ESSAY 1-2025

THE SILENT WITHDRAWAL

China's Declining Female Workforce Poses a National Challenge

Dian Zhong

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INTRODUCTION

The "quiet revolution" aptly describes the global social shift for women—broader horizons, empowered identities, and increased control over education, work, and family life.[1] Yet in China, the opposite trend is unfolding: Women are quietly withdrawing from the labor market, despite significant gains in education and human capital development. Once the backbone of China's labor force, women now face diminishing opportunities, widening gender gaps, continued underrepresentation in leadership, and increasingly stringent family responsibilities—trends that contrast starkly with much of the rest of the world.

Remarkably, just fifty years ago, China was heralded as a global model for its remarkable strides in gender equality and women's empowerment. The slogan "Women hold up half the sky," first proclaimed by Mao Zedong in 1955, still resonates deeply with older generations of Chinese women, particularly those born in the 1960s and earlier. These cohorts, who fostered some of the first waves of feminist consciousness in contemporary China, are a reminder of an era when gender equality was not only promoted by state labor policies but also ingrained in the national consciousness and celebrated as part of the country's international identity.

How has China's once-prominent position in gender equality eroded, and what are the implications of this shift for its global image and labor market prospects? How have government policies failed to address this challenge and leverage women's human capital gains to create a synergistic balance between their productive and reproductive roles? How has China's massive economic restructuring fractured its gender relations and disproportionately impacted women's labor participation? Moreover, how has China's feminist movement evolved in response to the growing tensions between the state's directives and women's individual interests? Finally, what urgent policy interventions are needed to halt the worsening of gender equity while sustaining China's long-term economic growth?

A Hoover Institution Essay

Essay 1-2025 • February 2025

This report addresses critical questions across six sections: China's ongoing erosion of gender parity; government policy missteps; patterns and dynamics of the gendered labor market; the evolving relationship between the feminist movement and state power; the long-term effects of unbalanced gender relations on China's economic prospects; and strategies to avoid past mistakes and prepare for a more equitable future. By exploring these themes, the report aims to illuminate China's complex gender issues and provide actionable insights for policymakers seeking to foster inclusive development in a country facing growing internal disparities.

The key takeaways from our analysis are as follows:

- China needs to redefine the state's relationship with women.

  The state's retreat from fostering women's employment opportunities, social welfare, and political representation marks a serious regression. The current focus on prioritizing fertility, often at the expense of women's fundamental rights, must be recalibrated to enable women to embrace motherhood on their own terms. Achieving this requires revitalizing and supporting feminist organizations while refraining from labeling pro-women activists as foreign infiltrators. A collaborative strategy is urgently needed, particularly to address illegal and unethical local practices that incentivize childbirth in remote areas.

- China needs to reinvent its state narratives and move away from paternalistic campaigns.

  Relying on outdated mass campaigns or public-persuasion strategies to pressure women into traditional roles is no longer effective. Instead, the state should draw on the successes of the Mao era, which balanced high female labor force participation with fertility by prioritizing robust structural support systems while using pro-equality campaigns as a unifying force rather than a divisive one. If messaging is necessary, it should be reimagined to reflect genuine and equal respect for women's diverse aspirations in contemporary society.

- China needs to reallocate legal and fiscal resources to better ensure the implementation of existing policies that support women.

  The state has introduced numerous women-focused policy guidelines for local implementation, but it cannot rely solely on local governments and enterprises to shoulder these responsibilities. Instead, responsibilities must be matched with fiscal and legal authority, enabling provincial and municipal governments to delegate power to local and community bureaucrats to deliver immediate and direct support to families in need. Achieving this will inevitably require reallocating national budgets to fortify a minimal welfare state.

- China needs to prepare for a future of low fertility while maximizing human capital gains.

  The transformative power of pronatalist policies should not be overestimated, as empirical evidence demonstrates their limited impact on real fertility rates. Instead, policies

should adapt to demographic shifts by leveraging lower birthrates to enhance human capital development and improve economic quality. Drawing on the experiences of other nations in the region, it is essential to devise innovative strategies—such as pension reforms, public housing reforms, and workforce reengagement programs—to turn demographic challenges into potential gains for societal well-being.

1. CHINA'S ERODING GENDER EQUALITY

For decades, China's exceptional GDP growth has masked a growing and overlooked issue: the steady erosion of gender equality. As the country shifted toward profit-driven sectors, traditionally dominated by men, gender roles have reverted to more conventional norms, with women relegated to reproductive roles. Meanwhile, the rest of the world saw a positive turn—women now hold unprecedented positions of power as presidents, CEOs, and extremely successful entrepreneurs.

This section explores the stark contrast between China's declining position on the global gender equality index and its once-progressive stance, analyzing how this shift has drawn international scrutiny while fueling a surge in feminist activism within the country.

1.1 GENDER EQUALITY IMPROVES GLOBALLY, BUT NOT IN CHINA

The 2023 Nobel Prize winner in Economic Sciences, Claudia Goldin, is renowned for her groundbreaking work on the century-long evolution of women's role in economic activities worldwide. Goldin identifies four stages in this transformation: The first three are evolutionary, with clear changes visible through time series data, while the last is revolutionary, marked by a "silent" shift in women's deeper attachment to the workforce, stronger identification with careers, and greater ability to make joint decisions with their spouses.[2] This picture is reflected in the recent findings of the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Gender Gap Index, which reports that among the 146 economies covered, the Health and Survival gender gap has closed by 96 percent, the Educational Attainment gap by 94.9 percent, the Economic Participation and Opportunity gap by 60.5 percent, and the Political Empowerment gap by 22.5 percent.[3] The ongoing progress toward gender equality is clear in most parts of the world.

Yet, students of modern China know that the country often stands as an outlier in social science theories, and here once again, China forms an exception to Goldin's observations. Despite over four decades of lasting economic growth, China has seen its gender disparities widen. Female labor force participation has steadily declined, gender wage gaps have remained wide, and women are significantly underrepresented in politics and business leadership. Startlingly, this is not a case of Chinese women "opting out"—they have been deliberately "left out" and "pushed out" of the country's economic blueprints.

On the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index, China ranked sixty-third for gender equality in 2006 but had fallen to 106th (out of 146) by 2024.[4] National estimates show a steady

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decline in the women's labor force participation (LFP) rate, dropping from 73.3 percent in 1990 to 67.9 percent in 2000, and further to 63.7 percent in 2010.[5] Despite China's efforts to achieve more balanced and inclusive growth after the 2000s, the situation for women has not improved. From 2000 to 2023, women's LFP rate fell by 10.1 percentage points, and the gender gap in labor participation continued to widen in spite of significant advances in women's education and employment opportunities since the 1980s.[6]

Not only are Chinese women withdrawing from the labor market, but the wage earnings of those who remain are also falling behind. According to the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), the gender pay gap of China's annual earnings has reached 26.5 percent, with the gender pay gap of hourly earnings standing at 20.9 percent.[7] A recent large-scale meta-analysis, utilizing 1,472 estimates from 199 studies, revealed a dramatic increase in China's gender wage gap over the past two decades, with an estimated rise of approximately 1.5 times or more between the 2000s and 2010s.[8] Given the well-documented correlation between gender-relative income and male-biased sex imbalances,[9] China, alongside Vietnam, Brunei, and the Philippines, continues to rank among the countries with the broadest gender gaps in sex ratio at birth.[10]

China's declining female LFP rate stands out as an anomaly on both global and regional levels,[11] leading the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to single out the country as a critical case of gender disparity within the Asia-Pacific region.[12] In contrast, countries with comparable macroeconomic indicators, such as Brazil and Mexico, have made strides in improving women's economic participation over the past few decades.[13] Despite a recent surge in government policies, legal reforms, and official narratives promoting gender equality in China, after all those years of sidelining women, the efforts to harness women's growing human capital and facilitate the country's transition to an inclusive, knowledge-based economy have been frustratingly stunted.

1.2 FROM LEADER TO LAGGARD: CHINA'S WANING GENDER PARITY

To younger generations of Chinese women, the saying "Women hold up half the sky" may now seem like a relic of propaganda. However, during the Socialist Period (1950–1978), gender parity was one of the few policy achievements China could truly claim amid widespread poverty, economic stagnation, and political upheaval. Chinese women, working side by side with men in factories, mines, and farmlands, were celebrated as symbols of China's socialist vision of modernity.[14]

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, a series of gender equality–promoting policies were enacted, pledging to liberate women from discriminatory social practices that had long barred them from the labor market. The Provisional Constitution not only promised equal rights for women in all areas of life, but also enshrined

gender equality into the national narrative. The introduction of the Marriage Law (1950), along with the establishment of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), laid the groundwork for the transformation of Chinese women's social roles, shifting them from passive family caretakers to active wage earners, particularly in urban areas.[15] For a nation striving to catch up with its global counterparts, women were seen by authorities as a newly "emancipated" political force and an untapped labor resource, essential to realizing China's ambitious modernization goals. As China mobilized its entire population for rapid growth, for the first time in history women were fully integrated into the country's economic plans. During the Great Leap Forward, women started playing vital roles in both agricultural and industrial production. Iconic figures like the "Iron Girls" emerged as powerful symbols of the new gender division of labor, embodying the state's vision of equality and collective prosperity.[16]

As a result, this period saw a dramatic surge in women's labor force participation, reaching an impressive 84 percent by the 1980s, far surpassing the 61 percent average in more "advanced" economies such as those within the OECD. Women employed in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which dominated the prereform economy, enjoyed pay parity with their male counterparts. The overall gender wage gap in China during this time ranged from 16 percent to 22 percent, significantly lower than the 36 percent to 38 percent gap in the United States over the same period.[17]

However, the post-1978 economic reforms reversed many of these gains. Market-oriented reforms prioritized profit and efficiency, leading to structural changes that disproportionately affected women. The shift from state-owned enterprises to private sectors caused a drastic decline in women's LFP due to massive gendered layoffs. Simultaneously, the privatization of healthcare and childcare services intensified the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. As traditional household divisions resurfaced, women were once again expected to shoulder the primary burden of domestic and caregiving duties. Without adequate safety nets to alleviate their "double burden," women were either forced into precarious employment or pushed out of the workforce entirely.[18] Today, Chinese women spend significantly more time on unpaid household work compared to men.[19]

Since the 1990s, as China's GDP has steadily risen, China's female economic participation and opportunities have steadily declined. Although its female LFP rate is still relatively high compared to the global average, the sustained drop marks a significant setback. What we are witnessing today is the gradual erosion of gender equality as a foundational pillar of China's socialist identity. It also signals a profound shift in the country's economic and political priorities.

In his address to delegates at the 2023 National Women's Congress, Politburo Standing Committee member Ding Xuexiang notably omitted a long-standing phrase about male-female equality that had been a fixture of leadership speeches since the 1990s, signaling yet another shift from an "equity-first" to an "efficiency-first" approach.[20] While gender equality remains part of the general official rhetoric, in practice it is no longer a source of strength for the regime but is increasingly viewed as a potential obstacle to its legitimacy.

1.3 THE AUDIENCE COST: GLOBAL SCRUTINY AND LOCAL ACTIVISM

China's decline in gender parity has brought not only economic consequences but also significant political and diplomatic repercussions. Since the 2000s, as globalization has brought Chinese factory girls into the global spotlight, the relationship between social actors advocating for women's rights and the Chinese state has been fundamentally reconfigured. Most strikingly, international media coverage highlighting China's lack of protection for young female laborers has led to a notable "audience cost," drawing global scrutiny and raising doubts about the regime's commitment to gender equality.

This external pressure has, in turn, fueled the rise of feminist activism within China. With the international spotlight amplifying domestic discontent, maintaining the symbiosis among the state, feminist organizations, and grassroots movements has become increasingly difficult. As more feminist activists disengage from official channels such as the Women's Federations, they have turned to individual resistance strategies, often leveraging spontaneous collective actions on social media. What began as a compliant and accommodating movement has evolved into a defiant force, openly challenging the state on issues such as domestic violence, social discrimination, reproductive rights, and economic rights within the household. These activists demanded reforms that go beyond surface-level policies, calling for systemic change in both public and private spheres to revitalize the gender-equality agenda in China.

1.3.1 Dagongmei*: The Chinese Factory Girls Enter the World Stage*

China's repositioning as a global manufacturing hub during the 1990s and 2000s had a profound impact on its workforce, especially for women. Female workers, often characterized by lower wage expectations and greater endurance, became the favored labor force in Export Processing Zones.[21] The influx of *dagongmei*—young rural women working in factories—played a pivotal role in securing China's wage competitiveness on the global stage.

Ironically, it was precisely the fragile social status of these women that made them attractive hires. In major manufacturing centers such as Shenzhen, the massive supply of *dagongmei* into assembly lines was often driven by their marginalized position within their families, a desire to escape patriarchal pressures such as arranged marriages, and a cultural association that framed factory work as a symbol of appropriate femininity. Docile, dexterous, tireless, and cheaper, women were perceived as better employees than men for labor-intensive tasks.[22] In other words, it was women's comparative disadvantage in the labor market that positioned them in "female ghettos of employment," rather than any newfound economic empowerment.

