Two-child policy in China: rhetoric versus reality

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Two-child policy in China: rhetoric versus reality

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What led the government of People’s Republic of China to relax the one-child policy? Is the two-child family planning policy a strategic response to address the current and imminent demographic crises or a tactic to pacify local and international dissent against human rights? Can the two-child policy reconcile and sustain China’s demographic future? What does it imply for the health and reproductive rights of the next generation? These questions are still intensely debated in scientific, policy and media circles, both within and outside China.

China’s one-child policy was one of the most strategic and controversial family planning policies ever implemented in the entire human history. At the time when it was introduced, in 1979, the Communist Party of China (CPC) held an undisputed mandate that reducing population growth was the only solution to tackling extreme poverty and boosting economic development (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005). The government took top-down ‘coercive’ methods to implement the policy, overriding basic human rights, imposing social restraint, confiscating personal belongings and even levying tough financial penalties on couples who contravened family planning regulations (Attané, 2002; Hesketh et al. 2005). Over time, there were exceptions and differentiation to the actual implementation of the policy, depending on geographical region, ethnic background and economic development at provincial- and county-levels (Gu et al. 2007). Couples in rural areas were allowed a second child if their first was a girl and, later, to those if both parents were the only children.

More than three decades after the introduction of one-child policy, there are still debates about the magnitude of the policy impact on population size. The
government claims, based on extrapolation methods, that the policy averted 400 million births across China. However, this includes the period since early 1970s during the “wan, xi, shao” or “later, longer, fewer” family planning campaign which advocated for later marriage, longer birth intervals and fewer children through use of birth control methods (Wang et al. 2013). There is evidence to suggest that China, unlike India, had already completed its fertility transition during the 1970s even before the enactment of the one-child policy: fertility rates in China declined by over 50% from 5.8 children per woman in 1970 to 2.8 in 1979. That said, China has ever since experienced a gamut of complex demographic challenges including structural changes in the population distribution and composition primarily driven by: fertility declining below sub-replacement (ultra-low) level, rising sex-selective abortions and female infanticide, intensification of male dominant sex-ratios resulting in over 30 million excess bachelors, shrinking work force and unprecedented population ageing.

A historical U-turn to one-child policy came through on 29 October 2015 when the CPC publicly announced that couples in China can have a second child – with effect from March 2016 until the two-child policy is legally ratified. The first step to this historic shift was made in 2013, under the new leadership of President Xi Jinping, bending rules and allowing couples to have a second child if either parent is the only child (Basten and Jiang 2014). These policy changes were not expedited by unwary actions; rather systematically in stages through intense high-level political debates and ensuing the ideologies within CPC. Another important milestone coincided when China responded affirmatively to the International Conference on Population and Development Plan of Actions (ICPD-PoA), which advocated strongly in favour of protecting reproductive rights and enabling informed contraceptive choices to individual men, women and couples. The Chinese government, in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund, implemented three major cycles of reproductive health/family planning (RH/FP) country programmes – the evaluations demonstrated positive evidence which eventually convinced the Chinese government to scaling-up the programme nationwide and reorienting RH/FP services towards informed choices (CPDRC et al. 2011). However, there were still
challenges and gaps in the quality and provision of informed contraceptive choices (Fang & Kaufman 2008; Brown et al. 2010). Overall, the UN programme in China was instrumental in setting a strategic direction towards eliminating the birth quota system, regulated by the one-child policy.

The broader operational context of the current two-child policy is far too different and complex than its antecedent: be it social, economic, demographic, political, cultural, technological and environmental. Today, most Chinese people, the aspiring middle-class generation, live in big cities and urban areas. Migration and mobility are its peak level, increasingly so amongst females. The current generation of Chinese women have relatively better social and economic position than their older counterparts, in terms of education attainment, participation in economic activities and access to information.

Modernisation has also crept into Chinese family systems, especially young people increasingly opting for cohabitation unions and delaying marriage prioritising career and personal development over family obligations. Most young people, especially unmarried, prefer to have one child and in some cases wanting no children at all (CPDRC et al. 2011). Contraceptive options are no longer restricted to IUD or sterilization; condom use has risen substantially among younger cohorts of Chinese couples. There is even a natural tendency among future generation to follow a later, longer and fewer reproduction strategy. Younger generation are also conscious of the looming demographic and economic crises and most of them will see their parents living beyond 80 or even 100 years.

As China gears towards the two-child policy, population planners are vigilant of the unfolding demographic developments. It is too early to forecast how the new policy will influence couples’ fertility intentions and fix the irregularities in population age-sex structure. Nevertheless, the two-child policy is unlikely to trigger any major increase in absolute population size or reverse population ageing in China. While the rigidity of family planning systems, to some extent, will relegate, it is almost certain that the two-child policy is not liberal in terms of basic human and reproductive
rights. A take-home message for China is not to fiddle with numbers instead allow individuals and couples to make reproductive choices and decisions on their own.

References


