



Croatian
International
Relations
Review

CIRR

XXIX (93) 2023,
50-72

DOI 10.2478/
CIRR-2023-0053

UDC 327 (4-6
EU:73:55)

Unintended Consequences: Examining the Negative Impact of China's Three-Child Policy and Maternity Leave Extensions on Rural Women's Political Participation

Shushu Tan*

Ph.D student, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Email: 21010192@siswa.unimas.my

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8222-4355>

Lucy Sebli Seidelson

Dr., Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Email: slucy@unimas.my

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9959-7174>

**Corresponding author Email: 21010192@siswa.unimas.my*

Abstract

Key words:

*Three-Child
policy, Rural
Women's Political
Participation,
gender equality,
challenge,
Exploration*

In the context of rural women's political participation in China, this extensive study examines the complex interactions between demographic changes, traditional cultural values, and gender roles. It does so primarily in light of the Three-Child Policy and extended maternity leave laws. The results of our study shed light on the overall detrimental effects of these policies on the level of involvement of rural women in political activities. The implementation of the Three-Child Policy, in conjunction with the extension of maternity leave, aims to tackle demographic challenges and improve maternal health. However, it unintentionally reinforces long-standing traditional gender norms. The challenges related to an ageing population are highlighted by a notable decrease in the birth rate and a growing proportion of elderly individuals. This also reinforces the widely held belief that women are primarily responsible for domestic duties. The implementation of these policies presents a range of complex obstacles for rural women, which restrict their ability to reintegrate into the workforce and hinder their potential for career advancement. Consequently, this impedes their engagement in political matters. Moreover, this study underscores the importance of adopting a comprehensive policy reform strategy that takes into account the complex interplay between demographics, extended maternity leave, and long-lasting cultural values. The proposed approach places a high emphasis on empowering rural women, with a specific focus on promoting inclusivity and encouraging their active participation in political processes. In summary, this research presents a compelling argument for policymakers to reevaluate existing policies and formulate effective strategies aimed at promoting a society that is characterised by fairness and inclusivity. In addition, it promotes additional investigation through interdisciplinary research, aiming to delve more deeply into the nuanced experiences of rural women and assess the efficacy of potential policy reforms. Collaborative initiatives between academic institutions and women's organisations play a crucial role in advancing gender equality and empowering rural women to actively participate in shaping their communities and the nation.

I. Introduction

Background and Context

The People's Republic of China, marked by its resolute demographic policymaking and inexorable commitment to socioeconomic transformation, stands as a crucible in which the juxtaposition of policy dynamism and its unintended reverberations culminate in a veritable labyrinth of consequences. The implementation of China's Three-Child Policy in 2021 marked a notable milestone in this intricate and multifaceted landscape, as it superseded the longstanding One-Child Policy. The implementation of the Three-Child Policy signifies a deliberate and intentional endeavour aimed at tackling the increasing demographic challenges. The consequences of this have wide-ranging implications that affect multiple facets of socio-political dynamics.

An increase in maternity leave benefits coincided with the implementation of the Three-Child Policy, ostensibly to support working mothers. This partnership, despite appearing progressive, unintentionally reveals numerous complex challenges within the rural population, especially among women. Rural women, who are frequently marginalised and burdened by systemic inequalities, are likely to encounter a complex set of challenges as a result of this convergence of policies. These diverse challenges encompass political participation, gender equality, and labour dynamics, representing a new area of study in social science research.

In the year 2021, the Chinese government initiated a notable policy change through the implementation of the Three-Child Policy. This policy allows couples to have a maximum of Three Children (Zhao, 2022). The introduction of this policy was driven by the objective of tackling demographic challenges, specifically the ageing population, while simultaneously preserving China's human resource advantages. The change in birth policy has significant implications and unintentionally affects multiple sectors of society (Wang, 2022). Rural women, specifically in the realm of political engagement, are facing significant and unanticipated repercussions (Zhao, 2022).

The attitude towards Childbirth in Chinese society has undergone changes over time. There is now an increasing reluctance to have more Children due to the increased pressures related to housing and education (Wang, 2016). Historically, the implementation of rigorous family planning policies has significantly shaped public attitudes, placing strong emphasis on the desirability of having a single Child. The current request for second or third Children has been received with a tepid level of enthusiasm. The policy shift imposes a disproportionate burden on rural women (Wang, 2022). Due to their distinct societal responsibilities, individuals in this group primarily bear the responsibility for Childbirth, which requires them to take leave from their professional duties. Therefore, this results in additional expenses for their employers. As a result, there is a growing trend among companies to exhibit reluctance in hiring female employees and display a higher likelihood of terminating their employment when they are pregnant. This has led to a significant violation of women's rights (Tan, 2017).

This study examines the unintended consequences of the Three-Child Policy, with a specific emphasis on rural women and their involvement in political activities (Wang, 2022). The policy shift (Zhao, 2022) has significant implications when examining its effects in rural areas (Zhao, 2022). The policy's primary objective is to revitalise the population structure and address the issue of demographic ageing. However, it has the potential to worsen the preexisting obstacles that rural women encounter in terms of political engagement (Zhao, 2022). The unique socioeconomic conditions and cultural dynamics in rural regions necessitate a closer examination of how this policy shapes women's political engagement (Wang, 2022).

Conducting a comprehensive examination of the unforeseen ramifications of the Three-Child Policy and the extension of maternity leave, particularly

in rural settings, is of utmost importance (Zhao, 2022). The primary objective of this study is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the outcomes that have arisen concerning the political engagement of women living in rural areas (Wang, 2022). The comprehension of the intricate interplay among family planning policies, provisions for maternity care, and women's political participation, specifically in rural areas, holds significant significance (Zhao, 2022). To initiate this investigation, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive examination of existing literature, critically assess previous findings, and identify any shortcomings or inadequacies in prior research efforts (Wang, 2022).