Nevertheless, given the harsher realities in other forms of work available, jobs in export-oriented production within multinational firms often appeared more favorable, making them highly sought after by many women.[23] As foreign investors' demand for gendered labor persisted, a new social group of rural migrant female workers emerged in China, solidifying the societal expectation that women in their twenties should hold waged jobs. By transforming their perceived disadvantages into strengths, women once again became the backbone of China's indispensable labor force.[24]

Moreover, rather than viewing themselves as temporary wage earners or "girls waiting to be married off," many of the *dagongmei* seized the opportunity to move to big cities and began actively investing in their futures. They enrolled in English and typing classes on weekends, or saved up for small-scale entrepreneurial ventures, all in anticipation of achieving economic independence and a more autonomous womanhood.[25] For them, factory work and the income it generated opened a realm of newfound freedom, offering opportunities for personal growth and the possibility of breaking away from traditional life paths.

Upon this momentum, the Women's Federations also seized the opportunity to boost their own institutional prestige by joining the effort to enhance female workers' human capital. They provided training services to help women overcome disadvantages in literacy, professional education, and social skills, ultimately enabling them to compete and thrive in the marketplace.[26] Their initiatives brought new vitality not only to the *dagongmei* but also to the previously marginalized women's organizations themselves. By positioning the pursuit of women's "internal capacities" as a pathway to both economic growth and gender equality, the Women's Federations successfully rebranded themselves as central players in realizing China's economic goals. Simultaneously, by integrating women into the national labor force and drawing activists and scholars into collaborative research and policymaking initiatives, the Women's Federations secured targeted claims on state resources and extended their bureaucratic reach from the top (ACWF) down to rural villages and urban residential communities, ultimately benefiting millions of female workers.[27]

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In postsocialist China, the taboos surrounding capitalist ideology and the anxiety over sending young women into foreign-owned sweatshops quickly reignited the narrative of exploitation by global capitalism. In a peculiar and unexpected turn, the rise of Chinese feminist activism and the state's organs once again found a shared path and common cause. Government officials and women's representatives began a sustained learning process, gradually developing forms of mutual accommodation, influence, and necessity. A new symbiosis among the state, women's organizations, and broader social forces began to emerge, challenging Western democratization theorists' views on state-society relationships.[28] The openness of the Chinese government, combined with unprecedented global attention, offered Chinese women a historic opportunity to regain political legitimacy and independent voices—an opportunity that peaked with the hosting of the United Nations' 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing.

1.3.2 Navigating Power: State, Women, and the International Community

After the 1995 UN Conference on Women, Chinese feminism gained newfound legitimacy and frameworks for advocating for gender equity. Thanks to the strategic maneuvering of

the ACWF, the largest and most prestigious semiofficial organization in China, gender equality was once again linked to the country's vision of modernity. In the years leading up to and following China's full-scale globalization, feminist advocacy was elevated, seen by the government as essential not only for advancing social equality but also for enhancing China's international image and showcasing its progress.[29]

However, the opening of China's economy to the outside world and the unfolding socioeconomic impacts of globalization introduced a new kind of legitimacy challenge for the Chinese regime. The rapid economic growth allowed more Chinese citizens to observe, in comparing the performance of communist systems with that of noncommunist systems, that the former "could only dream" of the latter's achievements.[30] However strong the Chinese state was, the country's integration into the global economy inevitably exposed it to a dilemma faced by many postglobalization states—a gradual decline in the state's effectiveness as a civil association and the potential emergence of a legitimacy crisis.[31]

This marked yet another turning point for Chinese female workers. On the demand side, the *dagongmei* became acutely aware of their vulnerable and unprotected labor status during the factory downsizing. Those who remained in urban areas began to self-organize into grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), funded socially and run by volunteers and legal professionals with deep experience in female factory worker issues.[32] Meanwhile, on the supply side, the Women's Federations gradually lost their appeal as their traditional approach proved increasingly ineffective in addressing the immediate needs of female workers.[33] After all, the official ties of the ACWF to the state inevitably limited its capacity to fully support independent feminist activism.

By the 2010s, as state ideology further shifted from protecting women's socioeconomic rights to emphasizing their reproductive roles, institutionalized and noninstitutionalized feminist forces had diverged. This divergence led to a curtailment of the overall influence of feminist organizations, leaving a significant gap in advocacy for gender equality thus far.

Intentionally or not, the relationship between China's feminist movements and the international community has introduced new layers of complexity to their efforts. While international support has amplified their causes, it has also heightened government scrutiny, as the Chinese state remains highly cautious about foreign influence in domestic civil affairs. Consequently, Chinese feminists now face the challenge of walking a delicate tightrope—striving to engage with the state, garner societal support, and maintain international connections, all while carefully navigating the narrow confines of what is politically acceptable within China's restrictive environment.

1.3.3 From Compliance to Clash: Feminist-State Relations Unravel

For decades, Chinese feminist activists have carefully avoided direct confrontation with state power, yet they have remained under state suspicion. This suspicion is not entirely unwarranted, as critiques of China's worsening gender inequality by feminist activists often intersect with broader critiques of social injustice. Historically, during the period when

Women's Federations held significant influence, women's issues frequently served as a vanguard for intellectual resistance against political, economic, and cultural domination.[34] Even today, the ACWF, despite its mandate to address female-specific issues, continues actively collaborating with public prosecutors to support victims of legal injustice regardless of gender.[35] As a result, feminist advocacy increasingly intertwines with other social grievances, leading the previously constructed alliance between feminism and the state to unravel.

The feminist agenda, caught in the cross fire between the Chinese state and the international community, has thus far become a highly sensitive and contested issue, leaving Chinese women themselves with little to no voice in shaping its direction.

From the 2010s onward, as the state continued to marginalize women's representatives in government organs, the noninstitutionalized currents of feminist activism gained strength and began to challenge the state's authority more openly. The most notable clash occurred in March 2015, when five prominent feminist activists were arrested for organizing a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. The incident quickly went viral, galvanizing a broader coalition of civil rights lawyers, labor activists, scholars, performance artists, and internet users to openly criticize the authorities' harsh response, which was widely seen as "the worst crackdown in decades."[36] In solidarity, countless anonymous female university students posted pictures online of themselves wearing masks with the faces of the "Feminist Five," despite the posts being swiftly deleted by censors within hours.

Ironically, the arrests occurred just two days before International Women's Day, sparking global outrage and drawing condemnation from high-profile figures like then–US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who took to Twitter to call the Chinese president's actions "shameless." Clinton, who famously declared, "Women's rights are human rights," during her remarks at the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing, found herself an unwelcome witness to the country's regression on women's rights.[37] In response, the Chinese government deployed its propaganda machine to accuse feminist organizations of being infiltrated by "foreign hostile forces."[38] This incident highlighted growing tensions on at least two fronts: First, the growing rift between the state and feminist advocacy weakened the ACWF, prompting feminist activists to seek more-radical methods of expression and nonstate alliances. Second, the foreign criticism directed at the Chinese government clashed with its noninterference policy, incentivizing it to reconsider its international commitments to gender equality while simultaneously escalating repression of feminist voices domestically. The feminist agenda, caught in the cross fire between the Chinese state and the international community, has thus far become a highly sensitive and contested issue, leaving Chinese women themselves with little to no voice in shaping its direction.

Since 2015, many feminist NGOs have been shut down or forced to operate underground, with some activists fleeing abroad to continue their advocacy. But despite these setbacks, China's feminist activism has proven resilient. The #MeToo movement, which gained traction in China in 2018, showcased the persistence of feminist voices, particularly among educated

urban women.[39] Even amid growing state censorship, rising rights awareness and feminist initiatives have continued to influence China's suburbs and countryside, despite government efforts to shift the focus from gender equality to women's family and childbirth roles.[40]

2. CHINA'S GENDER POLICY DILEMMAS

Gender once stood as a policy area where the Communist Party of China demonstrated its remarkable ability to mobilize women from all class backgrounds and walks of life for its revolutionary cause. Today, it remains a critical test of the ruling party's policymaking and implementation capabilities, as the nation grapples with the urgent need to harness its human capital for economic upgrading, address its daunting demographic crisis, and rally support from half its population—women who are increasingly disillusioned by the state's unfulfilled promises and are beginning to resist its agenda through passive forms of defiance.

The Chinese government's approach to gender issues reveals three major policy loopholes: first, a lack of support for educated women to utilize their human capital effectively; second, the neglect of women's growing desire for economic independence; and third, the inefficiency or unintended consequences of gender-related policies.

Despite advancements in women's education, the absence of targeted policies leaves many highly educated women underemployed or unable to fully contribute to the economy, squandering their potential and widening gender disparities in the labor market. Simultaneously, the government's focus on combating the demographic crisis prioritizes traditional family roles, sidelining women's aspirations for financial autonomy and creating a stark conflict between personal ambitions and state-driven imperatives. Furthermore, poorly designed gender-related policies often fail to address structural inequalities and instead result in counterproductive outcomes, such as reinforcing gender stereotypes or exacerbating economic pressures on women, deepening the divide between policy goals and the lived realities of women in China.

2.1 WASTED POTENTIAL: THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN CHINA

As part of China's national strategy of "transforming the Chinese population," since the founding of the PRC families have been encouraged to ensure that their children receive at least a basic education for literacy. Throughout the reform era, enhancing the nation's human capital remained a top priority. In 1982, compulsory education and literacy were officially incorporated into the newly revised Constitution of the People's Republic of China, legally obliging parents to ensure that their children complete the nine-year compulsory education. In urban areas, single daughters with strong academic performance were often given the opportunity to pursue higher education. As a result, female illiteracy among those aged fifteen and above fell dramatically from over 90 percent in 1949 to just 7.3 percent in 2017, while women's share of college enrollment increased from less than 20 percent in 1949 to 52.5 percent in 2017.[41]

In 2017, the launching of the 13th Five-Year Plan for Education reaffirmed the state's commitment to continued investment in education, regardless of gender. In 2020, China reported achieving full parity in tertiary education enrollment.[42] In 2024, women surpassed men in enrollments.[43] Beyond pre–labor market investments in formal education, organizations like the ACWF have made notable progress in female workers' continuous learning and post–labor market entry investments to support their career advancement (see section 4.1.2, "Redefining Feminism: Gender Equality as Statecraft for Social Stability").

That's the positive side of the story. Despite substantial progress in women's education and an increasing market demand for professional and managerial skills, Chinese women have struggled to leverage their enhanced human capital for socioeconomic success. As noted in section 1.1, China's female labor force participation rate has steadily declined, and gender disparities in employment and wages have worsened. During the economic reforms in the 1980s, women were primarily channeled into the service sector and secretarial roles, while men were typically recruited for technical and managerial positions.[44] This gendered division of labor has persisted to this day: Men continue to dominate leadership roles, while women remain significantly underrepresented in prestigious occupations, holding a much smaller share of top political and business positions.[45]

The persistent "glass ceiling effect" faced by Chinese women has become a subject of growing public interest and academic research. In 2013, a report by the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute revealed that the percentage of highly educated women in China is 31 percentage points higher than the percentage of female business owners, underscoring the significant barriers to entrepreneurship.[46] Similarly, a report by the International Labour Organization resonates with this finding, showing that only 16.8 percent of senior managers in China are women, placing the country 88th out of 126 nations in female leadership representation.[47] Additionally, 40 percent of Chinese companies are composed of all male board members. From a regional perspective, China's performance is also disappointing, with only 17.5 percent of firms led by women, compared to 29.3 percent in the Asia-Pacific region.[48] These findings suggest that despite the progress in education, women's gains have not proportionally translated into equal opportunities in the labor market.

What this disconnect implies is a significant policy shortfall. Given the shrinking number of new entrants to the workforce due to a rapidly aging population, the Chinese economy will increasingly depend on the contributions of highly qualified women in managerial and professional positions. However, this is far from the reality in China.[49] On the input side, Chinese women have benefited from government policies that prioritize leveling up their professional skills. However, on the output side, systemic barriers—such as lack of marital support and persistent cultural discrimination—remain unaddressed, preventing women from pursuing successful careers and fully realizing their potential in contributing to China's economic growth. As a result, many women who were denied professional opportunities were left to channel their knowledge and skills into family education, a focus that has gained prominence in recent years through policies such as the Five-Year Plan on Guiding the Promotion of Family Education (2016–2020).

This paradox underscores the dilemma the Chinese government faces in addressing both human capital challenges and demographic risks—two objectives that have become contradictory due to a long-standing policy deficit in social security and public health. This leads us to the discussion of China's demographic trends and the enduring double burden Chinese women face in balancing work and family life.

