

## *Original Paper*

# The Causes and Results of Gender Disproportion in China

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### **Abstract**

*In the last two decades, the gender imbalance issue has become a severe problem that the Chinese government cannot tackle. In the nearest research, China has 37.17 million males more than females, which is approximately equal to the population of Poland. In order to understand this issue further, this article explores the reasons that caused the Chinese gender imbalance issue, the impacts the issue might bring to the domestic and global system, and what policies the Chinese government could adopt to solve the problem.*

### **Keywords**

*Gender issues, One-Child Policy, Abortion*

## **1. Introduction**

Following the progress of social norms and the development of feminist movements, more and more people start to focus on the gender problem, which is related to gender imbalance. Not only did the policymakers and governmental officials find out that letting more women work in the government or military would make the country operate more efficiently, but also the employers would observe that hiring more females would make the company do business better. Therefore, many results already indicate that the gender balance of a country is extremely important from the macro-level to the micro-level works. In other words, these observations indicate that if a country has the problem of gender disproportion, it must cause serious problems in national development. Even though it might not happen currently, the problem must break out at some point in the future. Unfortunately, China is facing a severe gender imbalance problem currently, and the trend of gender disproportion has not improved in recent years. As one of the great powers in the global system, China's national development is deeply pertaining to the world. Thus, it would be very valuable to investigate and analyze what reasons China faces the problem of gender disproportion, what impacts the problem might bring to Chinese society and security, and what the country should improve in order to solve this problem in the future.

### *1.1 Background of Chinese Gender Imbalance*

Before talking about the gender imbalance issue further, it is highly necessary to describe the background of the problem, which would build a better image to explore the problem later. According to the data from Statista, among Chinese aged 55 to over 95, the sex ratio is relatively balanced in Chinese society. For example, when between the age of 55 to 64, the group of Chinese born in the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, the sex ratio is 100.81: 100 (males to females). Even further, for Chinese born in the 1930s to 1940s, the sex ratio is between 87.76 to 100, which indicated that females born in this decade were even higher than males (Statista, 2019). However, from the 1970s, the sex ratio in China was gradually out of balance. From the 1970s to the 1980s, the Chinese sex ratio started to gradually increase from 103:100 to 108:100, and until 2000, the Chinese gender disproportion rapidly raised to 120: 100 (Statista, 2019). In some Provinces, the gender disproportion problem is more severe. In Provinces such as Anhui, Jiangxi, and Shanxi, the male births to females could even reach 130: 100 in 2000 (Branigan, 2011). It is not difficult to find out from this data that the gender disproportion problem was severely exposed in recent decades

### *1.2 Reasons Caused the Gender Disproportional Problem*

The trend of the Chinese sex ratio represents that even though Chinese male births were slightly higher than female births in the 1960s, it was still not a big problem during that time. Therefore, there must be some specific factors that contribute to this problem. There are two important reasons to trigger the gender imbalance: the Chinese inherent culture of son-preferences, and the government's strict birth-control through one-child policy. It is imperative to talk about each of the factors respectively.

#### *1.2.1 Chinese Inherent Culture of Son-Preference*

The idea of the son-preference was embedded in Chinese culture, and Chinese women always had a low status before the communist party established its regime in 1949. Chinese society was always a patriarchal society. By the Confucian philosophy of ancient China, women must obey men to fulfill the concept of "filial piety". On the other hand, sale and purchase of women, female infanticide, and wife-beating were all licit in Confucian ideology (Wielink, 2019).

Furthermore, influenced by Confucianism, Chinese society always considered that maintaining the lineage is fundamental, and the blood, as well as the lineage, would only pass through the male side (Branigan, 2011). Even though females of the lineage could receive some movable goods through inheritance, the main productive assets would still pass to the male line. On the other hand, if a man does not have any sons, he could only choose to adopt a male birth child from other family members or take another wife to get a son to pass the lineage (Wikigender, 2015). In addition, in traditional Chinese society, ancestor worship was an extremely crucial activity since people had certain beliefs relating to the afterlife. However, only males of the family could process the ritual, and girls could not represent her family to do that. Therefore, if a family does not have a son, which would be considered as a handicap for a family not only during life but also afterlife (Wikigender, 2015). Once the females of a family married