A comprehensive body of scholarly literature has investigated the topic of women's rights in relation to the changing birth policies in China (Song, 2019). Researchers have conducted thorough investigations into the effects of these policies, examining their outcomes through a detailed analysis of literature and tracking of processes (Wang, 2022). The involvement of rural women in politics, specifically in the context of the evolving landscape brought about by the implementation of the Three-Child Policy, is an aspect that has received limited attention in existing research (Zhao, 2022). The primary objective of this study is to fill the existing void in the literature by analysing the intricacies associated with the political involvement of rural women subsequent to these legislative modifications (Wang, 2022).

In summary, extensive research has been conducted on the broader societal effects of the Three-Child Policy. However, it is essential to examine the specific circumstances faced by rural women and how these circumstances influence their political engagement. This aspect warrants further investigation (Wang, 2022). A comprehensive analysis is needed to explore the unintended consequences and challenges faced by rural women in their political participation. This examination should take into account the wider policy landscape and its intricate impacts on this particular demographic (Zhao, 2022). This research endeavours to elucidate the complexities surrounding the political involvement of rural women and enhance our understanding of the ramifications of China's changing birth policies (Wang, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

This study intends to conduct a thorough investigation into the mutual relationship between the Three-Child Policy and the expanded maternity leave regulations in China, particularly focusing on rural women. The primary objective of this research is to analyse the unintended consequences that arise from the amalgamation of this policy within the complex landscape of political participation among rural women.

Research Objectives

1. To discern and elucidate the multifaceted ramifications of China's Three-Child Policy and the corresponding extensions in maternity leave on rural women's political engagement.

2. To delineate the nuanced intersections of demographic policies, traditional gender roles, and the political agency of rural women, casting light upon the confluence of societal pressures and political agency.
3. To critically assess the extent to which these policies either ameliorate or exacerbate pre-existing gender-based disparities within the rural milieu, delineating the ever-shifting contours of gender politics and women's empowerment.

II. The Three-Child Policy's Impact on Rural Women's Political Participation

A comprehensive examination is necessary to explore the various implications of the recently implemented Three-Child Policy, a demographic initiative by the People's Republic of China, on the political involvement of rural women. This section examines the objectives and consequences of the policy, with a specific focus on the unforeseen adverse outcomes. It also analyses the complex relationship between rural women's roles and domestic responsibilities within the context of this policy.

A. Examining the Policy's Goals and Outcomes

The adoption of the Three-Child Policy in China is a strategic measure in response to demographic concerns and the challenges posed by an ageing population. Its primary objective is to stimulate and enhance fertility rates within the country. The policy, known as the Enhanced Population Growth Policy, is an extension of the Two-Child Policy. Its primary objective is to promote population growth and address the anticipated socioeconomic difficulties that arise from an ageing population (Feng et al., 2022). The primary objective of the policy is to incentivize families, including those residing in rural areas, to increase their number of offspring. This is aimed at strengthening the nation's future workforce and providing support to pension schemes.

However, based on empirical evidence, it has been observed that the task of achieving the desired objectives is intricate and involves multiple aspects. Numerous nuances, such as socioeconomic factors and deeply ingrained cultural and societal values, have an impact on the policy's outcomes. Rural regions, specifically, pose distinctive challenges and complexities that necessitate a comprehensive examination.

B. The Unintended Negative Consequences

However, empirical evidence suggests that achieving the desired objectives is a complex task that encompasses various aspects. The policy's outcomes are influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic factors and deeply ingrained cultural and societal values. Rural regions present unique challenges and complexities that require a thorough examination.

- 1. Economic Strain:** The increasing societal pressure for higher fertility rates, especially in rural areas with limited financial resources, has resulted in significant financial burdens on households. [Li et al. \(2021\)](#) found that rural women, who typically manage household finances, experience considerable stress due to the financial responsibilities of raising additional Children. As a result, this burden restricts their ability to engage in political activities.
- 2. Limited Access to Education:** The problem of limited educational access for rural women remains a significant challenge in different parts of China. [Chen and Sun \(2020\)](#) argue that the policy's emphasis on Childbearing may discourage women from pursuing educational opportunities, thereby further marginalising them in political processes.
- 3. Reduced Mobility:** The Three-Child Policy has increased expectations and responsibilities in Child-rearing, potentially negatively affecting the mobility of rural women. Therefore, their ability to participate in political gatherings and contribute to local political initiatives is limited ([Wang & Wang, 2021](#)).

C. Rural Women's Roles and Domestic Responsibilities

To comprehensively evaluate the impact of the Three-Child Policy on the political participation of rural women, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of the complex relationship between their social status and domestic responsibilities. In rural Chinese communities, traditional gender roles are commonly observed, with women primarily responsible for household tasks, Childcare, and caring for the elderly. The policy intensifies domestic responsibilities, increasing expectations for Child-rearing. Consequently, women have limited time and energy for political engagement ([Zhang & Liu, 2019](#)).

The Three-Child Policy, aimed at addressing demographic concerns, inadvertently affects the political participation of rural women in a negative way. The aforementioned results are closely associated with economic hardship, restricted educational opportunities, and decreased mobility. To fully understand the influence of policy on the political engagement of rural women, it is essential to conduct a thorough analysis of the intricate relationship between their roles in rural communities and their domestic duties. This analysis highlights the significance of employing a comprehensive approach in developing and executing demographic programmes, specifically in rural areas.