2.2 DOUBLE BURDEN: CHINESE WOMEN AT THE CROSSROADS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

China's unprecedented economic success during the past forty years or so was largely sustained by its demographic dynamics. Most notably, the surge of working-age individuals into the labor market in the 1980s and 1990s—a historical blessing driven by the high fertility rate of around six births per woman in the 1960s and 1970s—drastically reduced the dependency ratio, allowing the country to reap the benefits of a demographic dividend for nearly four decades.[50]

However, the one-child policy enacted in 1979, coupled with other major changes during the reform years, led to a dramatic decline in birthrates. By the mid-1980s, most urban families were having only one child. Time marches on, and by the 2010s China's largest working-age cohort had begun to reach retirement. With the size of the working-age population having peaked in 2011, the era of China's demographic advantage has come to an end. As of 2023, approximately 278.4 million people, or 30.73 percent of the Chinese population, are now aged over sixty, with projections indicating that by 2050, nearly 43 percent will surpass the retirement age.[51]

Population, once a key pillar of China's economic rise, has now turned into a significant conundrum. In a striking twist of history, fertility has become the most crucial and complex policy issue for the leadership of a nation that still holds the world's second-largest population.

Faced with the daunting prospect of demographic shrinkage, the Chinese government—once proud of its long-term planning—now finds itself scrambling to reverse its earlier policies by urging families to have more children. However, not every policy can be easily undone. Enforcing childbirth is, technically speaking, even less feasible than enforcing birth control. In 2016, China implemented a universal two-child policy; having little impact, it was soon overshadowed by the universal three-child policy, introduced five years later. Upon the introduction of the two-child policy, China's National Health and Family Planning Commission projected an additional 30 million working-age individuals by 2050, with some experts even predicting "a virtual traffic jam in newborn babies."[52] This initial optimism was soon crushed by the reality of falling birthrates. Despite a slight baby bump in 2017, China's birthrates continued to decline, culminating in the first population drop (850,000 people) since 1961, the last year of the Great Famine. The downward trend is persisting to this day: In 2023, the population fell by another 2.08 million, or 0.15 percent, in spite of aggressive policy efforts to reverse it.[53]

Studies in developed countries often attribute declining birthrates to factors such as women's increased education and labor participation, economic stagnation, rising unemployment, skyrocketing housing prices, inflexible labor markets, and advances in contraceptive technologies. In China, however, the challenges extend beyond socioeconomic factors to include institutional and cultural barriers, contributing not only to the decline in childbearing desire but also to the widening gap between desired fertility and actual completed fertility.

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Instead of offering sufficient economic and social support to alleviate the burdens of parenthood, authorities and policymakers have relied heavily on an outdated, campaign-focused, and sexist approach. Childbearing-age men and women are inundated with official slogans extolling the virtues of parenthood and framing family expansion as a patriotic duty. In some provinces, party members are being urged to lead by example, having more children to inspire their peers.[54] A few municipalities have also introduced onetime financial assistance for newborns, but the amount is minimal and falls far short of covering the actual costs of raising a child.

Above all others, single or childless women in their late twenties and early thirties have been singled out as the primary "culprits" of China's ongoing "baby bust," a narrative vividly reflected in the closure of once-overbooked kindergartens in densely populated areas. This discourse is compounded by China's severe sex ratio imbalance, with approximately 112 boys born for every 100 girls.[55] As an unintended consequence of the one-child policy, the male population now exceeds the female population by around 33 million, creating significant challenges for relationship-building, marriage, and care provision for future generations.[56] Under this pretext, women who choose to remain unmarried or childless—often derogatorily referred to as "leftover women"—have become the target of nationalists, who view childbearing as a "national duty."[57] This narrative not only unfairly blames women but also underscores deeper policy pitfalls, as the authorities fail to address broader systemic issues driving declining birthrates, such as the high cost of childbirth, lack of affordable childcare, and inadequate parental leave policies.

None of the government's recent pronatalist campaigns seems to address the enduring "double burden" Chinese women face in balancing work and family life, a challenge created by both the withdrawal of the state's protection of women's rights and the persistence of societal obligations that fall disproportionately on women. On one hand, women continue to shoulder substantial financial responsibilities for themselves and their families, with the communist work ethic of self-reliance and self-devotion placing equal, if not greater, pressure on women in the workplace[58]; but as their pursuit of career goals is often hindered by persistent discrimination in the labor market, many women feel compelled to delay or abandon childbearing plans in order to save their jobs. Even those who remain in the labor market after giving birth have to bear the "maternal penalty" due to the privatization of previously

state-subsidized childcare services.[59] On the other hand, patriarchal values and Confucian filial piety continue to impose heavy expectations on women, demanding that they shoulder the bulk of household duties, from nurturing children to managing the home and caring for elderly family members.[60] These multiple pressures, either overlooked or reinforced by state policies, place immense strain on women, stifling both their professional advancement and their childbearing potential, further exacerbating—and being exacerbated by—the country's demographic crisis.[61]

Women are bearing the brunt of China's new birth-encouragement policies, and they are becoming acutely and painfully aware of this reality. Instead of being empowered by policies meant to encourage childbirth, Chinese women are finding themselves marginalized, their autonomy undermined and their contributions to the workforce undervalued. The undeniable gap between policymakers' objectives and the actual impact of policies has angered many women, particularly those more attuned to gender-equality issues. Increasingly, Chinese women—including mothers—have taken to social media to voice their frustration, challenging the government's patriarchal framing of women's reproductive roles as a "necessary sacrifice" for national development.[62]

In summary, the compounded effects of the "double burden" not only affect women's well-being but also undermine the effectiveness of state policies aimed at simultaneously promoting economic growth and higher fertility. To make meaningful progress, policymakers must rethink the gendered assumptions underpinning their strategies and work toward fostering a more supportive environment for women in whichever path they choose to take.

2.3 THE GENDER POLICY DEFICIT: EMPTY PROMISES AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

In today's China, gender has become an issue of increasing societal contention and political sensitivity. As previously mentioned, the rising tensions among the state, society, and women as individuals regarding gender-related policies stem from a prolonged process of gradually abandoning equality as a core socialist value. However, the story extends beyond a mere lack of political motivation—it is also deeply intertwined with weak policy enforcement and flawed policymaking.

In a speech at the Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in 2015, President Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's commitment to safeguarding women's rights, declaring, "Women's rights and interests are basic human rights. They must be protected by laws and regulations and integrated into national and social rules and norms." Beyond making positive gestures on international platforms, the Chinese government has also introduced a host of national plans aimed at alleviating societal concerns and restoring women's basic rights. More than ten national frameworks set clear targets for the development of women and girls, including the National Human Rights Action Plan 2016–2020, the Population Development Plan 2016–2020, the Healthy China 2030 Blueprint, the 13th Five-Year Plan on Education, the 13th Five-Year Plan on Civil Affairs, the 13th Five-Year Plan on Poverty Alleviation, and others. The expectation is that through these broad and ostensibly

gender-neutral policies addressing poverty eradication, antiviolence, education, and health, Chinese women will eventually achieve equality with men before the law.

Precisely because these national plans are "gender blind," they fail to address the deep-rooted sexist social norms and gender stereotypes that perpetuate women's inferior status to men at every stage of life.

However, precisely because these national plans are "gender blind," they fail to address the deep-rooted sexist social norms and gender stereotypes that continue to bind women to an inferior status compared to men at every stage of life. These entrenched norms and stereotypes are also what prevent many "rule of law" policies from being enforced at the household level. For instance, hospital confidentiality policies regarding the gender of a fetus are often overruled by family members pressuring doctors to disclose this information; newborn girls are still being killed in home births in remote areas despite clear policies criminalizing such acts; women suffering from domestic violence often endure long and grueling legal processes to obtain a divorce if their husbands refuse to consent; divorced mothers frequently struggle to claim alimony due to poor law enforcement; and companies, though legally bound by antidiscrimination policies, continue to bypass labor regulations by omitting explicit male-preference language from job listings and instead perpetuating gender bias through résumé screening and discriminatory practices during job interviews. Due to these persistent gaps between policy and practice, few national plans have been able to meaningfully improve the lived experiences of women in China.

The Maoist period demonstrated how far the state's ideology and narratives had to go to even temporarily challenge the deeply embedded cultural legacies that relegated women to second-class citizenship. While Maoist egalitarianism was a radical attempt to integrate women into the workforce, it was abruptly discarded during the early reform years, when gender-equality policies were blamed for hindering economic growth and "liberating women before the right timing."[63] Both the Maoist and reformist perspectives, however, failed to grasp some critical components necessary for advancing women's rights and welfare. The ideal approach likely lies somewhere in between the two perspectives. Yet, rather than charting a moderate path by drawing lessons from both periods, today's official rhetoric seems to keep the chaff and discard the wheat—resurrecting traditional gender norms while demanding that women, who are left unprotected and unsupported, bear the same economic burdens as their male counterparts.

In primary education, textbooks have been revised to reintroduce traditional gender roles, now framed as part of China's millennial cultural heritage.[64] Through differentiated and stylized gender activities, boys are expected to embrace "manhood," while girls are taught to embody "feminine virtues."[65] It is no surprise that this reinforcement of gender norms is setting up future generations of women to face the same "double burden" of juggling work and family, with little relief from the forced choice between the two.

Recognizing that many national policies have failed to yield practical outcomes, the Chinese government has, in recent years, turned to gender-specific laws and regulations in an effort to

reverse some of the worst trends of gender discrimination. Flagship initiatives such as early retirement for women, extended maternity leave, and maternal benefits tied to the universal two-child/three-child policy were introduced to protect women in a competitive labor market. However, recent research reveals that these well-intentioned measures have inadvertently intensified discrimination against women. As detailed in section 3.2.3, these policy interventions have significantly undermined women's employability, as employers view these benefits as additional costs they must absorb alone.[66]

It almost seems that the more the state tries to "protect" women by imposing mandatory measures on the labor market, the less desirable women become to private employers, and the fewer options they have in finding a balance between work and family. Ultimately, these policies have done little more than deepen the dilemma women face, forcing them to choose between the financial precarity of motherhood and sacrificing career opportunities for the sake of having children.

While gender-neutral national plans often fail to address women's specific challenges, targeted policies that treat women as mere victims of labor or passive recipients of state protection can be equally harmful, as they further restrict women's choices. The core issue with these policies lies in their prioritization of women's reproductive roles over their economic participation. Yet this is a false trade-off. Women should not be forced to choose between these two essential aspects of their lives, nor should the state force this decision upon them. Instead, these objectives should be harmonized to simultaneously alleviate the productive and reproductive burdens, allowing women to thrive in both spheres. A profound shift in mind-set, alongside recalibrated policy design and execution, is urgently needed to achieve this balance.

3. GENDERED LABOR IN CHINA: HISTORICAL PATTERNS AND EMERGING TRENDS

During the Maoist era, women were incorporated en masse into the workforce as part of the state's mobilization strategy, gaining unprecedented economic rights, political privileges, and ideological prominence. However, as the Maoist doctrine faded, women's territory in the public sphere also receded. As China entered the booming reform era, women who had previously held formal employment were forced back to "where they belong." Relegated to a secondary and inferior position in the capitalist wage-labor market, working women who once stood as symbols of socialist progress now face economic deprivation, social discrimination, and a renewed dependence on patriarchal state structures. Instead of stepping into a new era, women have been pushed back into the past.

