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China's One-Child Policy Through A Feminist Lens

Abstract

The one-child family policy was developed and enacted in 1979 to mitigate concerns about social and economic problems from rapid population growth. The policy was more effective in urban areas than rural areas, and the policy witnessed uneven enforcement throughout mainland China. This essay will examine the historical context and repercussions of the one-child policy and discuss the main criticism of it (its amplification of discrimination against women, who, as a result of the policy, faced forced sexual procedures, infanticide, abandonment, and a skewed gender ratio) through the perspective of feminism and feminist theory in policy-making and policy analysis. Women bore the burden of following the one-child policy disproportionately to their male counterparts. Thus, feminist theory is a crucial lens in evaluating the one-child policy, considering women (especially rural women who were restricted in their choices of birth control - IUD or sterilisation) were the primary targets because of their ability to bear children. With existing patriarchal traditions and beliefs, the one-child policy caused a surge in violence against women, thereby creating a cycle of inequality. Amongst women, the most targeted demographic was rural, low-income women who could not afford the fines and thus were subject to other brutal punishments. Widespread abandonment and murder of female babies, frequent coerced and sex-selective abortions, and China's continued struggle with the demographic challenges the one-child policy created demonstrate the policy's enduring

repercussions. The policy challenged the core beliefs of the feminist theory- equality and autonomy. The government failed to consider their female citizens and ignored feminist beliefs to ensure obedience to the policy, which indicates the government did not see women as first-class citizens who were entitled to autonomy and protection.

One-Child Policy

The one-child family planning policy was enacted in 1979 (Zhu 463) and continued until late 2015 (Pletcher). Its purpose was to reduce population, which skyrocketed during “The Great Leap Forward” economic development campaign in 1958 (Zhang 142). During “The Great Leap Forward,” Communist leader Mao Zedong advocated for “more people, more power” (Zhang 142) to promote economic growth through industrialisation and societal mobilisation (Peng 639).

In the 1960s, death rates rose due to resource scarcity from the population spike (Peng 644-649). The one-child policy was introduced to reduce resource strain. Mao’s successor, Hua Guofeng, also emphasised that family restrictions were crucial to reaching China’s urbanisation goals in a socialist society, which he believed were obstructed by a large population (Greenhalgh, “Making of China’s One Child Policy” 172). The previous family planning policy, “Late, Long, Few”, advocated having children later, with wider age gaps and fewer offspring. It did not mitigate the population crisis significantly. Thus, the one-child policy was implemented nationwide. Exemptions were permitted to families with handicapped or female firstborns and ethnic minorities. Rural areas resisted the policy more than urban areas because rural families needed large families for agricultural labour, and urban families did not have the means to support large families with two working parents. Less-developed Western China faced heavier policy implementation due to high fertility rates (Zhang 145).

Feminist theory

Feminist theory has consistently criticised traditional theory's problematic view of women as "second-rate men" or "the other (not-men)" (Beasley 11). Beasley clarifies that feminist social and political thought exists to "include women and the relation of the sexes within existing theory". Feminist theory is "part of existing theories concerned with freedom from oppression" (Beasley 11). Feminist theory asserts that traditional political thought is "fundamentally constructed out of women's exclusion from the concept" and thus relies on women's subordination for activities to be undertaken, with a focus on "male membership" in society (Beasley 12); the theory stems from the understanding that traditional theories are developed with few references to women's social and political positions and experiences (Beasley 4). Feminism distinctly recognises "women's marginalisation and seeks to overcome it" (Beasley 12). Beasley continues by listing some of the characteristics of feminist theory in social and political spheres: it is "(1) a critique of misogyny/sexual hierarchy, (2) a focus on consideration of women as the subject of analysis, which may include references to differences between them and even question the status of the grouping itself." and "(3) an expanded account of and altered orientation to what may be discussed within the analysis of social and political life" (36). Arinder clarifies that "the purpose of using a feminist lens is to enable the discovery of how people interact within systems and possibly offer solutions to confront and eradicate oppressive systems and structures." The primary purpose of feminist theory is to dismantle oppression, especially regarding sexism and sexist exploitation (Arinder). The key focal points of feminist theory are "sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, difference, and choice" (Arinder). The one-child policy not only directly impacted women, but more specifically, it was detrimental

to rural and low-income women. Feminism concerns itself with intersectionality (Arinder); therefore, feminist theory is important for public policymaking and analysis and crucial in considering the various social, economic, and political dimensions that affect different women.

An example of the importance of feminist theory in policy-making and analysis recently is the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in 2022 in the United States, which ignored the feminist perspective in policy-making and resulted in a ban on abortion at any gestational duration in 14 states (Dickman, et al. 1). 5 of these states allow exceptions; however, survivors are required to report the rape, which is a “requirement likely to disqualify most survivors of rape, of whom only 21% report their rape to police” (Dickman et al. 1). Since the overturn, 519,981 rape cases were associated with 64,565 pregnancies during the 4 to 18 months the abortion ban was in effect (Dickman et al. 1). Within this statistic, “5,586 rape-related pregnancies (9%) occurred in states with rape exceptions and 58,979 (91%) in states with no exception” (Dickman et al. 1). The overturning of *Roe v Wade* was a gross disregard for the safety and autonomy of American women and their rights under feminist theory. The statistics mentioned indicate that since the overturn, more women are forced to carry the child of their assaulter to term, which is punishing the victim instead of the criminal. The ban directly targets women’s safety and choice, as well as puts low-income and other marginalised groups of women at risk socially and economically. It also puts the children of highly marginalised women that were raped at risk of abandonment and abuse. Overturning *Roe v. Wade* was a display of clear disregard for feminist theory in policy-making, and it has caused a magnitude of women and children to suffer.