III. Data Source and Methodology

This study seeks to investigate the adverse effects of China's Three-Child Policy and the extension of maternity leave on the political participation of women in rural regions. The study utilised survey data collected from six provinces: Liaoning, Shandong, Henan, Hunan, Guizhou, and Ningxia. The strategic selection process included the inclusion of two provinces from

each of China's eastern, central, and western regions. The methodology was used to ensure a representative sample for the survey. The researchers distributed 970 surveys through direct personal interaction and successfully completed 920 questionnaires. It is important to acknowledge that a particular demographic of women living in rural areas, who have lower levels of education, faced challenges in understanding the questionnaire and explanations given by the researchers. Therefore, the questionnaires were considered inappropriate for inclusion in the study. Out of the distributed questionnaires, 913 were deemed valid, yielding a questionnaire effectiveness rate of 94.2%.

Table 1. Data Source and Methodology

Section	Data Collection and Research Methodology
Research Focus	Examining the Negative Impact of China's Three-Child Policy and Maternity Leave Extensions on Rural Women's Political Participation
Data Sources	A series of surveys were undertaken across six provinces in China, including Liaoning, Shandong, Henan, Hunan, Guizhou, and Ningxia.
Provincial Selection	To obtain a representative sample of provinces from China's eastern, central, and western regions, it is recommended to select two provinces from each region.
Questionnaires Distributed	970 questionnaires distributed in person by trained investigators.
Completed Questionnaires	920 questionnaires were successfully completed.
Excluded Questionnaires	A small portion of rural women with limited educational backgrounds faced comprehension challenges, rendering their questionnaires unsuitable for inclusion.
Valid Questionnaires	913 questionnaires were considered valid, resulting in a questionnaire efficacy rate of 94.2%.
Addressing Life Pressures	One questionnaire section addressed the challenges faced by rural women, particularly those whose husbands migrated to urban areas.
Insights Gained	The statistics in this section offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by rural women, enhancing our understanding of how China's Three-Child Policy and extended maternity leave affect their political engagement.

Recognizing the considerable life pressures faced by rural women, especially those whose husbands have migrated to urban areas for employment, the questionnaire included a section that addressed the challenges and difficulties encountered by these women. The statistical data obtained from this section provided valuable insights into the diverse obstacles faced by rural women, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of China's Three-Child Policy and extended maternity leave on their political participation.

Table 2. Statistics of Rural Women's Basic Information and Challenges Affecting Political Participation

Sample Dissemination	Samples Collected	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)		
Below 30	167	18
31 to 40	358	40
41 to 50	367	40
50 and above	21	2
Education Level		
Illiterate	110	12
Elementary School	250	27
Junior High School	373	41
High School	94	10
Above and High School	86	10
Difficulties		
Agricultural Labour	236	26
Household Income	369	40
Domestic Chores	127	14
Children Rearing	148	16
Health Conditions	33	4

The information provided in Table 1 provides significant insights into the fundamental aspects and obstacles influencing the political engagement of rural women within the framework of China's Three-Child Policy and the extension of maternity leave. The interpretation of the data is hereby discussed in relation to its relevance for further assessment of the subject matter:

Age Distribution

- Under 30: The age group in question comprises approximately 18% of the rural women surveyed. Younger women may encounter distinct challenges and opportunities when it comes to engaging in political participation, as opposed to older age cohorts. Individuals in this context exhibit a higher propensity for embracing change and possess distinct perspectives on matters pertaining to family planning and achieving a harmonious work-life equilibrium.
- 31 to 40 years old: The age group that comprises the largest proportion, accounting for 40% of the sample. This group is presumably comprised of women who are actively involved in the care and upbringing of Children, managing domestic duties, and possibly engaging in part-time or seasonal agricultural work. These elements may exert an influence on individuals' political participation.
- 41 to 50 years old: An additional noteworthy demographic, accounting for 40% of the surveyed population, is observed. These mothers have the potential to have offspring that demonstrate increased autonomy and are provided with improved opportunities to participate in communal and political activities.
- 50 and above: A smaller proportion, amounting to 2%. The interests of older women exhibit variability, and their engagement in political activities is influenced by their life experiences and responsibilities.

Education Level

- Illiterate: Based on the results, a significant portion of the sample, specifically 12%, suggests that women with lower levels of education may face additional barriers when participating in political activities. These barriers may include difficulties in understanding and actively engaging in formal political processes.
- Elementary School: Despite having a sample size of 27%, it is important to note that women with higher levels of education may encounter fewer obstacles compared to their counterparts. However, it is still possible for them to face challenges in terms of accessing and participating in political activities.
- Junior High School: The largest demographic category comprises 41% of the total population. These women demonstrate a higher level of educational achievement in comparison to others. However, they may face challenges due to gender norms and societal expectations.
- High School: A total of 10% of the sample. Individuals belonging to this specific demographic may have greater opportunities for political engagement due to their relatively higher levels of education.
- High School and Above: An additional 10 percent. There is a potential correlation between women who have attained higher levels of education and their increased likelihood to engage in political activities and advocate for their rights.

Challenges Faced

- Agricultural Labor: A total of 26% of the female respondents indicated that they perceived agricultural labour as a significant challenge. This implies that the obligations associated with rural labour may restrict their capacity to participate in political activities.
- Family Income: A significant proportion of respondents, specifically 40%, identified family income as a notable challenge. The participation of rural women in political activities is influenced by economic factors, with financial constraints potentially affecting their ability to engage in such activities.
- House Chores: A total of 14% of respondents reported that they found house chores to be challenging. The women face a considerable challenge in balancing their household responsibilities with their political participation.
- Children Rearing: A total of 16% of respondents identified Child rearing as a significant obstacle. The responsibility of caring for Children can impose constraints on the amount of time and energy individuals have available to engage in political activities.
- Health Condition: A total of 4% of the participants indicated that they faced health conditions as a significant challenge. This particular subgroup, although small in size, may encounter physical constraints that impede their engagement in political endeavours.