3.1 RECASTING WOMEN: FROM NATIONAL HEROINES TO DISPENSABLE WORKERS

Gender equality once stood as a hallmark of China's modernization agenda, with women's contributions to the workforce forming an integral part of Mao's national development

strategy. This approach, reflected in legislative reforms and political movements, was facilitated by the centrally controlled employment system.[67] At the local level, the state, as an employer, shared reproductive costs with working families, providing access to collective maternal care, on-site childcare, breastfeeding rooms, state-sponsored healthcare, public education, and so on. It was this extended provision of social services through work units that enabled millions of "iron girls" to shoulder the "double burden" and balance both the motherhood and breadwinning roles.[68]

Under socialism, policies aimed at achieving equal pay for equal work were widely implemented across all sectors and gave women additional incentives to participate in the workforce. It became a societal expectation that women would maintain a waged job, irrespective of their marital or childbearing status. In state-run work units (*danwei*), workers' salaries were determined solely by factors such as education, experience, and skills, with no formal gender differentiation in wage accounts. In urban areas, female labor participation reached over 90 percent prior to the market reforms,[69] and wage gaps between men and women were extremely small compared to global standards.[70] This principle extended to agricultural jobs as well, where wage disparities between men and women were relatively low.[71]

However, as China shifted toward a market economy in the late 1970s, many of the previous social agreements on gender equality began to unravel. Most disturbingly, women's wage parity with men was now being held against them, as female labor was openly blamed and accused of contributing to the low productivity of the socialist planned economy. This line of argument, advanced by some male reform economists, formed the basis of a loose school of thought known as the "outpacing theory." According to its proponents, women's expanding benefits and rising social status should only come once China reached a certain level of productivity. In other words, as part of Mao's utopian vision, women's "liberation" was seen as having arrived prematurely, just like China's socialist revolution, which was believed to have outpaced the country's objective socioeconomic conditions.[72]

The official narrative surrounding women's economic participation underwent a complete reversal. Women were now regarded as a superfluous, low-efficiency labor force, easily expendable for the sake of national economic growth. To justify the forced early enticement of female workers, patriarchal notions of femininity and Confucian family ethics were revived, with some even citing Japanese women's domesticity as a model for Chinese women to emulate, urging them to abandon work for the family.[73] During the unemployment crises that followed the return of the "sent-down youth" (*zhiqing*) from the countryside to cities, women who had held long-term factory jobs were suddenly "encouraged" to go back to their family caretaking role so as to "free up work" for younger candidates, even when those lacked experience or expertise.[74] The slogan "women returning home" became the proposed solution to the problem of "sent-down youth returning to cities."[75] This episode was later repeated during the mass layoffs of state-owned enterprise employees.[76]

As a result of the fundamental shift in societal expectations for Chinese women—from industrious and heroic "iron girls" to invisible domestic caretakers—China's female labor participation rate plummeted in the years following the onset of market reforms. Between 1976

After the reforms, social agreements on gender equality unraveled, with women's wage parity openly blamed and accused of contributing to the low productivity of the socialist planned economy.

and 1984, the gender wage gap was estimated to have widened by over 100 percent.[77] Many women were either pushed into lower-prestige jobs or entirely excluded from the labor market, reinforcing entrenched gender discrimination in employment. By the 1990s, it was clear that women disproportionately shouldered the impact of both widespread job losses and the increased domestic responsibilities resulting from economic transition.

3.2 EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DECLINING LFP IN CHINA: A SYNTHESIS

World labor economists have long observed that female LFP often follows a U-shaped trajectory as economies develop. In the early stages of development, women tend to exit the workforce as manual labor becomes less socially acceptable. However, as education levels rise and job opportunities in white-collar sectors expand, women gradually reenter the labor market, leading to a new plateau in female LFP.[78]

However, China's decline in female labor force participation diverges from this typical trajectory. Despite advances in education and more women entering the service sector over the past few decades, overall participation has continued to fall. Scholars have proposed various explanations specific to China, including the impacts of economic transition,[79] entrenched gender norms and workplace discrimination,[80] and the unintended consequences of pronatalist policies.[81] This section synthesizes both widely accepted and novel hypotheses, examining them within the context of China's current labor market dynamics.

3.2.1 Economic Reforms and Gendered Layoffs

Though macroeconomic policies are often cloaked in "gender-neutral" language, the structures they create disproportionately impact women. Since Boserup's pioneering work,[82] scholars have critiqued the male bias in development policies[83] and demonstrated how institutional structures perpetuate gender hierarchies.[84] Studies by Çağatay and Elson[85] and Karamessini and Rubery[86] reveal how policies implemented by governments to stimulate economic growth often have the unintended effect of exacerbating female labor vulnerability.

In China, the post-1978 economic reforms were initially conceived as a gender-blind strategy aimed solely at generating economic growth; however, their implications proved far more profound than anticipated, especially for women.[87] Most research has attributed the widening gender gap in employment to these very reforms, with reform-related gendered layoffs serving as the prevailing explanation.

To begin with, as a subfield of economic history studies on China's economic trajectories, a significant body of research within economic history on China's developmental trajectories highlights the shift from a planned economy to a market-oriented system as the key macrovariable behind the sharp decline in female LFP. Prior to the reforms, the state's promotion of

equal employment under the banner of egalitarian ideology led to near-universal employment for women.[88] Women born after the 1950s were the first generation to enjoy equal access to jobs and wage parity, boosting the proportion of women in paid labor for more than a decade. However, following the post-1978 reforms, the preference for hiring men over women surged dramatically.[89] As employers prioritized efficiency and profitability, women were increasingly viewed as less productive and more costly due to their reproductive roles.[90] In short, the reforms triggered an abrupt demand-side shift: Female labor force participation dropped as market demand for female workers declined.

In the 1990s, as China further advanced in breaking state monopolies and opening its markets to private enterprise and foreign investment, gendered layoffs of overburdened SOEs emerged as a prominent issue. Intensive restructuring of these enterprises between 1998 and 2001 disproportionately impacted female workers, with many forced into early retirement with little to no financial compensation.[91] A survey across seventy-one Chinese cities revealed that women constituted 62.8 percent of laid-off workers, despite making up less than 39 percent of the urban workforce.[92] These women often faced greater difficulty than men in reentering the workforce,[93] with mothers of dependent children especially vulnerable as prolonged unemployment frequently led to permanent withdrawal from the formal labor market.[94]

Why were so many more female employees laid off than their male counterparts during the restructuring of SOEs? In addition to traditional human capital explanations—such as women's reproductive costs, domestic responsibilities, physical strength, and lower professional skills—an often-overlooked factor is that the industrial transformation under the new development model placed women at a distinct disadvantage. Unlike skilled male industrial laborers and technicians who had greater experience in organizing collective actions, women, more often occupying administrative or secretarial positions, lacked the collective bargaining power essential to safeguarding their employment.[95]

This trend also sheds light on the steady decline in female LFP in recent years. As argued by Çağatay and Özler[96] and Kucera and Milberg,[97] trade liberalization often temporarily "feminizes" labor markets as global capital flows into female-dominated, low-skilled light industries such as textiles and apparel. However, such employment is often insecure and exploitative,[98] providing limited career advancement or bargaining power for women.[99] This trend became salient in China during the 1990s, when capital flows led to specialization in labor-intensive manufacturing, solidifying gendered labor divisions in the Export Processing Zones.[100] However, this brief surge in female employment quickly declined as multinational corporations sought even cheaper labor sources elsewhere.[101] This shift forced China to transition from labor-intensive, low-technology manufacturing—where women made up a significant share of the workforce—to technology-intensive industries that predominantly employ men.[102]

Following this line of thought, a significant group of feminist scholars view women's layoffs as a negative side effect of the socialist era, suggesting that gendered training and job

Where gender stereotypes once shaped job assignments, they now serve as the justification for layoffs.

assignments under the planned economy laid the groundwork for the widening gender gap that emerged during the reform period.[103] When state-owned enterprises transitioned from all-encompassing work units to profit-driven entities, auxiliary and service sectors—where women were disproportionately concentrated—were the first to be cast off. In other words, where gender stereotypes once shaped job assignments, they now serve as the justification for layoffs. Using the urban female labor force (more heavily influenced by state policies) and the rural female labor force (less so), Rozelle et al. demonstrated that the status of women in the urban sector fell further.[104] This was largely because women in urban areas had received more protection under the socialist agenda of gender equality, leaving them more exposed to vulnerability once those protections were dismantled. Similarly, Li et al. found that the gender wage gap remains smallest and most stable within the public sector, where institutional safeguards have persisted longer than in private industry.[105]

Finally, an emergent line of research has highlighted the prominent narratives and mass media propaganda during the mass layoff years, which portrayed romance, marriage, and household responsibilities as the natural domain for women, thereby reinforcing the unwritten rule that laying off women carried fewer social and economic consequences than laying off men.[106] Instead of viewing the decreasing demand for female labor as simply a by-product of economic transition, this line of research closely examines how the resurgence of traditional gender norms has lowered the opportunity costs of women exiting the workforce, thereby restricting women's labor supply. Thus, while none of the reform policies explicitly addressed gender, the overarching pursuit of efficiency and profit signaled a retreat from the state's previous commitment to gender equality. This shift not only empowered employers with the prerogative to "liberate Chinese women from harsh labor work" but also reshaped societal preferences, discouraging many women from pursuing work outside the household.

3.2.2 Traditional Gender Roles and Workplace Discrimination

The transition from a planned economy to a market-driven system dismantled the centrally controlled employment structure, granting private enterprises the autonomy to hire as they saw fit, regardless of broader social implications. With the new freedom of choice came the freedom of gender-based discrimination. As traditional stereotypes around labor divisions resurfaced, a theoretically gender-neutral labor market swiftly transformed into one deeply marked by gender disparities. Research adopting this perspective highlights and directly addresses the negative biases that obstruct women's professional advancement in the Chinese labor market.

Signs of rising discrimination in China are hard to miss, especially when we look at the evidence from large-scale surveys conducted over the years.[107] In a telling example, a 2009 poll by the ACWF reported that 51 percent of company management believed that "certain types of jobs are not suitable for women."[108] A survey funded by the Chinese People's Political

Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2014 further revealed that 87 percent of female university graduates had experienced some form of gender discrimination during their job search.[109] In the global arena, the World Values Survey revealed that 38 percent of respondents in China agreed with the statement, "Men have more right to a job than women when work is scarce," ranking China third highest among G20 countries, behind only India and Turkey.[110] More recently, a study by Focus 2030 reaffirmed that employment disparities are the most frequently cited reason for gender inequality in China.[111]

These findings align with other studies indicating a worsening bias against women in China's labor market. For instance, a survey in Jiangsu, China's wealthiest province in terms of GDP per capita, revealed that 80 percent of female respondents reported experiencing discrimination during recruitment, with employers openly expressing a preference for male candidates.[112] Additionally, Gao et al. conducted interviews with top female managers in China and found that they face significant obstacles to attaining and retaining high-level positions due to both organizational biases and structural barriers.[113] Zhang et al. further explored this issue in an experimental study on gender discrimination in the job market for recent college graduates.[114] By sending out fictitious applications for male and female candidates with similar qualifications, they uncovered a clear preference for male applicants, highlighting the substantial impact of gender bias on women's early career opportunities. Si demonstrated that even the expansion of gender equality in higher education has been insufficient to counter the adverse effects of persistent gender bias, primarily fueled by a deeply discriminatory workplace culture.[115]

Considering the internal inconsistencies within China's labor market, scholars have examined how gender discrimination intersects with other forms of bias, affecting various labor groups differently. For instance, the comprehensive meta-analysis by Iwasaki and Ma confirms that the wage gap between men and women is particularly pronounced in rural areas and the private sector.[116] Analyzing Chinese Household Income Project (CHIP) survey data from 2007 to 2013, Ma and Li observed that while employment conditions improved for nonmigrant women, the relative position of female migrant workers worsened, even after accounting for other factors.[117] Similarly, Ma found that differences in wage returns to endowment factors—the economic benefits individuals receive based on their qualifications, skills, experience, or other productivity-related attributes—significantly contributed to the wage gap between Han men and ethnic minority women from 2002 to 2018, suggesting that workplace discrimination against women may be more severe than that against ethnic minorities in China.[118]

Finally, an emerging group of researchers have applied wage-decomposition analyses to explore the factors behind pay disparities between men and women, highlighting the extent of gender discrimination. Their findings show that the gender wage gap remains largely "unexplained," indicating that women with comparable socioeconomic backgrounds to men continue to earn less due to entrenched gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices in hiring and compensation.[119] As a consequence of this long-standing systematic discrimination against women, employers continue to view women as more easily replaceable or disposable workers, further disadvantaging them during China's current economic downturn.[120]

3.2.3 Protection Backfired: The Fallout of Gender-Insensitive Policies

The structural adjustments in China's economy have had profoundly gendered outcomes, even if this was not the original intent. Unfortunately, the policy responses intended to address declining female LFP and widening gender gaps have acted more as poison than remedy. In section 2.3, I highlighted three well-intentioned but ultimately flawed policies designed to "protect and enhance women's benefits": early retirement for women, extended maternity leave, and maternal benefits linked to the universal two-child/three-child policy. I will now explore these policies in greater detail.

It is a widespread practice for the statutory retirement age to be lower for women than for men in many countries.[121] Early retirement for women is also more socially acceptable, due in part to social norms that place undue emphasis on women's appearance, leading to their being perceived as "old" at a younger age and suffering more severe age discrimination compared to men.[122] In China, this age-based discrimination against women is institutionalized through a retirement system that forces women to retire earlier than their male counterparts. Since 1951, China has enforced a mandatory retirement age across all sectors: Men retire at sixty; female senior officials, professionals, and technicians at fifty-five; and other female workers at fifty. While early retirement for women was initially framed as a "social compensation" for a group perceived as biologically disadvantaged, it has inadvertently become a significant driver of the decline in female labor force participation and in women's financial benefit and social welfare. As China faces a rapidly aging population, the unintended consequences of this policy have been amplified, with a larger proportion of older female workers being funneled into an ageist and sexist retirement system.[123]

Maternity leave is another striking example of how well-intentioned policies can backfire. In 2012, China extended maternity leave for female employees from ninety days to ninety-eight days, aligning with the minimum standards set by the International Labour Organization (ILO). By 2021, amid growing concerns over the country's plunging fertility rate, several provinces and cities further increased maternity leave to up to 158 calendar days. Nevertheless, essential state services, such as subsidized healthcare for women and publicly funded daycare centers for working parents, remain nowhere to be found. Private employers, who are the primary source of employment in China, have little or no public support to cover costs such as maternity insurance fees, allowances, and hiring replacements during occupational interruptions. The underlying reason for this lack of public social security measures appears to stem from the government's reluctance to reallocate resources away from priorities such as national defense and technology. This situation is further compounded by the opportunistic assumption that traditional Chinese family values would lead grandparents to willingly take on child-rearing responsibilities.[124] Consequently, the extension of maternity leave in both 2012 and 2021 not only failed to achieve its intended goal of increasing birthrates but also further reduced employment opportunities and income for women.[125]

Finally, the two-child and three-child policies, enacted in 2016 and 2021, respectively, again aptly illustrate how poorly conceived policies can be both inefficient and harmful. As with other "maternal benefits," the added costs of maternal care and childcare fall primarily on

employers and working families. Cost-sensitive private employers have grown increasingly cautious about hiring not only single or childless women but also those who now have new quotas to expand their families. Women affected by these policies often find themselves compelled to either disclaim any plans for childbearing or risk facing managerial or legal repercussions should they decide to have children. Naturally, the most noticeable effect has been not an increase in the birthrate, but rather the further exclusion of women from the labor market.

