

China's two-child policy may exacerbate gender inequality ^[1]

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Since China ended its one-child policy allowing all families to have up to two children, an additional 90 million women have become eligible to have a second child. But new UBC sociology research suggests the new universal two-child policy could be negatively affecting women's status and gender equality.

The study, published in the Chinese Sociological Review, found that women with less marital power-- shaped by their relative income, resources and education-- had lower "fertility autonomy" and were likelier to succumb to pressure to have a second child even if they did not want to.

"When husbands have greater marital power, fertility pressure from the husband increases the likelihood that women intend to have a second child, despite the fact that they have achieved their desired fertility," said Yue Qian, the study's lead author and an assistant professor in the department of sociology. "In contrast, when women have greater power in a marriage, their second-birth intentions do not change with levels of fertility pressure from their husbands."

Using 2016 survey data, the researchers examined the fertility intentions of women who wanted no more than one child and already had one. Women were asked to indicate who had the greater power in their families: the husband or wife.

They found that self-reported power levels correlated to which spouse had more material resources, income and education, which in turn affected women's ability to stop having children when they no longer wanted any more children.

The findings have far-reaching implications for gender equality in urban China since motherhood is a major contributor to the gender pay gap, said Qian. Unlike Canada and many European countries that have generous family-friendly policies to encourage fertility and facilitate work-family balance, the Chinese government no longer provides welfare benefits such as childcare subsidies or publicly funded kindergartens. As a result, employment rates and earnings of mothers increasingly lag behind those of fathers.

"Our study suggests the two-child policy may exacerbate a vicious circle of gender inequality in post-reform China," Qian said. "Women's disadvantaged status in the labour market exacerbates gender inequalities in access to resources, and the fewer resources wives have relative to their husbands may diminish women's bargaining power, their ability to push for equality in the family, and their ability to stop childbearing when they don't want additional children, which may in turn jeopardize women's careers."

The researchers argue that more policies should be developed to lessen the disadvantages arising from childbearing that women face, and to enhance women's status in the era of the universal two-child policy.

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The study was co-authored by Yongai Jin of Renmin University of China in Beijing.

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