According to the available data, a variety of factors, including age, education level, and the difficulties they face on a daily basis, affect rural

women's political participation. A comprehensive grasp of these factors is essential in order to effectively tackle the unintended repercussions of government policies and advance gender equality in political engagement.

The Three-Child Policy and Its Social Benefits

China is currently confronted with two notable imbalances in its population structure. One of these imbalances pertains to the age distribution, indicating the presence of an ageing society within the country. Since the convening of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Central Committee of the Communist Party has strategically devised and implemented the "two-Child" and "universal two-Child policy" in order to effectively tackle the changing population dynamics and address the associated concerns. The growing severity of China's ageing population necessitates the implementation of more refined birth policies and supportive measures. These efforts aim to enhance the nation's population structure, tackle the challenges posed by population ageing, and uphold China's advantage in terms of human resource endowment.

By 2025, China is expected to implement a comprehensive maternity support policy system, improve service management systems, enhance eugenics and Child healthcare services, advance universal healthcare and Child healthcare services, decrease costs associated with Childbirth, Childcare, and education, increase fertility rates, achieve balanced sex ratios at birth, and gradually optimise population structures, ultimately improving population quality ([Zhao, 2022](#)).

From 2010 to 2020, China's population growth remained low, with a projected annual average growth rate of 0.53% in 2020, compared to 0.57% in 2010, as depicted in Figure 1. Experts predict that China may reach a population "turning point" between 2026 and 2030 due to the decreasingly high fertility rates observed in the early years of the People's Republic of China. This turning point is expected to be accompanied by improvements in laws, regulations for efficient services, and optimisation of the population structure. By 2035, it is anticipated that there will be improved services aimed at facilitating Children's education and promoting holistic personal growth ([Yan, 2020](#)).

Population dynamics are strongly interconnected with the real estate industry. The rising number of Children necessitates the expansion of sleeping, leisure, and study areas. The implementation of the "Three-Child policy" is anticipated to drive up the prices and rents of apartments larger than 120 square metres, due to increased demand for such accommodations. Smaller apartments, with sizes ranging from 50 to 60 square metres, are expected to experience minimal impact on sales and rental volumes. Real estate development and construction endeavours to improve the quality of life and the physical environment. The relaxation of population policies has stimulated growth in the real estate industry, specifically by increasing the demand for larger apartments and the development of residential services.

The complete implementation of the policy has led to an increase in the demand for larger residences and high-quality apartments, as people now require more space and auxiliary services. The cost of living in second and third-tier cities can accelerate the growth of the real estate industry and contribute to economic expansion. Experts suggest that the demographic dividend is reaching its final phase. However, the trend of urban areas attracting people is projected to continue for at least twenty years. This emphasises the potential for the real estate industry to flourish, especially in central regions and high-quality housing. The relaxation of birth policies is expected to stabilise and enhance asset prices (Zhang, 2016).

Simultaneously, the implementation of the "Three-Child" policy has sparked considerable enthusiasm in the stock market. In the last two days, stocks associated with the Three-Child policy have witnessed significant gains. Sectors such as baby care, golden hair rabbit, and Maine have observed an approximate growth of 20%. Children's Clothing Co., Ltd. and Lego, along with other Children's toy manufacturers, have experienced a two-day trading limit, while several other companies in the same industry have observed an increase in bidding limits.

As of May 31, there was a 17.51% increase in Hong Kong shares. Pharmaceutical companies, including Kangzhi Pharmaceuticals, Aoyang Health, and Tongce Medical, experienced growth of over 7% on June 1. Similarly, Guangshengtang, International Medicine, and Xilong Science saw an increase of nearly 5%. The assisted reproduction industry has a market size of 32.2 billion individuals, but its current penetration rate is only approximately 8%. According to projections, China's assisted reproduction market is expected to reach a value of 45.2 billion by 2023. This expansion of the market presents significant investment opportunities (Yue, 2020).

IV. Extended Maternity Leave: A Double-Edged Sword

Analysing the effects of extended maternity leave

The extension of maternity leave policies is a multifaceted aspect of social policy, with both positive benefits for mothers and their Children as well as complex challenges that require careful analysis. This section aims to analyse the effects of extended maternity leave, focusing on the balance between caregiving and civic engagement. It also explores the challenges faced by rural women in relation to these policies. These policies support maternal health and optimal infant development by allowing women more time to bond with their newborns and recover from Childbirth (Smith et al., 2022). Extended maternity leave aims to empower women by providing them with increased flexibility and autonomy in managing their reproductive lives. This is considered a fundamental right and a crucial element of women's liberation.

However, in the context of rural China, the long-term absence of women from the labour market may unintentionally lead to labour market discrimination and limited career opportunities. This, in turn, can affect the financial autonomy of rural women (Chen & Wang, 2019). The trade-off

between maternal well-being and professional development highlights the complex challenges posed by extended maternity leave policies, especially for women living in rural areas. Extended maternity leave policies in China have significant implications for the political participation of rural women. These policies play a vital role in influencing the dynamics of women's political participation in both formal and informal institutions. Informal institutions encompass ethical norms, customary practices, and religious convictions, while formal institutions consist of governmental policies, regulations, and procedural frameworks (Marsh, 2002).

These policies have a significant impact on women's traditional gender concepts. Traditional Chinese culture has reinforced gender norms, including a preference for male offspring and the perception of women as subordinate to men. Historically, women have been confined to domestic responsibilities, with their education primarily emphasising qualities deemed appropriate for the roles of wives and mothers. The rural upbringing frequently results in a diminished inclination for political leadership and involvement among women, as they may not have acquired the requisite abilities or aspirations (Li, 2002).