As recent empirical evidence shows, the universal two-child policy has significantly reduced Chinese women's employment by 4.06 percent and decreased their labor income by 10.43 percent. Unsurprisingly, this policy has disproportionately impacted women under twenty-five, decreasing their employment by a staggering 23.99 percent. Given that these young women are also the main beneficiaries of China's educational progress, this drop reflects a particularly harsh "motherhood penalty" on the most well-educated and high-skilled groups (with a bachelor's degree or above), reducing their income by 29.59 percent.[126]

In China's highly gender-biased labor market, certain ostensibly gender-neutral policies have had unintended negative effects on female labor demand. For instance, research by Chen and Ge,[127] as well as Zhen et al.,[128] reveals that reductions in import tariffs were responsible for over two-thirds of the expanding gender gap in labor force participation. Likewise, protechnology and innovation policies, which dominate China's current economic strategy, have inadvertently reduced female economic participation (see 3.3.1). The root issue is that without a gender-sensitive approach, current industrial promotion policies have disproportionately impacted labor-intensive, low-skill industries that traditionally employ more women—women who faced structural barriers or were denied opportunities to advance in more capital-intensive sectors in the first place.

3.3 RED FLAGS: THREE WORSENING TRENDS IN CHINA'S FEMALE EMPLOYMENT

The overall female LFP rate offers a useful snapshot of the challenges facing women in China's sexist labor market. However, as an aggregate metric, it often fails to capture the varied impact on different subgroups within the female workforce or to shine a light on the most concerning trends among those in precarious socioeconomic positions. Three critical issues require immediate attention: the exclusion of less-skilled women from China's ongoing economic upgrading, the shift of less-privileged women into an expanding informal labor market, and the reversion of rural-urban migrant women from economic opportunities back to traditional farming and household roles.

3.3.1 Less-Skilled Women Are Being Excluded from China's Technological Breakthroughs

China's sweeping trade liberalization, rapid industrial transformation, and intensive push toward high-tech, automated industries have positioned it at the forefront of global innovation. However, few growth strategies have been developed with explicit consideration of how

these policies affect women's welfare in the labor market.[129] Similar to the earlier economic reforms, the current strategy of "intensive economic upgrading" has produced unintended consequences for women's economic participation.[130] Broadly speaking, the shift toward capital-intensive industries has raised employment thresholds, further limiting upward mobility for those lacking the requisite skills—a demographic where women are disproportionately represented.

As a core objective of the "Made in China 2025" plan, China is moving fast in propelling manufacturing industries toward "smart manufacturing" through clustering and automation.[131] Perhaps unexpectedly, this transition has disproportionately affected women, especially in "female employment ghettos" such as textiles and garment manufacturing, where automation rates now exceed 80 percent, resulting in substantial job losses for women.[132] With the disappearance of traditional assembly lines, the manufacturing industry is gradually losing its role in human capital accumulation. While a small proportion of *dagongmei* remain employed in automated factories, the majority of them have been rendered redundant, forced into the precarious informal sector or unpaid household work.[133] Likewise, women working in sectors such as waitressing, transportation, retail assistance, and entertainment are increasingly at risk of job displacement due to advancing automation and robotization.[134]

Women have also been caught in the intensifying currents of the international competition that China faces. While trade liberalization is generally perceived as a pathway to overall economic welfare, it often brings adverse distributional impacts to specific population segments, especially those employed in labor-intensive sectors. Much like how American blue-collar workers bore the brunt of import competition in the 2000s, Chinese female workers in export-oriented industries have become unintended casualties of trade reforms.[135] Empirical studies reveal that reductions in import tariffs lead to a relative contraction of female-intensive industries compared to male-dominated sectors in China. Yu et al. estimate that between 1990 and 2005, the 13.5 percent reduction in import tariffs increased China's gender gap in LFP by 2.49 percentage points, accounting for 65.2 percent of the overall increase in this disparity. Older women, particularly those aged forty-six through fifty, were among the most impacted demographic groups.[136]

Furthermore, the gender bias long embedded in traditional workplaces has spilled over into emerging sectors such as artificial intelligence (AI) and high-tech industries. Due to enduring gender stereotypes, educational disparities, and sectoral segregation, women have largely missed out on the benefits of expansion in these fields. Furthermore, their underrepresentation has also perpetuated a gender-skewed workplace culture, amplifying pervasive sexism.[137] Empirical studies in China reveal that systemic obstacles such as educational and skills gaps, lack of networking opportunities, work-life balance, and cultural bias make it particularly challenging for women to gain entry and thrive in these sectors, particularly during their takeoff phase.[138]

Many of the concerning trends mentioned above are often overlooked by Chinese policymakers, as it is commonly assumed that women are themselves at fault—perceived as

inadequately prepared or not flexible enough to capitalize on China's economic advancements. However, this perspective disregards the fundamental role of policymaking in shaping the structural barriers that hinder women's socioeconomic status. Without addressing the structural barriers entrenched in a labor market shaped by gender biases, Chinese women are set to miss out on economic opportunities or, worse, be sacrificed in the name of socioeconomic adjustments. For whatever reason, women are consistently more vulnerable to being pushed out of the workforce—a pattern that should be of urgent concern for any policymakers seeking to minimize human capital loss from such imposed exits.

3.3.2 Less-Affluent Women Are Being Pushed into Precarious Informal Jobs

As ironic as it may seem, for many women who have lost formal employment, retreating to unpaid household work can feel like a privilege—or at least the lesser of two evils. However, the more troubling and often overlooked consequence of their withdrawal from the formal labor market is the sharp rise in female participation in the informal sector. These women, unable to secure stable employment yet shouldering breadwinning responsibilities, are often compelled to take jobs outside regulated frameworks, where they face a lack of job security, legal protections, and access to essential benefits such as healthcare and pensions.

Since the 1990s, as China has accelerated its economic transition, informal employment has skyrocketed, closely paralleling the gendered layoffs from state-owned enterprises and the steady decline in women's participation in formal jobs. While some affluent women embraced traditional homemaking roles, many others continued to bear the financial responsibility of supporting their families and had no choice but to enter the precarious, unregulated, and unprotected informal labor market.[139] Additionally, a significant number of women who once held formal jobs also moved to informal work upon reaching legal retirement age, often earlier than their spouse did.[140] These positions—whether in formal settings but without contracts or casual, temporary roles like hourly cleaning—are typically low paying, part-time, and devoid of social security benefits.

Ma and Deng's analysis of data from the Chinese Household Income Project (2007–2013) maps this dramatic shift. Their findings paint a stark picture: Over the period, the share of "self-employed" rose from 24 percent to 42 percent, and "own-account workers" grew from 11 percent to 15 percent. Disturbingly, women accounted for 49 percent of all casual workers, even though they made up only 43 percent of the survey sample.[141]

A darker reality is faced by young factory girls who, after losing or leaving their jobs in manufacturing, are often driven into illicit activities. The gray sex industry emerged as a prominent issue in Chinese society in the 1990s and persists today despite strict law enforcement. In the outskirts of cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen, second- and third-generation migrant girls are increasingly turning to dangerous, unregulated forms of "self-employment," including prostitution and other sexual services. For many, this is not a choice of self-determination; rather, it is a last resort—a means of escaping what they perceive as the exploitation of factory work.[142]

The informal sector, though a crucial source of livelihoods worldwide, often places women on the lowest rungs of the economic hierarchy, a dynamic even more pronounced in China's gender-biased labor market. Poor, unskilled, and socially stigmatized women—particularly female migrant workers—are disproportionately concentrated in the urban informal economy, where labor law enforcement is weak or nonexistent.[143] Domestic work is the most common category, with approximately 90 percent of domestic workers being female migrants.[144] And when these women can't secure domestic jobs, they often face the grim reality of returning to rural areas.

3.3.3 Rural-Urban Migrant Women Are Losing Ground in the Cities

Today, female migrant workers account for over half of China's total migrant population; however, they also constitute a particularly vulnerable demographic in China's labor market.[145] Even during the Mao era's egalitarian movements, rural women were often excluded from the social services and equal pay benefits available to workers in urban state-owned enterprises.[146] The economic transition did open up new employment opportunities for rural women, leading many to migrate to cities between 1990 and 2000. This migration tripled the proportion of rural women engaged in off-farm jobs, from approximately 10 percent in 1990 to 30 percent by 2000.[147] However, these women continue to encounter more pervasive discrimination than both their male counterparts and nonmigrant women, especially in terms of job availability, wage levels, employment stability, and access to social welfare protections and labor laws.[148]

What's more troubling is that the disadvantage faced by female migrant workers cannot be fully attributed to qualifications alone. Gender, combined with rural residency (*hukou*) status, plays a significant role in limiting their opportunities. Using survey data from 106 cities, Qin et al. found that, all other factors being equal, holding a rural residency status reduced female workers' wages by 16 percent, while this factor was not statistically significant for male workers.[149]

Before the 2010s, the manufacturing sector had been the primary employer for migrant women in China. However, with rapid industrial upgrading and relocation of factories to lower-cost countries, rural women are increasingly marginalized, either forced back into agriculture or relegated to informal, low-wage service jobs. Their overall share of employment in urban manufacturing has steadily declined, from 43.4 percent in 2003 to 39 percent in 2012, while their employment in agriculture and water conservancy has steadily increased, averaging a 10-percentage-point rise over the same period.[150]

As opposed to the "glass ceiling" effect faced by more-privileged women, the "sticky floor" effect faced by rural women is even more concerning as it poses a threat to their financial independence and social mobility. As Mu and Van de Walle demonstrate, rural women who remain behind as other household members migrate face an increased workload in farm labor, reduced leisure time, and little to no enhancement of their decision-making power within the household.[151]

Rural women were among the last to benefit from the migration shift from agriculture to industry and services during China's early economic transition. Now, as the economy pivots from manufacturing to knowledge-based growth, rural women are, unfortunately, among the first to feel the impact. In the 1990s, as their spouses left for better-paid urban jobs, rural women had to bridge the labor gap without reaping equivalent benefits, ultimately making up about two-thirds of the country's agricultural workforce.[152] They have also largely missed out on arguably the biggest accumulation of residential property wealth in China's history.[153] It is all too easy to attribute these challenges to their supposed "human capital quality" (*suzhi*), a term many officials in charge of rural welfare often cite, but such calls for quality frequently serve to obscure entrenched social inequities. This hidden prioritization of ability and efficiency over inclusion and equality not only undermines past efforts to integrate rural women into more economically productive roles but also starkly contrasts with the government's narrative of a "people-centered approach" and "harmonious development."

Rural women were the last to benefit from the shift from agriculture to industry and services during China's early economic transition. Now, they are the first to feel the impact as the economy pivots to knowledge-based growth.

4. THE LIBERATED, THE TACTICAL, AND THE REBELLIOUS: WOMEN IN MODERN CHINA'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

Chinese women have never been passive recipients of their fate, nor helpless victims without recourse to resistance or change. On the contrary, since the founding of the People's Republic of China they have actively sought political power and a collective voice. From the ACWF to grassroots feminist NGOs to pro-women Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), women across diverse social strata and demographics have developed various strategies to combat labor market discrimination and assert greater autonomy and equality with men. These efforts have not only shaped feminist narratives in Chinese society but have also continuously influenced the state's legitimacy narrative through dynamic and evolving gender politics.

Individuals, organizations, and movements have actively shaped gender politics throughout modern Chinese history. Their interactions across three distinct yet interrelated historical periods—the revolutionary period (1919 to circa 1976), the reform era (1979 to circa 2010), and the postreform period (circa 2010 to the present)—have given rise to three generations of pro-women advocates. Together, they have defined and transformed the sociopolitical landscape, shaping what is now recognized as a phenomenon called "Made-in-China Feminisms."[154] Their experiences offer valuable insights for advancing gender equality in China's future—if such change is indeed urgent and possible.