others, they would be considered to move to their husbands' lineage, which indicated that a female would not be responsible to take care of her parents anymore but taking care of her parents-in-law instead (Branigan, 2011). So, in the conventional Chinese concept of family, there is always a preference for having a son to take care of the elders. If a family sold its daughters or abandoned them it would be conceived as a normal phenomenon before. Also, in Chinese tradition, people always believe that "The man goes out to work while the woman looks after the house" (Legacy Times, 2020). Unlike western countries, before the 20th century, no female could become a government official in China. Chinese traditional values always consider becoming a governmental official as the highest honor. Thus, a family would be eager to have a son since it is possible for a male to become a politician in order to bring honor back to the lineage.

In Mao's era, traditional values were temporarily suppressed, which improved Chinese gender inequality for a few decades. When Mao was holding the power, the communist regime was highly influenced by Marxist ideology, which led Chinese politicians to advocate the emancipation of women thoroughly and notice that women have tangible equality with men. Under this circumstance, Mao said his family maxim, "Women Hold Up Half The Sky" (Wielink, 2019). During that time, the Chinese government highly encouraged women to participate in joint production and labor with men and believed women should stand in the same position as men. In addition, the Chinese government also established the celebration of International Women's Day after 1949, which displayed an important symbol for women to achieve egalitarian status in the social, political, and economic building of the nation (Wielink, 2019). Besides this, between 1966 and 1976, while the movement to get rid of the Four Olds (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas, especially pointed out Confucianist ideas) was processed, Mao officially recognized "Men and women are the same" (Wielink, 2019). People were trying hard to maintain gender equality during Mao's period, which could be an important factor to explain why the Chinese sex ratio was relatively balanced before the mid-1970s.

However, after Mao passed away, the Chinese government started to revive the traditional culture. Some of Confucianism's ideas are advocated again, and people gradually began to be influenced by the concepts of son-preference again. For example, in some rural areas of China, people who only have daughters but not sons would feel shameful, and the husband would ask his wife to get pregnant again until they had a son (Jiemian, 2018). Also, many Chinese couples that were born after the 1990s had abortions when they knew they were pregnant with a girl until they had a son (Xixik.com, 2020). Except for this, women's working status kept lowering in Chinese society. In Mao's era, women's wages were almost equal to men's, but in 2010, Chinese urban women's average income was only 67.3 percent of average men's. Chinese urban women's employment was falling from 77.4 percent to 60.8 percent in 2010 as well (Hong, 2014). The government, only 4 percent of senior officials are women in China, which is less than half of the proportion in Mao's era (Hai, 2017). This is worse than in western countries since there are 25 percent of women in the U.S. Congress (Rutgers, 2021). Therefore, the lower status of

women could enhance the son-preference concept of Chinese families, and it acts as an important factor that was corresponding to the trend of gender disproportion in China from the 1980s to now.

### 1.2.2 One-Child Policy

The second reason to cause the problem of Chinese gender imbalance is the strict demographic restriction by the one-child policy. Combined with the son-preference culture, this policy largely hurt the female-birth rate. The one-child policy was introduced in the late 1970s and ended in 2015, and the policy indicated that every Chinese family could only have one child since policymakers were concerned that the enormous demographics and rapid population growth of China would curb economic growth. By the late 1970s, this policy still encouraged each family to restrict birth voluntarily. Nevertheless, from 1980, the policy was standardized and strictly executed by the government. In order to execute the policy efficiently, the government would provide financial incentives as well as preferential employment opportunities for people who obey this policy. On the other hand, if people violated this policy, the family would either be heavily penalized, or it has to abort the child before the child was born (BBC, 2015).