In addition, although many participants believe that women are not inherently less competent than men, there is a prevailing belief that men should prioritise social engagement, while women should focus on household matters. These ideas hinder the political effectiveness of rural women and reduce their motivation to participate in public activities. The low level of education among rural women hinders their ability to participate in politics and limits their effectiveness in this domain. This is significant because Dahl argues that political efficacy is closely linked to an individual's propensity to participate in political activities. When individuals hold the belief that their actions have the potential to bring about an impact, they are more likely to engage in participation (Dahl, 1971).

A. Balancing Caregiving and Political Engagement

The relationship between extended maternity leave policies and women's political participation, especially in rural areas, requires a careful analysis of the balancing act involved. Extended maternity leave, although beneficial for the well-being of mothers, could unintentionally impede the active participation of rural women in political engagements.

In rural Chinese communities, traditional gender roles persist, with women primarily responsible for household chores, childcare, and elder care. The prolonged length of maternity leave can increase domestic responsibilities, limiting women's ability to actively engage in political activities (Zhang & Liu, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the complex relationship between the duration of maternity leave and the amount of time available for active civic participation.

Moreover, the economic circumstances and scarcity of resources in rural regions necessitate that women prioritise their fundamental necessities,

such as sustenance and safety, over political influence. Rural women often lack the economic stability necessary to possess decision-making power and influence political outcomes. Individuals prioritise their immediate well-being and exhibit reluctance to engage in political endeavours that may not result in tangible advantages (Fei, 2011).

a) Concepts of Family Culture

The ubiquitous effect of "family culture" is observed in rural regions of China. Individuals often exhibit a preference for seeking assistance from family clans or interest groups rather than establishing organisations with shared objectives, so eroding the trust placed in governmental institutions. Rural women, like their urban counterparts, adhere to this cultural convention by typically seeking support from their immediate relatives or close acquaintances during times of need. This strong reliance on family networks and the lack of functioning civil organizations diminishes rural women's trust in public organizations, further discouraging their political participation (Fei, 2011).

B. Challenges Faced by Rural Women

Rural women in China face a distinct array of challenges that emerge from the convergence of socio-economic inequalities, restricted availability of healthcare services, and the arduous rural way of life.

- 1. Socio-economic Disparities:** The enactment of extended maternity leave policies has the potential to unintentionally amplify existing socio-economic disparities that are prevalent in rural regions characterised by limited employment prospects. The process of rural women reintegrating into the workforce following a prolonged period of absence can be challenging, potentially resulting in a state of financial vulnerability (Huang & Zhang, 2021).
- 2. Limited Access to Healthcare Services:** Insufficient healthcare infrastructure is a prevalent issue in rural areas of China. Although the provision of extended maternity leave has been shown to have a positive impact on maternal health, it is important to acknowledge that this measure alone may not adequately address the existing healthcare disparities experienced by women residing in rural areas. Consequently, it becomes evident that a more comprehensive reform of healthcare policies is necessary in order to effectively tackle these disparities (Cheng & Wang, 2018).
- 3. Arduous Rural Lifestyle:** The demanding rural lifestyle, characterised by a multitude of agricultural and domestic responsibilities, presents challenges in effectively utilising extended periods of maternity leave. Rural women are faced with the challenge of effectively managing their various responsibilities, including caregiving duties and political aspirations. This calls for the implementation of customised policies and support mechanisms to address their unique needs (Li & Guo, 2017).

4. Weak Women's Grassroots Organizations: The Women's Federations and Women's Congress are the primary women's organisations in rural areas, tasked with promoting women's engagement in politics. These organisations possess restricted autonomy and authority, primarily functioning as conduits for government directives. Consequently, their ability to enhance women's awareness of political rights is limited. The lack of resources and power in these organisations hinders their ability to effectively promote political participation among rural women (Liu, 2005).

Extended maternity leave policies have both positive and negative effects. On one hand, they improve the well-being of mothers, but on the other hand, they create obstacles for women's political participation. To achieve a harmonious balance between caregiving responsibilities and active civic engagement, policymakers must carefully consider the specific challenges faced by women in rural areas within the Chinese social context. Implementing such a strategy is essential to ensure meaningful engagement of women in both private and public spheres. Rural Chinese women face significant challenges in balancing their caregiving duties with political engagement. Gender norms, family customs, and institutional factors can limit individuals' participation in public activities. To enhance political engagement among rural women, it is crucial to address these challenges through the implementation of policy reforms and initiatives that promote gender equality.

V. Traditional Cultural Values and Gender Roles

Traditional cultural values and rooted gender roles have a significant impact on the political engagement of rural women in China, particularly in relation to the Three-Child Policy and extended maternity leave. This section explores the intricate cultural network and its impact on the roles and status of women in rural areas, as well as their political participation. It specifically focuses on the influence of long-standing traditions.



Figure 1. Chinese Female Professionals



Figure 2. Women Siting in Cabinet

A. Exploring the Influence of Traditional Culture

The lasting influence of traditional Chinese culture, characterised by its rich historical background and deeply rooted norms, is apparent in contemporary society, spanning urban and rural areas. The cultural norms discussed in this context are deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the community, shaping the expectations and behaviours of its members.

The historical preference for male Children in traditional cultural settings has significantly impacted the political participation of women in rural areas. Gender bias has perpetuated disparities in the sex ratio and influenced power dynamics in families and society. The enduring consequences for women's aspirations and social standing in rural communities stem from the devaluation of daughters and the prioritisation of sons (Luo, 2019).