4.1 THE SHIFTING LEGITIMACY OF ORGANIZED GENDER POLITICS

As is true of the feminist movements in most developed countries, the rise of "Chinese feminism" was a political and cultural phenomenon, deeply connected to broader movements for

social activism and enlightenment.[155] China's first feminist movement was born along with a profound intellectual awakening for both women and men. The earliest feminist voices surfaced during the late Qing dynasty from radical thinkers, social reformers, and revolutionaries who sought to inspire a "mentality change" across Chinese society. Among them, Qiu Jin stands out as a pioneering figure who wrote passionately on the sufferings of Chinese people under both domestic exploitation and foreign imperialism, while advocating for Chinese women's fight against patriarchal oppression. Her execution for treason embodies the powerful convergence of nationalist and feminist struggles in the formative years of Chinese feminism.

Gender in China has always been a deeply politicized issue, intricately linked to shifts in state legitimacy and changes in social institutions and norms. Over the past century, both the primary actors and the arenas for gender advocacy have evolved drastically. During the communist revolutionary era, women were represented as a collective subset of the proletariat, mobilized to fight alongside their male comrades. Later, they became a marginalized yet highly institutionalized constituency within the new regime, vying for legal and material resources within state-sanctioned organizations. By the 2010s, women had begun shedding this collective, monolithic identity, emerging as individuals with diverse voices that extended beyond the bounds of state-sponsored gender politics. The shifting dynamics between feminist movements and the state are best seen in the light of the power struggle over the legitimacy and narrative of gender politics in China.

4.1.1 Marxism Meets Feminism: The CCP as the Liberator of Chinese Women

In China, the promise of women's liberation has been closely tied to the nation's modernization ambitions since the early twentieth century, particularly following the May Fourth Movement in 1919.[156] At the same time, Marxism gained traction among Chinese intellectuals as a compelling "alternative remedy for China's problems." Gender politics, as a critical element of the international communist movement, took root at the intersection of Marxism and feminism, and was quickly molded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into a core component of its revolutionary agenda. Recognizing the mobilizing power of gender narratives over a previously silent political force, the CCP incorporated women's liberation as a core pillar of its legitimacy during its most challenging years. For decades afterward, the Party positioned itself as the liberator of Chinese women, embedding gender equality within its political ethos. The women leaders within the party, on the other hand, also envisioned modernity as achievable through collective labor and saw gender equality as an integral part of socialist ideals.[157]

However, the practice of consciousness-raising—a core feminist strategy—has had limited public presence in China due to political restrictions on organizing and collective critique. One notable exception is the work of Ding Ling, a writer and prominent member of the Chinese Communist Party who advocated for women's rights within the broader framework of revolutionary literature. In works such as *Miss Sophie's Diary* (1927), Ding addressed issues of sexual autonomy and societal oppression, masterfully weaving feminist themes into the party's guidelines and subtly critiquing the limitations of a strictly Marxist approach to feminism, which prioritized class struggle over gender identity.[158]

After coming to power in 1949, the CCP leadership continued to champion Marxist principles of equality, mobilizing women as vital contributors to economic productivity and nation building. Soong Ching-ling, the honorary president of ACWF and vice chairwoman of the People's Republic of China at the time, played a pivotal role in advocating for women's education, labor rights, and participation in modernization efforts.[159] Notably, this top-down approach often equated women's liberation with their economic utility, leading to policies that prioritized women's workforce integration as a prerequisite for securing their other rights.[160] For urban women, employment became a fundamental part of life, closely linked to their status both at home and in society. The term "housewife" (*jiatingzhufu*), by definition disconnected from social production, came to be a scorned urban social category and was increasingly seen as a relic of the past.[161]

While economic engagement was overwhelmingly framed as "liberating," it was enforced in ways that did not account for women's unique needs. With gender seen as secondary to class struggle, the focus on women's economic roles frequently sidelined issues specific to women, such as reproductive rights and gender-based social inequalities. As noted in the critique by international scholars such as Catharine A. MacKinnon on the uneasy alignment between Marxism and feminism, Chinese feminism under the communist revolution continually grappled with tensions between class and gender.[162] While drawing on both Marxist and feminist frameworks, feminist movements during the revolutionary era were required to align with class-centered state ideologies even as awareness of distinct gendered experiences grew. This tension reached a peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), when radical egalitarianism demanded the suppression of gender distinctions in favor of a unified revolutionary identity, often at the expense of femininity.[163]

Throughout the revolutionary period, the CCP's strategy of advancing gender equality by mobilizing women into economic production was grounded in the Marxist assumption that the material base shapes the superstructure: The more one contributes to social production, the higher their societal standing. However, this view proved overly simplistic; economic participation alone did not necessarily translate into genuine gender equality within the deeper social fabric of Chinese society. To complicate matters further, as the party leadership distanced itself from Maoist ideals and withdrew from actively promoting women's economic participation, the long-standing ideological alliance between class and gender unraveled, ushering in a new phase of gender politics in China.

4.1.2 Redefining Feminism: Gender Equality as Statecraft for Social Stability

The onset of the post-1978 reforms marked a clear break from the egalitarian framework that once defined gender politics in China. The CCP recalibrated its stance toward the Chinese populace, shifting its claim to legitimacy from a promise of equality to a commitment to national development—even if it meant tolerating rising inequality. As Maoist ideals faded, so too did terms like "class" from official discourse, which were gradually replaced by softer language such as "stratum" (*jieceng*) or "social stratification" (*shehuifenhua*).[164]

From the late 1980s onward, a new narrative centered on individual capacity, entrepreneurial ingenuity, and profitability under free-market competition took hold, while the state's commitment to gender equality was reframed as an impediment to economic productivity and increasingly marginalized. Some voices were bold enough to criticize previous gender policies as "helping women take from the socialist 'big rice pot' beyond the value of the quantity and quality of their work."[165] Gender parity, once superficially promoted through state-enforced female economic participation, was abandoned as if it were a bygone mistake.

Marketization and the removal of equality from official discourse accelerated a rapid sexualization of the public sphere, marked by the essentialization and naturalization of gender differences to "correct" the ascetic, degendered culture of the socialist era.[166] Rekindled patriarchal values emerged most visibly in the economically prosperous regions, reshaping China's gender relationships to underscore male dominance and female submissiveness.[167] In this new landscape, the market, incentivizing profit-seeking behaviors, aligned with traditional gender norms by commodifying women's sexuality, marriage, and fertility as resources subject to social competition.[168]

In response, the Women's Federations, after decades of operating within the state structure and building extensive grassroots networks for mobilizing and distributing national resources, quickly adapted to navigate these adverse changes. The ACWF top leadership continued to press for gender equality by invoking the founding principles of the Communist Party, arguing that gender equity remains essential—even within the framework of a socialist market economy.[169] This approach of holding the state accountable for its rhetorical commitments was not new. However, with the disentangling of "class" as the sole category for social movement, Chinese feminist organizations gained flexibility to address gender-specific issues more directly within the evolving framework of social governance.[170]

Second, in response to the mass layoffs in state-owned enterprises that disproportionately affected female workers, the ACWF expanded its counseling and support functions, launching retraining, referral services, and reemployment programs to help women reenter the formal job market. With the overwhelming shift toward profitability and market efficiency, women now needed to demonstrate their market value—often equal to or greater than their male counterparts—to avoid being seen as less productive or more expendable in a highly competitive job market. Thus, enhancing women's "human capital quality" (*suzhi*) became central to the ACWF's efforts during this time.[171] Additionally, pro-women representatives strategically engaged with state rhetoric and media platforms to argue that gender-based layoffs not only are economically inefficient but also carry significant social costs.

However, the ACWF's official ties to the state inevitably limited its scope of action. While it is widely acknowledged that discriminatory layoffs perpetuate a culture of undervaluing women's contributions to the economy, the ACWF refrained from pushing aggressively for legislative reforms or stronger enforcement of gender-equality policies. Rather than challenging the social injustices arising from marketization, the Women's Federations took on the role of molding women into "better" workers than men—a logic echoing the reformist approach to

feminism, where value is tied to productivity. Referencing President Xi's speech at the Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in 2015, the ACWF emphasized aligning its advocacy within the framework of the "nation's greater good." In this way, rather than foregrounding women's basic human rights, official organizations accepted a narrative in which women's worthiness of state support hinges on their roles as creators of social wealth, contributors to national development, and stabilizers of society.[172]

Under the guise of a feminist-state partnership, organized gender politics in China have consistently aligned with the national-development agenda and the regime's legitimacy claims. When equality was prioritized, the Women's Federations focused on mobilizing women into the workforce—even if it meant losing femininity. As efficiency became the primary goal, their role shifted to ensuring that women's issues did not disrupt economic growth or social stability. While their strategies for advancing women's rights have adapted over time, their function within the state framework has remained secondary and highly tactical.

4.1.3 Feminism as Diplomacy? China's Pro-Women Campaign and Its Limits

As China integrated into the global economy, pursuing national goals increasingly required careful consideration of international repercussions. From the 1990s onward—especially in the lead-up to joining the World Trade Organization—the Chinese government actively expanded diplomatic ties, leveraging international exposure and soft power to reshape its image as a reformed, open, and modern nation. Within this context, promoting women's rights emerged as a strategic tool to project a favorable international image and support the country's integration into the global market.[173]

However, the reciprocal nature of public diplomacy introduced not only an international spotlight but also exogenous influences on domestic feminist movements, likely extending beyond the government's original intentions. Support from international organizations, such as the Ford Foundation, the Asia Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation, not only provided financial resources to emerging grassroots NGOs in China but also equipped pro-women activists with theoretical frameworks and agendas focused on issues such as anti–domestic violence, reproductive health rights, and rural women's empowerment.[174] On one hand, these foreign-funded gender-focused NGOs tactically aligned with various official institutions, operating with a tacit nod from authorities; on the other hand, they offered valuable platforms for female university professors, lawyers, journalists, and local ACWF cadres to build transnational alliances and amplify the feminist agenda within China's public discourse.[175] Although the widespread existence of genuinely transnational movements remains debatable, the diffusion of gender-equal "global norms" has produced positive spillovers in many domestic entities, making them progressively more cosmopolitan.[176]

Since the 2010s, as social disparities and discontent have grown, Chinese pro-women activists have increasingly found themselves on a tightrope. While the Chinese state continues to pursue diplomatic leverage by making statements and promises aligned with global agendas on women's empowerment, it has sought to limit the proactive role of pro-women movements, carefully controlling the connections between domestic feminist organizations and global

civil society. The arrest of the "Feminist Five" in 2015 and subsequent crackdowns on social activism underscore a pivotal shift: The government's strategy of using women's rights as a symbol of modernity and progress has faltered. Instead, official rhetoric has turned to highlight the state's commitment to fertility-related social welfare while warning of the supposed destabilizing risks of foreign-supported pro-women activism.[177]

4.2 DIFFERENTIATION AND SOLIDARITY: CHANGING PATTERNS OF WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

Pro-women organizations in China have shown evolving identities and roles across different historical periods, adapting to changing sociopolitical contexts and challenges. In the revolutionary era, gender politics was inseparable from collective labor and socialist ideals. During the reform era, issues of gender took on new dimensions linked to consumerism and individualism, though traditional gender roles remained deeply ingrained. In the postreform era, gender has become a defining aspect of individual identity, shaping women's everyday experiences and diversifying the content of gender politics within China's rapidly shifting social landscape.

A closer examination of the emerging forms of individual resistance among Chinese women from diverse backgrounds and social strata reveals a shared momentum driving a collective shift. This shift has led some international observers to characterize it as a "new era of feminist awakening."[178] The following examples offer insights into the challenges faced by Chinese women and their resistance strategies, marking what appears to be the early stages of a resurgence in feminist activism in China.

4.2.1 Asymmetrical Impacts, Unequal Burdens, Varied Experiences

China's economic reforms have permeated every facet of social life. While intended to generate gains across the population, marketization has impacted women asymmetrically, offering opportunities for some while imposing significant challenges on others. As a result, the collective identity of women from the revolutionary era has unraveled, giving way to individual identities and approaches.