The rigid policy and the strong-son preference triggered increased numbers of female fetus abortions, and female infanticide, and elevate the number of females left in orphanages after the 1980s. According to the data of the National Health Commission, there were 9 million children that were aborted in China annually, which is more than a quarter of worldwide total abortion. China's abortion number is the highest in the world (Batty, 2009). In addition, from the early 1980s to now, there were more than 330 million abortions that have been directly caused by the one-child policy, most of them were females since a lot of couples still preferred to have a son (Zhou, 2019). Because of the one-child policy, in the 1990s, almost one in ten female births was abandoned in every province of China, and many of them would not have opportunities to be adopted and be left in orphanages until they became adults. Besides this, in some rural areas, after a family has a child, to ensure that people would violate the policy further, the couple would be forced to take to the sterilization campaign. Hence, the possibility of female birth was further inferior (Ahluwalia, 2021).

Although the reduction of the Chinese demographic and concern about the weak labor force would hurt the Chinese economy in the future, the government finally decided to release the restriction on childbirth in 2015. The result of the gender imbalance caused by the policy could not be reversed within the short term. Because of the impacts of the one-child policy, many couples who were sterilized are unlikely to have a second or third child, so it is impossible for them to make the contribution of increasing female birth. On the other hand, the market for abortion was also developing following the processing of the one-child policy. With the increase of economic pressure or the pressure of layoffs after pregnancy, many couples may choose abortion more hastily because the maturity of abortion technology reduces the possible side effects of abortion. Thus, it is not difficult to comprehend why the trend of abortion was not averted even if the Chinese government had already relaxed birth control. As a result, the gender

imbalance could not be improved due to the negative legacy of the one-child policy. Overall, the two important reasons, Chinese inherent son preference as well as the strict restriction of processing the one-child policy, caused the problem of gender disproportion. Those two factors sometimes are integrated with each other, which causes the gender imbalance problem to become more severe.

## **2. Impacts of Gender Disproportion in China**

By studying gender, it could be concluded that gender problems are tightly related to a country's social and national development. Equal participation of men and women in society could bring many benefits to society and the state's progress. On the other hand, if gender is imbalanced, like in China, males outnumber females, which must bring various impediments to the country's society. There are three different negative impacts that could be brought by the problem of gender disproportion in China: social instability, weakened economic growth, and aggressive foreign policy. All problems would not only weaken Chinese social or economic growth but also deteriorate Chinese domestic security and global security.

### *2.1 Social Instability*

Because of the male surplus in China, it could impact social stability. Until 2018, China's population reached 1.4 billion, but there are 34 million more males than females, which is almost equal to the population of Poland (Denyer, 2018). In other words, it indicates that there are more than 30 million people in China who could not marry others. Several problems would be brought about by this phenomenon and they would impact social stability.

Initially, it could be assumed that people miss the opportunities to fulfill the conventional expectations of marrying, and having children. This would make single males feel low self-esteem and increased susceptibility to psychological difficulties since Chinese traditional views consider that marriage is inevitable and related to social status (Boer, 2006). Therefore, the combination of psychological problems as well as sexual frustration may provoke aggressive and violent behaviors in these men (Barber, 2000).

In addition, some scholars have observed that the overwhelming majority of violent crime is always related to young, unmarried, and low-status males, so the large numbers of unmated men in China are often further cause for concern (Sampson, 1991). The Chinese government worried that those single males might be bound together in an outcast culture since they lack a stake in the current social order. This would lead them to do antisocial behavior or organized crimes, which would threaten social stability and domestic security further (Hesketh, 2011).

Except for direct violent crime, the increasing proportion of single unmarried males might expand the sex industries in China as well as bride trafficking. Usually, some deadly viruses like AIDS, syphilis, and claps would be spread by sexual behaviors, and most of them would not only directly impact sex workers but also their offspring. Therefore, the expansion of sexual industries would negatively influence social

health and deteriorate social stability (Dandona, 2006). The elevation of bride trafficking is another problem that could be caused by gender disproportion. Because many people in rural areas could not find wives, and they were highly stimulated by the traditional values that men should feel shameful if they could not marry others, single males usually would pay for human traffickers in order to get a wife through kidnapping. And those females were unlikely to run away since many Chinese rural areas have poor public transportation and police stations were corrupted by local residents (163.com, 2020). Except for the human trafficking of Chinese females, some Chinese single males would even attempt to bride traffic foreign females. They would pay 20,000 dollars to human traffickers through the online website or cash, then females from Cambodia, North Korea, and Vietnam would often be kidnapped to China. In 2016, the Chinese government found out more than 7,000 women from Cambodia were kidnapped as brides for Chinese single males (Borgen, 2020). Those women would often be locked in a room and raped repeatedly until they were pregnant and provided a baby for the family (Stauffer, 2019). Therefore, the gender imbalance would severely affect social stability through this aspect as well.