B. Family Values and Societal Norms

Chinese society places great emphasis on family values, with the family unit traditionally seen as the cornerstone of social stability. The emphasis on family cohesion and support, while advantageous in some respects, can hinder women's involvement in political activities as they are often confined to domestic responsibilities.

Rural women often face a combination of cultural norms and societal expectations. Women are expected to fulfil traditional roles as obedient daughters, responsible spouses, and nurturing mothers, primarily within the confines of the household. The prevailing societal convention reinforces the idea that women are mainly responsible for household tasks, which diminishes and undermines women's perceived value and competence in the public sphere.

C. Impact on Rural Women's Status and Roles

The conventional cultural norms and gender expectations have a significant impact on women living in rural areas, resulting in reduced social status and limited opportunities. Asymmetrical power dynamics in rural households often lead to reduced agency for women in family decision-making, including their participation in political activities. [Zheng and Guo \(2013\)](#) argue that women face limitations in their aspirations for leadership positions and engagement in public affairs. These limitations stem from prevailing perceptions that depict women as submissive and lacking in competitive drive.



Figure 3. Chinese Hardworking Woman Iron Ladies

likewise, women living in rural areas often face limitations imposed by societal and familial expectations that prioritise their responsibilities in caregiving, particularly towards Children and the elderly. These tasks significantly consume their time and energy, thereby limiting their ability to actively participate in political matters. Cultural norms and domestic roles undermine women's political efficacy, which refers to their belief in their ability to influence decision-making ([Xie & Xu, 2014](#)).



Figure 4. Chinese Hardworking Rural Woman

Traditional cultural values and gender roles significantly impact the political participation of rural women in China. These entrenched social norms contribute to the continuation of gender inequalities and restrict women's ability to actively participate in public matters. It is crucial to consider cultural influences in order to promote gender equality and enable rural women to engage actively in political processes.

VI. Cumulative Negative Impact on Rural Women

The combination of China's Three-Child Policy, extended maternity leave, and deeply rooted cultural values creates a complex set of obstacles for rural women, resulting in a cumulative adverse effect on their political involvement. This section examines the interaction of these factors, emphasising the complex challenges that rural women encounter in their efforts to achieve gender equality and participate actively in political processes. Data was collected regarding the political participation of rural women.

Table 3. Changes in Various Demographic Indicators in China from 2010 to 2020

Indicator	Change (2010-2020)	2010	2020
Total Inhabitants (in millions)	+72.06 million	1,339.72	1,411.78
Birth Rate (per 1,000)	-28.4%	11.90	8.52
Transience Rate (per 1,000)	-0.56%	7.11	7.07
Natural Increase (per 1,000)	-69.7%	4.79	1.45
Progenies (0-14 years)			
(in millions and as % of total population)	+30.92 million (1.3% per year)	222.46 (16.2%)	253.38 (18.0%)
Adults (15-64 years)			
(in millions and as % of total population)	-30.67 million (-0.3% per year)	998.43 (72.9%)	967.76 (68.5%)
Older people (65 years and over)			
(in millions and as % of total population)	+71.81 million (+4.8% per year)	118.83 (8.7%)	190.64 (13.5%)
Mean of individuals per household	-0.5 persons	3.1	2.6
Childbearing age of Women			
(Aged 15-49) (in millions)	-40.91 million (-1.1% per year)	379.78	338.87
Women at most fertile ages			
(Aged 20-34) (in millions)	-15.17 million (-1.0% per year)	161.20	146.03
Mean of Children per woman	-0.3 Children	1.6	1.3
Average age of females at their initial marriage	+2.7 (years)	23.6 (in 2006)	26.3 (in 2016)
Mean age of women at birth of first Child	+2.6 years	24.3 (in 2006)	26.9 (in 2016)
Gender ratio at birth (males per 100 females at birth)	-6.6 points	117.9	111.3
Overall gender ratio (men per 100 women)	-0.1 points	105.2	105.1

The data presented herein illustrates the alterations observed in diverse demographic indicators within the Chinese context over the period spanning from 2010 to 2020. The data presented above pertains to the subject matter of "Unintended Consequences: A Critical Analysis of the Adverse Effects of China's Three-Child Policy and Prolonged Maternity Leave Extensions on the Political Engagement of Rural Women."

- Total Population (in millions): China's population increased by 72.06 million people during this decade. To comprehend the influence of policies like the Three-Child Policy and extended maternity leave on the political involvement of rural women, it is essential to analyse population growth.
- Birth Rate (per 1,000): There was a substantial decline in the birth rate, with a reduction from 11.90 per 1,000 individuals in 2010 to 8.52 per 1,000 individuals in 2020. The decline in rural women's political engagement can be ascribed to the aforementioned policy modifications, and it is a vital element to contemplate while analysing its influence.
- Mortality Rate (per 1,000): The death rate exhibited a relatively stable trend, experiencing a slight decrease from 7.11 per 1,000 individuals in 2010 to 7.07 per 1,000 individuals in 2020. This suggests that additional factors, aside from mortality, may have played a role in the observed population changes.
- Natural Increase (per 1,000): The natural increase, which is the difference between the birth rate and mortality rate, decreased significantly from 4.79 per 1,000 individuals in 2010 to 1.45 per 1,000 individuals in 2020. This observation highlights the impact of the analysed policies on population growth.
- Children (0–14 years): The annual growth rate for both the number and proportion of Children in relation to the total population was 1.3%. The demographic transition observed may be linked to the implementation of the Three-Child Policy and its impact on rural households.
- Adults (15–64 years): The adult population experienced an annual decline of 0.3% relative to the total population. The policies may have influenced decisions regarding family size and Childbirth.
- Older people (65 years and over): The annual growth rate of the older population was 4.8%, indicating the necessity for policies that cater to the needs of the ageing population, particularly in rural regions.
- Mean of individuals per household: The average number of individuals per household declined from 3.1 to 2.6. The observed policies may have influenced changing family structures and preferences.
- Number of women of Childbearing age (Aged 15–49): The annual decline in the population of women in the Childbearing age group was 1.1%. This could be linked to the effects of extended maternity leave and fertility policies.
- Number of women at most fertile ages (Aged 20–34): The annual decrease in the number of women in the most fertile age group was 1.0%, indicating the impact of the examined policies on demographic changes.
- Mean number of Children per woman: The average fertility rate declined from 1.6 to 1.3, suggesting that policies have had an impact on fertility rates.