In rural areas, the onset of mass rural-urban migration exposed women of different age groups to vastly different experiences. Older women took on the lion's share of responsibilities, managing child-rearing and caring for the elderly while also tending to family farmland.[179] Younger rural women, in contrast, seized opportunities in township enterprises—particularly in textiles and light manufacturing—giving them an escape from poverty, physical hardship, and sometimes undesirable arranged marriages.[180] Many gained economic independence and a more comfortable life compared to their mothers and grandmothers, whether through factory work or marriages into more affluent households. However, with young women leaving for work in cities, their mothers and grandmothers became primary caretakers for their children, who were often left behind. This dynamic not only led to the social challenge of "left-behind children" but also deepened generational tensions within families.[181]

The age factor became particularly significant during the early "wild growth" phase of capitalism that marked the beginning of the reform era, when youth and beauty emerged as "assets"

for women to capitalize upon. With the rapid expansion of the commercial, service, and entertainment sectors, demand surged for women under twenty-five—a requirement often specified in job ads for roles in department stores, hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and so forth. Despite the evident sexualization and objectification, this shift offered young women a fast track to economic independence and upward mobility, provided they could "cash out" their time-sensitive human capital.[182] Whether desirable or not, the blend of consumerism and sexism that accompanied China's economic reforms deepened generational divides among urban and migrant women, drawing a sharp contrast between the opportunities available to younger women and the exclusions faced by their older counterparts.[183]

In the booming suburban private industries, new patterns of gender stratification developed across different enterprise ownership types, local administrative regimes, and labor-control mechanisms. The experiences of different women working for the same employer under similar management and producing identical products highlight how the policies of Hong Kong's colonial state and Shenzhen's clientelist state—both granting significant enterprise autonomy—led to markedly different labor market dynamics and management practices. In Shenzhen, women workers often endure overt, punishment-based control structures, reinforced by patriarchal local networks. In contrast, women workers in Hong Kong experience a subtler form of control, shaped by familistic practices that afford them comparatively greater workplace autonomy. As a result, working women find themselves cast into two distinctly different worlds, not due to inherent qualities but rather because of their predetermined socioeconomic, geographical, and cultural contexts.[184]

Finally, in major cities, the dynamics are equally complex. As state-sponsored childcare and education access dwindles, marketization and the "outsourcing" of domestic work have become normalized, generating new job opportunities while also creating a stark divide between urban women from wealthy backgrounds and migrant women from poorer regions who fill these roles.[185] While urban women pursue professional careers and aim for higher social status, migrant women assume their domestic roles, often for lower wages and with limited opportunities for upward mobility. In response, Women's Federations and NGOs have been working to elevate the status of these "maids" by offering certifications in home economics and other skills, though their efforts have made only minor strides in breaking the segregation of migrant women in the labor market. At the heart of this issue lies a structural dependency: The existence of such roles for migrant women is sustained by the growing income inequality that fuels the rise of the wealthy class.

During the reform era, Chinese women grew increasingly divided by age, location, and status—yet education remains a rare unifier across these divides. While progress on women's economic and political empowerment has been slow, the Chinese government has excelled in promoting equal access to education for women.[186] This advancement has been facilitated by the long-term impact of the one-child policy, which reduced traditional gender biases in family investments in education. Additionally, the national university entrance exam (*gaokao*) has had a gender-neutralizing effect by providing an objective, merit-based pathway to higher education, thereby minimizing opportunities for gender-based favoritism and ensuring that academic performance, rather than gender, determines access to universities.[187] As a result,

the education gap between men and women is swiftly closing, as seen with the post-1990 generation of women, who now surpass men in college attendance rates.[188] Within higher education, gender-equal norms foster worldview shifts, reinforcing women's sense of identity and confidence. For many women from less privileged backgrounds, higher education has also provided a pathway to transcending their socioeconomic origins, attaining new social status, and becoming integrated into urban economic and cultural life.[189]

Today, social media platforms are becoming another critical social arena in China, where women engage with new ideas, build social networks, and share experiences that challenge traditional gender roles and foster a sense of shared sisterhood.[190] This environment is laying the foundation for a new feminist movement that merges diverse individual strategies of resistance with a unified commitment to gender equality.

4.2.2 Turning the Tables: Women's Individual Strategies in a Gendered Economy

During the 2000s, in response to an increasingly discriminatory labor market, Chinese women across different social strata adopted varied strategies of resistance. Many engaged in collective action through organizations such as the ACWF and labor unions, seeking additional education and specialized skills to remain competitive in an evolving job landscape (see 4.1.1 and 4.1.2). Others, particularly among the younger generation, pursued individualized paths for survival and advancement. Rather than embracing the comfortable balance between career and child-rearing afforded by their financial abundance—often at the expense of feminist goals such as equal rights and liberation—an increasing number of highly privileged women are actively advocating for broader social justice and gender equality.[191] Despite differing paths, these voices converge around shared goals of justice and solidarity in contemporary China.

In China, strong organizational control over society by the state and the systematic positive incentives for compliance offered by the socialist economic institutions have severely limited collective action based on organized interests, as seen in the West.[192] However, a discriminatory labor market has pushed Chinese women to learn how to turn a perceived disadvantage into an advantage. Unexpectedly, certain workplace gender norms have, at times, worked in women's favor, offering unique paths to upward mobility.[193] While this may not be a lasting solution for Chinese women striving for gender parity, it does provide a taste of freedom and resistance.

For instance, long-standing stereotypes in the Chinese job market have frequently confined women to roles in secretarial, assistant, and supportive positions. Male students are generally encouraged to pursue studies in the natural sciences, while female students are often channeled into the arts and humanities. University language programs, especially, see an overwhelming majority of female students, as communication skills are stereotypically viewed as aligning with "innate" female qualities. Yet with the expansion of foreign trade in China, female candidates fluent in foreign languages have rapidly become highly sought after, fueling the emergence of a new elite group of young, urban professional women in multinational and foreign firms. With fewer career options available, many women boldly ventured into "high-risk,

high-return" private and foreign sectors, ultimately navigating economic shifts more adeptly than many men.[194]

This dynamic also holds true for female migrant workers. For them, working on the assembly lines in coastal cities serves as a path of "double resistance"—a means of escaping both economic scarcity and the restrictive demands of a patriarchal society.[195] While often subjected to harsh conditions under male-dominated management, they do not simply absorb patriarchal and capitalist ideals passively. Rather than accepting the traditional notion of being "girls waiting to be married off," many of these women take steps toward personal advancement by enrolling in weekend English and typing classes or saving money for future entrepreneurial projects. In their daily work life, they actively shape their female identities and assert agency as political and cultural subjects within the factory environment. They openly embrace ambitions and aspirations for financial independence and an autonomous "womanhood" in both marriage and family life. For them, what may appear as a devalued social role becomes a platform for newfound freedom and self-development. In other words, even within the constraints of factory production—where they are often hired for their lower social status—these women are constructing identities that transcend the confines of class and traditional gender roles.[196]

Facing a gendered labor market and constrained collective action, Chinese women from varied backgrounds crafted innovative and resilient ways to "capitalize on discrimination."

Perhaps the most controversial example of navigating the prevailing sexism and consumerism in Chinese society is among what some scholars call "entrepreneurial Chinese feminists"—women who strategically perform or highlight their sexuality to achieve economic security.[197] Rather than being defined by strict socioeconomic backgrounds, this group is united by a shared rejection of traditional marital expectations—such as submissiveness and self-sacrifice—in favor of cultivating their sexuality with strategic calculation and self-discipline. By consciously commodifying their appeal to maximize personal returns on the marriage market, these women practice what some view as a "revenge strategy" against male-dominated societal norms, reframing relationships and marriage as exchanges of "equal value" for financial stability, and therefore "evening the scales" with men. Though widely disapproved of by authorities and society at large, this form of rebellion against traditional female virtues can be seen as both a coping mechanism and a pragmatic technique in response to a landscape where opportunities for fair economic competition with men are dwindling, and women's potential gains as "marriage negotiators" are on the rise. Whether ethical or not, by turning a societal disadvantage into a form of entrepreneurial leverage, these women have fashioned a unique, albeit contested, avenue of agency and autonomy.

Facing a gendered labor market and constrained collective action, Chinese women from varied backgrounds crafted innovative and resilient ways to "capitalize on discrimination." By leveraging conventional roles, redefining personal aspirations, and rejecting prescribed marital ideals, they transformed perceived disadvantages into strategic advantages. Their varied responses illustrate a mosaic of Chinese feminism—one that stretches beyond traditional activism and embraces an individualized, adaptive form of resistance. Through a dynamic

blend of pragmatism, defiance, and tenacity, they reshaped societal expectations, expanded the scope of autonomy and empowerment, and, in doing so, laid a foundation for younger generations in today's China. As the next section will explore, personal resilience became as crucial to progress as any broader, collective reform.

4.3 PRODUCTIVE, REPRODUCTIVE, OR NEITHER: EMERGENT TRENDS IN THE POSTREFORM ERA

China's younger generations of women are growing increasingly attuned to the trade-offs between motherhood and career advancement. Having witnessed the professional sacrifices made by their mothers, aunts, and older sisters, many young women are becoming more cautious toward traditional family roles. The "only daughters" born between 1980 and 2015, particularly those living in urban areas, show a distinct reluctance to jeopardize their careers for childbearing. Confronted by state-driven pronatalist messaging while being deeply concerned by alarming reports of the risks and constraints that motherhood entails, many childless women are increasingly hesitant to take such a life-altering step.[198] Even among young mothers with one child, the willingness to have a second remains significantly lower than that of men, reflecting heightened concerns over the impact of a second round of maternity leave on their professional trajectories, despite policies aimed at assuring them of employment security.[199]

With fertility now elevated to a top national priority, a critical question has emerged: Can these younger generations be persuaded?

4.3.1 A Choice of Life and Death

The predicaments facing Chinese women of childbearing age have become a topic of growing concern and debate, sometimes even spurring policy changes. In 2017, a tragic incident brought these issues to the forefront: Ma Rongrong, a twenty-six-year-old pregnant woman, leapt from the fifth floor of a hospital in Yulin, Shaanxi, during excruciating labor. Her shocking suicide was driven by a deeply distressing reason—her family had overruled her request for a C-section, disregarding medical advice. Video footage capturing Ma, kneeling in front of her family, crying and begging for relief just hours before her death, went viral. This image resonated with and haunted many women, who fear losing the control of their lives simply by choosing to become mothers.

In response to the widespread public outcry, particularly on social media, China's standing committee of parliament, the top lawmaking body, began discussing a draft amendment to the Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law in 2021. If enacted, this amendment would grant pregnant women the right to choose an emergency C-section, even against family objections.[200] While this amendment would be a meaningful step toward acknowledging women's reproductive rights and autonomy, there remains a substantial journey ahead in ensuring comprehensive protections and respect for women's choices.

Chinese women's concerns are pressing and well founded, and so is the demographic crisis facing the country. Recently, the General Office of the State Council issued a notice on "Measures to Accelerate the Improvement of the Fertility Support Policy System and Promote

the Construction of a Fertility-Friendly Society."[201] This document outlines a series of fertility-support initiatives designed to address multiple aspects of family life and ease the barriers associated with childbearing. First, the plan aims to strengthen fertility services by enhancing maternity insurance, improving the maternity leave system, establishing maternity subsidies, and expanding reproductive health services. Second, it seeks to build a robust childcare system by improving children's healthcare, increasing access to universal childcare services, enhancing childcare-support policies, and promoting children's development and protection. Third, the policy prioritizes support in education, housing, and employment by expanding high-quality educational resources, strengthening housing support, and protecting workers' rights. Finally, the initiative aims to create a fertility-friendly social atmosphere by promoting a new culture around marriage and childbearing, along with social publicity and advocacy.

This all-encompassing policy announcement has sparked diverse reactions among Chinese netizens, with only a minority applauding the measures, while the majority—likely those most affected—express deep skepticism, anxiety, and frustration. Comments on Guancha, one of China's most popular online media platforms, vividly capture these concerns. First, many are doubtful about the enforcement and practical implementation of these policies, echoing concerns about "empty promises" analyzed in section 2.3. Additionally, there is widespread apprehension over policies such as extended maternity leave and job protections, which could, paradoxically, hinder career prospects, reflecting the unintended consequences discussed in section 3.2.3. The fourth proposal, promoting a "fertility-friendly atmosphere" through public opinion campaigns, has unexpectedly sparked a dramatic gendered divide, as men and women each worry about how state-driven narratives might impact them. Last, some families have openly declared their decision not to have children, pointing to their "richer fellow citizens" as more suitable to bear this responsibility.[202] Judging from these early reactions, there is little optimism regarding the impact of these seemingly ambitious policies, especially given the limited central budget and the worsening fiscal positions of provincial and local governments.

The challenges of China's pronatalist policies are compounded by the fact that the demographic group most expected to bear children also comprises a high percentage of the "only daughters" born after the 1990s. Raised by parents who often treated them as "equals" to sons, these young women have grown into confident, assertive, and competitive individuals, far less bound by traditional gender roles than previous generations.[203] Their heightened financial, social, and educational capital—along with the amplified voice they wield via internet and social media—marks a substantial shift in China's gender dynamics.[204] Notably, in response to pervasive gender discrimination in the workforce, many of these young women are investing in higher degrees to surpass male peers, adopting a strategic approach to secure a foothold in an uneven job market. This trend contributes both to declining fertility rates—or, more accurately, delayed fertility—and to the fact that female graduate school enrollments have now outpaced those of men.

