent the population from shrinking, the Chinese government needs to devise more effective policies targeting the marriage crises in both rural and urban areas as a preliminary step.

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