- Mean age of women at first marriage and at birth of the first Child: Both indicators exhibited substantial increases, suggesting a correlation between the policies under examination and the postponement of family planning decisions and Childbearing.
- Gender ratio at birth (males per 100 females at birth): The sex ratio at birth decreased by 6.6 points. This may be indicative of changing gender preferences in family planning.
- Overall gender ratio (men per 100 women): The gender ratio exhibited minimal change, with a slight decrease of 0.1 points.

These demographic changes are crucial when examining the unintended consequences of policies related to Childbirth and maternity leave on rural women's political participation. They provide insights into how these policies have affected family structures, fertility rates, and population distribution over the decade.

A. Synthesizing Policy Implications, Maternity Leave, and Cultural Values

The Three-Child Policy unintentionally worsens gender disparities and challenges experienced by rural women, despite its intended purpose of addressing demographic issues. The policy, along with the extension of maternity leave, appears to provide women with increased flexibility in their reproductive decisions and maternal responsibilities. These policies may unintentionally perpetuate traditional gender norms, reinforcing the belief that women's main duties are confined to the realm of family.

Extended maternity leave, despite its intention to support women in their caregiving responsibilities, ironically excludes them from participating in wider societal and political activities. Although the significance of maternal care is recognised, the issue of how rural women manage the delicate equilibrium between caregiving responsibilities and political engagement is not adequately addressed. These policies, when examined from the perspective of conventional cultural values, contribute to the continuation of gender inequalities.

B. Multifaceted Challenges for Rural Women

Rural women are faced with a multitude of complex challenges that arise as a result of these policies. The extended period of absence from the workforce resulting from prolonged maternity leave can have negative implications for women's career opportunities, financial autonomy, and their capacity to participate in political endeavours. The lack of presence frequently leads to a dearth of professional growth, posing challenges for women in attaining leadership positions within the political domain.

Furthermore, the policy implications, in conjunction with cultural values, serve to strengthen the existing traditional gender norms, thereby presenting obstacles for women in their efforts to emancipate themselves from domestic responsibilities and engage more actively in the public

sphere. The prevailing perception of women as primarily responsible for caregiving and homemaking poses a significant obstacle to their political effectiveness and aspirations, thereby reducing the likelihood of their engagement in political activities (Luo, 2019).

C. Gender Equality and Political Participation

The cumulative adverse effect on the political participation of rural women not only sustains gender disparities but also impedes the broader objectives of gender equality and social progress. The correlation between gender equality and political participation is undeniable, as the capacity to actively participate in political processes has a direct impact on the rights and representation of women. The exclusion of women from the political arena results in the lack of representation of their voices and perspectives in policy decisions (Duflo, 2012).

A comprehensive approach is required to effectively address the cumulative negative impact on rural women. Policies should be formulated with a comprehensive comprehension of the complex cultural values in effect and the obstacles encountered by women residing in rural regions. Efforts focused on the advancement of gender equality should encompass not only legal reforms but also cultural developments that actively challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Facilitating the active participation of rural women in political processes is a crucial step towards cultivating a society that prioritises inclusivity and equality.

VII. Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the unforeseen consequences associated with China's Three-Child Policy and extended maternity leave regulations. It offers valuable insights into the intricate challenges faced by rural women in terms of their political participation. The investigation's findings reveal a complex interplay among demographic changes, deeply ingrained cultural norms, and gender expectations. These factors collectively contribute to a negative impact on the involvement of rural women in political pursuits.

a) Summary of findings

The results indicate that the Three-Child Policy's implementation and the extension of maternity leave effectively tackle demographic and maternal health concerns. However, these measures unintentionally reinforce conventional gender roles and impose further constraints on political participation among rural women. The enactment of these policies has led to a decrease in the birth rate and an increase in the percentage of elderly individuals. This could potentially worsen the difficulties associated with a population that is growing older. Concurrently, they play a role in perpetuating deeply rooted cultural values that prioritise women's roles within the realm of the family, consequently impeding their involvement in public matters.

Additionally, the results emphasise the need to address conventional cultural norms that contribute to gender inequalities and restrict women's access to opportunities in the public domain. The promotion of gender equality and the redefinition of societal norms to encourage cultural transformations are of utmost importance. Enabling the active engagement of rural women in political activities necessitates more than just legal reforms. It calls for a comprehensive strategy aimed at dismantling long-standing stereotypes and traditional gender roles.