In order to solve the problem and maintain social stability, the Chinese government tried several ways to reduce the number of single males. For example, Chinese public media often encourage single females to marry early and lower their standards in order to find a mate rapidly even if the females might have excellent performance in the workforce or achieve a high educational degree. In addition, various agencies of local government did initiate many matchmaking activities in order to help single males pair with females as soon as possible. Even further, in 2008, after a great earthquake, the Chinese government helped to pair grieving women to single males for ensuring social and economic stability (Fincher, 2014). Even though the Chinese government has already made several efforts to solve the problem, it still has not improved

## 2.2 Weaken Economic Growth

Some data represent that gender equality is significant for economic growth. For example, the United Nation Women concluded that when more women work, economic growth would be improved, productivity would be boosted, and economic diversification and income equality would be largely increased. For example, the increasing female employment rates in Sweden boosted GDP by over 6 trillion dollars (UN Women, 2018). Furthermore, according to research by McKinsey, gender-diverse companies would earn 15 percent higher than their competitors, and adding more women to the workforce would make the global GDP go up by at least 26 percent. Furthermore, the McKinsey Global Institute found out that women could grow the economy by up to 60 percent in India alone, and the revenue of women-owned U.S. companies has increased by 103 percent during the last 20 years (Morad, 2019). Conversely, if a country has a gender imbalance, and fewer women could have participated in the country's workforce, it would cost 15 percent of the GDP (UN Women, 2018). Because of the gender gap, China only has a limited number of women who could participate in the workforce, which would naturally hamper China's economic growth. Especially, when the younger generation is growing up and

the gender gap becomes wider, economic growth would assuredly be curbed further. And in China, usually, women are more educated and professional than their male colleagues. From the survey of the NBS and the Women's Federation, Chinese women are performing better than men at university, and around 62 percent of women in college show excellent academic performance, which is almost 10 percent higher than their male classmates. Besides these, the population of Chinese females in undergraduate and master's programs is higher than males even under the circumstance of gender imbalance (Fincher, 2014). Hence, the lack of working women in society would deprive Chinese society of more intelligent and professional workers in the future, which would weaken economic growth further. Even worse, the women's employment rate already declined from the 1980s to the 2010s. The employment rate for women between 20 and 59 years old fell from 77.4 percent to 60.8 percent within two decades (Fincher, 2014). These phenomena indicate that China could benefit greatly from gender balance but if China does not revert to the trend of gender imbalance then its history of strong economic growth might not be able to be maintained.

### *2.3 Aggressive Foreign Policy*

Last but not least, the gender imbalance in China might cause its foreign policy to be more aggressive. Usually, if there is a great number of males working in the government or military, the country would prefer to represent its "masculinity", meaning the government would seek more risky and expansive policies to other countries. The masculinized culture would pressure nervous politicians to appear as tough as possible on military issues or during political struggles would often be accused as "cowards" or "soft" (Enloe, 2015). The U.S. has realized this problem since the masculinized culture of the U.S. did enforce American politicians to "increase the defense budget, make NATO the primary institution for building a new European security, expand Junior ROTC programs in high schools, and maintain crippling but politically ineffectual economic sanctions and bombing raids against Iraq" (Enloe, 2015). However, the U.S. government started to focus on analyzing problems through a gendered perspective and encouraging females to participate in public issues.