The enforcement methods employed during the one-child policy violated the autonomy of Chinese women, and the negative consequences that arose from the implementation of the policy mainly burdened the female population. More specifically, low-income and rural women

experienced the worst of the repercussions due to lack of resources and contraception methods. The traditional Chinese preference for sons (for their societal privilege to inherit familial wealth and prestige) (Goeking 82) persisted with the introduction of the one-child policy, resulting in female children being abandoned or killed disproportionately. The policy resulted in not just numerous human rights violations against women but also created new economic and social challenges, such as skewed demography, economic inequality through strict state repercussions, and endangering female lives; the policy violated feminist theory's purpose of ensuring an equal and just world (Goeking 82).

Human Rights Violations

Since the 1960s, reproductive politics has been a central point of interest in feminist theory and activism (Greenhalgh, "Controlling Births" 3). The one-child policy violated Chinese women's autonomy, which is an infringement of rights under human rights and feminist theory. Birth control was mainly meant for the state to control women's bodies (Greenhalgh, "Controlling Births" 8). One enforcement method of the one-child policy was forced sterilisation. "The coercive phase of the early 1980s was capped by a massive nationwide sterilisation campaign" in which "20 million people were sterilised" (Greenhalgh, "Controlling Births" 7). The expectation was to prioritise attaining state-assigned goals over individual women's and families' reproductive preferences (Greenhalgh, "Controlling Births" 7). Various birth control methods became easily accessible, specifically to urban women, but rural women were given a low-cost, narrow selection of birth control methods - the IUD or sterilisation. These methods (involving "bodily intervention") handed "contraceptive practice in the hands of state policy enforcers" (Greenhalgh, "Controlling Births" 7). Feminist theory's right to bodily

autonomy had no place in China through the one-child policy, showcasing society's disregard for females as citizens entitled to personal choice and protection.

Forced abortions were another frequent and violent method used to enforce the one-child policy. Officials, "who felt they were performing their duty to uphold the policy," forced women with children to get abortions for their following pregnancies (CBC). Some abortions would be carried out later in the pregnancy as some women tried to hide them (CBC). Notably, rural women suffered from these violent methods as they had more pregnancies. In the 1980s, Greenhalgh found that contraception was synonymous with what the Chinese called "the four operations", which involved IUD insertion, tubectomy, vasectomy, and induced abortion. The Ministry of Public Health's statistics show that between 1979 and 1987, 269 million of these operations took place nationwide (Greenhalgh, "Controlling Bodies" 7). Freedom of choice was stripped, and violence against women was stimulated with the one-child policy.

Moreover, female infanticide rose during the one-child policy. For example, over 230,000 female infants were lost in 1981 in China (Weisskopf). Under the one-child policy, the traditional preference for sons forced people to murder their newborn daughters. Many Chinese thought that "if they can only have one child, better to give away, abandon or even murder a baby girl and try again for a boy" (Weisskopf). The Statistical Bureau of China reported an increased female mortality rate in 1987 than in 1981 due to less care for females (Yu and Sarri 1888). The one-child policy did not intend this to happen; however, the government failed to predict the violent measures citizens would take to satisfy the policy and tradition, and they failed to mitigate it. The policy directly targeted women, and low-income women faced the worst of the consequences. The government of China displayed its patriarchal disregard for its female citizens' safety and autonomy and placed its national economic interests over them.

Inequality and Child Abandonment

12% of female infants were unaccounted for each year since the one-child policy as a result of “sex-selective abortion, abandonment, infanticide, or underreporting” (Yu and Sarri 1888). Child abandonment of females caused overflows in orphanages (Yu and Sarri 1888). Chinese traditional culture caused women to leave their homes after marriage, particularly in rural areas. Compared to their male counterparts, females would receive less care and education, yet they would “work longer hours and experience higher risks of morbidity and mortality” (Yu and Sarri 1889). Tradition and the one-child policy together caused parents to abandon their daughters. In 1997, an estimated 150,000 children were abandoned in China because of the policy (Yu and Sarri 1889). The feminist theory believes that women are just as valuable as men and advocates for equality among the genders; however, tradition combined with the one-child policy caused unfairness towards females and girls frequently experienced violence. The Chinese government did not have appropriate methods per the feminist theory to solve this issue, nor did they consider the impact the policy would have on female citizens. The one-child policy jeopardised female safety and opportunity, compromising feminism’s goal for an equal and safer environment for women.

Demographic Challenges

The “missing girls” phenomenon in China during the 1980s further proves that gender discrimination significantly impacts the physical and mental well-being of female infants (Yu and Sarri 1888). The “missing girls” phenomenon refers to the drastic difference between a low number of females and a high number of males (Ebenstein 88). The bias for male children

caused a skewed sex ratio in China because of the one-child policy. The difference in the sex ratio has caused social issues such as marriage problems (more males and fewer females) and an ageing population paired with low birth rates. Had the government considered the consequences and dangers against women when administering the one-child policy and developed strategies to curtail them, the current demographic of China and the many females that suffered from the enforcement of the one-child policy would have seen a brighter future.

Conclusion

The feminist perspective on China's one-child policy showcases the Chinese government and society's disregard for their female citizens at the time of the policy. Analysing the policy's historical context, human rights violations, gender inequalities, and demographic challenges provides a better understanding of the actual impacts of the policy on women and the negligence of a more gender-equitable society. Through a feminist lens, it is easier to distinguish the actual targets and victims of the one-child policy- females. The significance of feminist theory in policy-making and policy analysis persists in recent times; the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the USA has endangered thousands of women and children as policy-makers and judges ignored the rights and autonomy feminist theory considers for women. It further proves the necessity of feminist theory in policy-making and governance to avoid further systemic failures, as tradition is built on harmful patriarchal ideas, and feminist theory seeks to dismantle such oppressive societies.

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