4.3.2 The Rise of the Urban "Only Daughters"

The shift in the upbringing and socialization of urban "only daughters" has far-reaching societal repercussions beyond what the one-child policy intended. In employment, these women

have significantly higher expectations and ambitions for wages, positions, and prestige than women of previous generations.[205] The arrival of these well-educated, self-determined, and professionally ambitious women in the labor market has introduced a new role model for Chinese girls: the "power woman" (*nvqiangren*).

The term *nvqiangren* was once a pejorative label for women who, in seeking personal success or fulfillment, were seen as neglecting traditional roles as devoted mothers, faithful wives, or obedient daughters. Today, however, this term is evolving in the public eye, especially among young women. Amid rising neoliberalism and consumerism in China, portrayals of strong-willed female characters in "strong female lead dramas" (*danvzhuju*) are subtly redefining the ideal of a "good woman."[206] Female CEOs and entrepreneurs excelling in traditionally male-dominated, higher-paying fields have emerged as inspirational figures, fueling the ambitions of young girls increasingly drawn to careers in finance and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields.[207]

Despite formidable challenges in China's labor market, some female entrepreneurs have steadily approached the "glass ceiling." By 2017, women held over 6.6 million middle and senior professional positions, making up a quarter of all entrepreneurs in China. In the rapidly growing e-commerce sectors, women make up 55 percent of internet entrepreneurs.[208] Ironically, this rise is driven by the same forces that have pushed many less privileged women down the social ladder: two decades of privatization, marketization, and the service sector's expansion. What differs from the past is that with education-based knowledge reserve and parental support, these generations of "only daughters" are often more adept at seizing these new economic opportunities.

Going forward, as China continues facing rapid aging and industrial upgrades, the expected growth in skilled labor demand within the service sector is likely to open new doors for women. With a comparative advantage in the service sector,[209] skilled women are well positioned to capitalize on expanding opportunities in wholesale and retail, e-finance, e-education, e-healthcare, and other digital social services—fields where they already outnumber men.[210] While it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions about the gender-specific impact of AI development, there is reason to believe that those technologies could enhance women's employment by reducing labor intensity, increasing work flexibility, and leveraging women's comparative advantage in cognitive skills.[211] The gradual shift—from women largely serving as a "buffer" workforce to more individuals taking active roles in leading industries—hints that investments in women's human capital are beginning to yield tangible benefits, allowing them to thrive in areas that combine national growth potential with a redefined sense of individual "femininity."

CONCLUSION

Why is women's role as wage earners vital to China's future? The simple answer is that gender equality in the labor market aligns closely with national economic growth. Global evidence shows that reducing gender disparities in labor force participation can fuel economic growth,

boosting productivity, fostering innovation, and ensuring long-term stability and growth potential.[212] Beyond elevating a nation's human capital and productivity, increasing women's labor market participation brings positive spillover effects, such as greater investments in children's education and healthcare—essential drivers of sustainable development.[213] Conversely, discrimination in hiring and firing decisions leads to inefficiency, as less productive male workers are often kept over more capable female candidates.[214] At the corporate level, gender discrimination hampers performance by restricting the advantages that come with diverse leadership.[215] Women's economic participation is not just beneficial but essential, especially in a rapidly aging society undergoing significant economic transformation. Supporting women's role as wage earners could unlock their full economic potential, reduce dependence on state-driven fertility policies, and ultimately foster a more resilient, inclusive, and cohesive economy.

China's transformation from one of the world's poorest nations to a global economic leader is a remarkable success story. However, widening gender disparities threaten to undermine this progress. While Chinese women have made great strides in education, they remain underrepresented in management, and their entrepreneurial potential is largely untapped. Gender equality, then, is not only a social and ethical objective but also a vital economic, political, and strategic imperative for China's future.

China's gender politics have indeed followed a unique historical path that warrants closer examination. The Maoist commitment to egalitarianism created an extensive, though largely superficial, gender parity in the workforce, with the state assuming considerable childcare responsibilities to support this model. However, this formula was inherently unsustainable within the limits of a socialist planned economy that ultimately could not bear its own weight. When economic reforms began in the late 1970s, the state retracted its support for childbearing and left women facing burdens as heavy as—or even heavier than—before. Mass layoffs disproportionately affected women, who also faced intensified workplace discrimination and the conflicts arising from pronatalist policies that clashed with their increasingly precarious financial realities. Women who had once embraced the regime's promise of equality found themselves grappling with setbacks that underscored the gaps between ideological commitment and material reality.

As state-backed organizations such as the All-China Women's Federation face tightening restrictions on collective action, a new wave of resistance strategies among younger, more resourceful generations has led to the emergence of postreform Chinese feminists. Many of these "only daughters," who have tasted economic independence and professional fulfillment, are keenly aware of the trade-offs they confront and are not easily swayed by uncertain promises to relinquish their autonomy for an inequitable, precarious experience of motherhood. Consequently, Chinese women are now encountering mounting challenges in both breadwinning and childbearing that have contributed to the dual crises of declining female workforce participation and a reduced birthrate.

This report was born from mounting concerns about and critiques of China's prevailing policies toward working women; it thus seeks to offer actionable policy recommendations to

establish gender equity as a fundamental component of China's enduring economic vitality and international standing. To achieve these aims, the "double burden" on women—forcing them to choose between family responsibilities and professional growth—must be relieved. This requires recalibrating existing gender-insensitive pronatalist policies and exploring new, inclusive alternatives that encourage women to remain active in the workforce while also supporting their essential roles as mothers. Given that younger generations increasingly prioritize economic security, reversing the downturn in female workforce participation and closing gender gaps in wages, leadership, and entrepreneurship are pivotal steps toward addressing the country's demographic and economic challenges.

Many policymakers have advocated for strategies to help women balance work and family life, often recommending measures such as equal employment opportunities, affordable childcare, shared parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and fostering of a social culture that encourages men's active participation in household duties. While my policy recommendations will not solve all the complex, deep-seated gender issues in China, I aim to address critical gaps in existing policy. Through practical "dos and don'ts" (see table 1), I hope to highlight potential pitfalls, steering policymakers away from unintended consequences and toward a gender-sensitive approach that truly benefits the group that matters most: Chinese women.

My first recommendation for Chinese policymakers centers on redefining the state's relationship with women: *Don't* prioritize fertility over women's other fundamental rights, such as access to education, employment, social welfare, and political representation; instead, *do* focus on policies that genuinely empower women, creating a climate where they feel socially respected, economically secure, and emotionally confident enough to choose motherhood

TABLE 1 KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS CHINA'S WORSENING GENDER EQUALITY

DON'T	DO
Prioritize fertility over women's fundamental rights, such as education, employment, social welfare, and political representation.	Focus on policies that empower women, creating a climate of social respect, economic security, and emotional confidence for motherhood on their terms.
Rely on outdated mass mobilization and national campaigns rooted in public persuasion to pressure women into traditional gender roles.	Give voice and choice to individuals, reinventing the official narrative with sincerity, empathy, and consideration for women's real-life challenges and aspirations.
Delegate legal and fiscal responsibilities solely to local governments and enterprises.	Provide families with immediate, direct support through the rebuilding of a minimal welfare state.
Overestimate the transformative power of policies, especially pronatalist ones.	Prepare for a future marked by low fertility and aim to turn it into an opportunity for high human capital gains.

on their terms. This shift implies revitalizing a cooperative relationship between feminist organizations and the state, where existing, yet currently sidelined, semiofficial entities such as the ACWF can once again collaborate within the political system, fostering negotiation, mutual influence, and shared progress.

Since the beginning of the post-1978 reforms, women have been excluded from much of China's economic advancement and decision-making processes. Yet their contributions are vital to the nation's modernization, human capital development, and global standing. Marginalizing or undermining pro-women voices by framing them as foreign infiltrations risks creating an adversarial relationship between women and the state—one that could potentially lead to coercive measures if the government remains focused on increasing birthrates at all costs. To avoid this, it is crucial to promote a collaborative approach, halting illegal practices by certain local governments that attempt to incentivize childbirth through direct or indirect pressure. In the most extreme cases, this includes addressing the negligence of coercive practices such as abduction and human trafficking. By working in tandem, women and the state can make incremental progress on both economic and demographic fronts, reviving the mutually beneficial relationship that once propelled both gender equality and national growth during the Mao era.

This discussion leads directly to my second recommendation: *Don't* rely on outdated mass mobilization and national campaigns rooted in public persuasion to pressure women to "return to traditional gender roles." Instead, *do* give both voice and choice to individuals, reinventing the official narrative to reflect sincerity, empathy, and genuine consideration for women's diverse aspirations and real-life challenges. China's revolutionary period saw exceptional achievements in both gender equality and fertility, partially driven by collective campaigns and mass mobilization. However, that era has now been replaced by one characterized by individualism, material aspirations, and economic rationalism. Public persuasion and bureaucratic guidelines cannot address the complex, diverse demands of today's women, who are rightfully cautious about sacrificing hard-won economic opportunities for the state's idea of "natural happiness in motherhood." Attempting to push this ideal through state-led publicity efforts is not only inefficient but also deeply patronizing.

If a public campaign is necessary, official statements should move away from paternalistic and patriarchal messaging, rescuing and reintegrating elements from the egalitarian pro–gender-equality speech and, most importantly, acknowledging the often-irreconcilable conflict between productive and reproductive roles. The high female labor force participation and fertility of the Mao era were not achieved solely through ideological alignment with Maoist teachings; they relied heavily on robust institutional support systems that granted women access to employment alongside collective childcare. It is time to refocus on creating the structural supports that today's women need, rather than overemphasizing the role of persuasion.

My third recommendation addresses the need for effective enforcement and tangible support in pronatalist policy implementation: *Don't* delegate legal and fiscal responsibilities solely to local governments and enterprises; instead, *do* provide families with immediate, direct

support through the rebuilding of a minimal welfare state. Recent policy initiatives have shown promising signs of greater gender sensitivity, with proposals to enhance maternity leave, establish maternity subsidies, and expand reproductive health services as key components of pronatalist efforts. Encouragingly, some policies also address broader socioeconomic challenges, such as access to housing, education, and employment support, which impact both women and men.

However, for these measures to go beyond rhetoric and positively influence family-planning decisions, there must be concrete fiscal and legal resources readily available to every family at the moment they need them. This calls for national-level commitment rather than a "top-down decentralization" approach that places undue pressure on provincial and local governments as well as private employers. A shift toward a minimal welfare state would also imply a reallocation of the national budget toward essential social protections. In doing so, China would be empowering its future generations for a sustainable development.

My final recommendation is the most pragmatic and perhaps most cynical one: *Don't* overestimate the transformative power of policies, especially pronatalist ones; instead, *do* prepare for a future marked by low fertility, and focus on transforming it into an opportunity for high human capital gains. Empirical studies indicate that public policies designed to boost fertility have had minimal impact on both the timing and total number of births, and China may be no exception to this pattern, despite the government's Herculean efforts.[216] While the Chinese economy has undoubtedly benefited from a remarkable population dividend, this outcome was more a by-product than the result of intentional policy measures, offering no guarantee that such trends will continue indefinitely. In fact, the fertility decline China now faces is a common experience across societies with a similar economic trajectory and shared Confucian cultural norms, such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. While the cultural connection to fertility rates lies beyond the scope of this research, these cases do provide valuable insights on adapting to demographic shifts. It can be especially beneficial to look to their policy innovations, such as reforms in retirement and pension systems, expanded public housing and healthcare support, enhanced state-sponsored parental leave for both parents, and services to reengage older workers alongside recreational options for senior citizens.

While a lower birthrate may signal a fundamental demographic shift within China, this shift isn't necessarily at odds with its long-term goals of advancing human capital and enhancing the quality of economic growth. At a micro level, fewer births allow parents to invest more substantially in each child's education and development, creating a "quality-for-quantity" effect.[217] This enhanced focus on individual development could align with China's broader objectives of transitioning to a knowledge-based economy and fostering innovation-driven growth. Moreover, this demographic shift could also pave the way for greater gender equality by reducing traditional family pressures on women, enabling more equitable participation in the workforce, expanded leadership roles, and less workplace prejudice, thereby unlocking untapped potential within China's human capital.

The so-called demographic crisis in China may not necessarily be a crisis after all. However, it will reveal the vulnerabilities of previous developmental strategies reliant on the abundant supply and exploitation of cheap labor, while intensifying the challenge for the Chinese government to build an inclusive society that prioritizes the well-being of its citizens. Such inclusivity remains fundamental for any nation striving for enduring progress and global influence.

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Preferred citation: Dian Zhong. “The Silent Withdrawal: China’s Declining Female Workforce Poses a National Challenge.” Hoover History Lab, Hoover Institution. February 2025.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DIAN ZHONG

Dian Zhong is a research fellow at the Hoover History Lab specializing in the comparative political economy of development. Her research focuses on the sociocultural implications of China's economic reforms, with a particular emphasis on gender dynamics. She has written extensively on topics including political institutions, regime change, economic transitions, geopolitics of developing nations, and China's foreign policy in Latin America.

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