In comparison, the Chinese masculinized problem is more pessimistic. In the two most powerful institutions of China, the Chinese Central Committee and Political Bureau, women only occupied very small portions. In the Chinese Central Committee, only 10 out of 205 members are women, which merely occupied 4.8 percent of the whole population. In the Chinese Political Bureau, only 1 out of 25 members are women, which only occupied 4 percent of the whole population. And in the most powerful military institution of China, the Chinese Central Military Commission, none of the members is female (BBC, 2017). So, from a gender perspective, it's not hard to understand why China's foreign policy has become more aggressive and assertive in recent years since most of the decision-makers are males. If more females were participating in senior decision-making, the Chinese government might reduce political, economic, and military conflicts with other countries, which would be important for maintaining global security. Nevertheless, in the foreseeable future, it is almost impossible for more women to participate in

the Chinese central political circle. Even for those minimum numbers of female politicians in the Chinese Central Committee and Political Bureau, they have to show some traits of masculinity, or they would be condemned as being too “feminine” by being “irrational, emotional, and subjective” (Cohn, 1993).

### **3. How to Improve Gender Imbalance in China?**

After exploring the causes and impacts of Chinese gender disproportion, it is necessary to think about how people could improve the problem. One of the most important points is that Chinese people should change their traditional concept of son-preferences. The concept is embedded in many Chinese people, but it is not unchangeable. Like the article mentioned above, in Mao’s era, the Chinese government promoted Marxist ideology through propaganda and improved women’s status to suppress traditional values. Unlike American and European universities, Chinese universities almost have no classes that relate to feminist theories or political theories through gender perspectives. Even though college students are required to take Marxist theory classes, the contents of those classes are only related to the country’s operation and do not focus on gender equality (Wang, 2018). Thus, if China wanted to change the conception of son-preferences comprehensively, the universities might need to arrange more courses to teach feminist theories or the history of feminist movements. After a few generations, when more people have taken those courses, the discrimination against females in China might be decreased through these lessons. On the other hand, the government should do more propaganda on gender equality, which would foster people to change their traditional values.

Furthermore, the Chinese government must restrict abortion in China. Because of the advanced abortion market, Chinese females could abort easily, and many female births would be aborted. To maintain the growth of female birth, the Chinese government needs to make abortion only available to females who have justified reasons such as diseases, or females at high risk during childbirth. Even if less abortion would not guarantee that female birth would surpass male birth, some female babies would at least be preserved.

Finally, the government could provide more subsidies and scholarships for female children and encourage more female workers to work in government and the military. A lot of Chinese families do not want to have female children because they think that even if women would be educated well, they could still not earn equal wages or achieve high positions in public service. Therefore, parents think it is not valuable to invest in their female children. If the Chinese government gives subsidies to the family and covers most of the tuition of females, some families might not choose to abandon female children. And if more women participate in public works, it would encourage families to pay attention to raising female children as well. Then, the sex ratio might gradually be balanced in China.



#### 4. Conclusion

This article deeply analyzes the reasons behind the Chinese gender imbalance, what impacts would result from this problem, and what people could do to improve this problem in the future. Two major factors cause gender disproportion in China. The first one is the Chinese traditional concept of son-preference. Because in ancient China, the lineage only passed to males, and after females were married, they would not be responsible for taking care of their parents anymore, then, parents would be eager to have a son. The other reason is the strict restriction of the one-child policy. Combined with the son-preference tradition, many couples have to abort the female fetuses to get a male birth. And a lot of couples in rural areas were forced to be sterilized, which reduced the possibility of female birth further. On the other hand, there are three negative impacts that are caused by the gender imbalance in China. The first impact is social stability. There are almost 34 million Chinese males who could not find mates in the future, which might lead them to be psychologically vulnerable, and therefore more aggressive and violent. The sexual industries could be expanded by gender imbalance, and this phenomenon would cause deadly viruses to be spread to more sex workers and their offspring. And the bridle of human trafficking would be increased in both Chinese females and foreign females since some single males would be eager to seek to marry in every way. Also, the Chinese foreign policy could be more aggressive, since more males participating in the Chinese government would lead them to represent the traits of masculinity. China could improve the problem from different aspects. The first aspect is to add more feminist theories courses in Chinese universities, which would gradually erode Chinese traditional values of son-preferences through education. In addition, the Chinese government could restrict abortion for females, then more female fetuses could survive. Finally, the Chinese government could give more subsidies and scholarships to female children and encourage more females to participate in public services simultaneously. Then, parents would consider their female children more valuable.

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