Based on the aforementioned discoveries, this study advocates for immediate action, urging policymakers to reassess current policies and strive towards the establishment of a society that is both fair and inclusive. Further investigation is necessary to explore the complex experiences of women living in rural areas and evaluate the effectiveness of potential policy measures aimed at reducing the overall negative impact on their involvement in political activities. The call to action includes various stakeholders such as civil society, academic institutions, and organisations dedicated to the promotion and progress of women's rights. The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of rural women for active participation in community and national development require the implementation of collaborative initiatives.

b) Implications for policy and society

The implications of the study have wide-ranging effects on policy-making and society as a whole. Policymakers should consider adopting a comprehensive approach that rigorously analyses the intricacies of rural women's lives and efficiently addresses the wide range of challenges they face. Policymakers must consider not only the quantitative outcomes but also the intricate interplay between demographic shifts, extended maternity leave, and deeply ingrained cultural norms. Reforms should be focused on prioritising the empowerment of rural women, aiming to foster a more inclusive societal framework that facilitates women's active participation in political processes.

c) Call for action and further exploration

Further investigation is required to thoroughly examine the complex experiences of women living in rural areas and evaluate the effectiveness of potential policy changes aimed at reducing the cumulative negative impacts on their involvement in political processes. The comprehensive understanding of this complex issue can be achieved through collaborative study, which involves integrating interdisciplinary viewpoints and actively engaging local communities and women's organisations.

The call to action includes civil society, academic institutions, and organisations dedicated to the promotion of women's rights. The implementation of collaborative endeavours is necessary to promote gender equality and empower rural women to actively participate in defining their communities and nation.

In conclusion, our research findings indicate that addressing the collective negative impacts faced by rural women necessitates a holistic strategy that encompasses governmental reforms, cultural transformations, and societal commitment. The Three-Child Policy, extended maternity leave, and deeply ingrained cultural values collectively contribute to the impact on political participation of rural women in China. This necessitates urgent attention and coordinated endeavours to advance gender equality and social progress in the country.

References

- Chen, H., & Sun, Y. (2020). Gender and Family Influences on the Three-Child Policy Implementation. *Chinese Journal of Population Science*, 4, 14-22.
- Chen, H., & Wang, Y. (2019). Balancing Caregiving, Economic Autonomy, and Political Engagement: Challenges Faced by Rural Women in the Context of Extended Maternity Leave. *Journal of Gender and Family Studies*, 24(3), 321-339.
- Cheng, L., & Wang, Y. (2018). Healthcare Disparities in Rural China: The Implications of Extended Maternity Leave Policies. *Health Policy and Planning*, 33(5), 565-579.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale University Press. Retrieved from <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300015652/polyarchy>
- Duflo, E. (2012). Women's Empowerment and Economic Development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 1051-1079. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.4.1051>
- Fei, X. (2011). *Rural China: A thirty-year perspective*. University of Washington Press.
- Feng, S., Li, Y., & Liu, J. (2022). China's Three-Child Policy: Motives, Implications, and Challenges. *Population and Development Review*, 48(1), 139-160.
- Huang, Q., & Zhang, L. (2021). Socio-economic Implications of Extended Maternity Leave for Rural Women in China. *Rural Development Quarterly*, 16(2), 117-133.
- Li, J., & Guo, X. (2017). The Interplay of Maternity Leave, Rural Lifestyles, and Women's Political Participation: A Comprehensive Analysis. *Women's Policy Review*, 29(4), 437-453.
- Li, L. (2002). Gender and Rural Political Participation in China. In *Gender and Rural Modernization* (pp. 229-253). Routledge.
- Li, X., Song, X., & Shen, Y. (2021). Three-Child Policy and Rural Family Economic Pressure: A Field Study of 45 Villages. *China Agricultural University*, 12(1), 33-45.
- Liu, L. (2005). The Performance of the Grassroots Women's Congress in Rural China. *China Journal*, 54, 109-127.
- Luo, H. (2019). The Preference for Sons in China: Historical, Cultural, and Societal Influences. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 4, 31.
- Marsh, D. (2002). *Comparative politics: Exploring concepts and institutions across nations*. Routledge.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, Research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publication. Retrieved from <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/interpretative-phenomenological-analysis/book250130>

- Song, F. (2019). *New legal thinking on the protection of female employees under the two-Child policy*. Shandong University.
- Tan, X. (2017). *The impact of the universal two-Child policy on women's rights* (Master's Thesis, Southwest University of Political Science and Law).
- Wang, Q., & Wang, Y. (2021). Childbearing Policies and Female Labor Force Participation: Evidence from China. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 40(3), 373-397.
- Wang, Y. J. (2022). Research on the impact of the Three-Child policy on women's rights. *Western Journal*, 06, 69-73.
- Wang, Y. P. (2016). The impact of the universal two-Child birth policy on women and its countermeasures. *Journal of Shandong Women's University*, 2016(3), 27-30. Retrieved from http://www.cqvip.com/qk/87729a/20163/90727690504849544_851484854.html
- Xie, S., & Xu, Q. (2014). *Gender Roles in Contemporary China: Seeing Half the Sky*. Routledge.
- Yan, S. Y. (2020). Analysis of the impact of the comprehensive two-Child policy on female employment discrimination. *Market Weekly*, 33(07), 147-149.
- Yue, R. L. (2020). On the current situation and improvement of women's rights protection in my country's constitution. *Economist*, 12, 236-239. Retrieved from <https://m.fx361.com/news/2020/0301/18101367.html>
- Zhang, L., & Liu, L. (2019). Rural Women's Participation in Family Decision Making and Policy Implications in Rural Areas of China. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 73, 115-123.
- Zhang, L., & Liu, L. (2020). Rural Women's Participation in Family Decision Making and Policy Implications in Rural Areas of China. *Gender and Society*, 40(3), 337-354.
- Zhang, Y. (2016). The impact of the "universal two-Child" policy on women's career development and the countermeasures. *Journal of Fujian Administration Institute*, 2016(4), 104-112. doi: <https://doi.org/10.19357/j.cnki.35-1295/d.2016.04.014>
- Zhao, X. F. (2022). The strategic significance and implementation path of promoting the three-child policy. *Hunan Social Sciences*, 2022(1), 120-126.
- Zheng, Z., & Guo, M. (2013). *Gender and Power in Rural North China*. Lexington Books.