



Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Hearing on The Future of Women in China:  
#MeToo, Censorship, and Gender Inequality

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Testimony of Mei Fong  
Chief Communications Officer, Human Rights Watch  
Author, “One Child: The Story of China’s Most Radical Experiment”

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Merkley, thanks to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for this timely hearing ahead of International Women’s Day. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on the impact of China’s population planning policies, and the effect it has had on the women of China and beyond.

The one-child policy began in 1980 and shaped China’s population for over three decades, before it was replaced in rapid succession with the two-child policy in 2016, and the three-child policy in 2021.

This sudden about-face from a “Have Just One Child” to “Have One More Child” is an attempt to redress the consequences of a ruinous and inhumane policy that was also economically short-sighted. China’s birth rate has now plunged to its [lowest](#) in 70 years, curbing future growth prospects and leading to a variety of social ills.

The one-child policy has also created a hugely [imbalanced](#) population. There are now about 30 million single men in China and [more Chinese retirees](#) than the population of Western Europe. With a shrinking workforce, China is already facing pension shortfalls—currently [\\$540 billion](#), according to China’s Academy of Social Science.

While working as a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, and researching my [book](#), I heard many stories about the one-child policy’s chilling effect. I spoke with women forced to have abortions as late as seven months into their pregnancy; officials describing how they cornered and chased pregnant women like prey, and mothers who recounted heartbreaking acts of abandonment and infanticide.

Now the Chinese state's switch to purportedly pro-natal policies have inflicted new wounds on women.

Since the introduction of the two-child policy, Human Rights Watch has documented a rise in [pregnancy-related discrimination](#) against women in the workplace. Employers now fear that women can potentially take two and now three maternity leaves, not just one as in the one-child era. Some companies have sought to avoid this through job ads, interviews and workplace treatment that discriminate against women with no children, or just one child—or simply discriminate against all women. Women have been fired for getting pregnant, or have been asked to sign agreements pledging not to have children. While such practices are illegal under Chinese law, enforcement is lax and the avenues for redress and compensation so few that such practices remain largely unchecked.

Elsewhere, Beijing's early approach to a demographic decline appear to be more stick than carrot, with growing curbs on divorce and abortion—both human rights abuses.

Last month, the government-backed China Family-Planning Association said it would [reduce unplanned pregnancies and abortions](#) among adolescents and single women. This follows tightened overall [restrictions on abortions](#) in 2018—with increased bureaucratic measures for those seeking these services. Several media reports have also reported on a clampdown on vasectomies.

Authorities have said these moves are motivated by welfare concerns but such explanations have been met with suspicion and in some cases derision on Chinese internet, given the state's long history of coercive practices on birth matters. It is important to note that these still continue for many Uyghurs in China, with [forced sterilizations](#) on women held in “political reeducation” camps. In 2017, a phrase began to crop up in government documents related to family planning in Xinjiang: “severely attack behaviors that violate family planning.”

Last but certainly not least—it is not only the women of China who have borne the brunt of Beijing's coercive population planning practices. The one-child policy caused a shortage of women and hence, a surge in bride trafficking in China, as well as from so-called source countries across the region including Myanmar, North Korea, Cambodia and Pakistan. Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) how hundreds of women and girls in Myanmar are sold to Chinese families as brides for US\$3000-\$13,000 and held in sexual slavery for years, with some women trafficked more than once. Once purchased, they are held in sexual slavery and pressured to produce babies as quickly as possible.

Given this situation, Human Rights Watch offers the following recommendations:

- Chinese authorities should fully enforce legal prohibitions against gender and pregnancy-based discrimination in employment.

- The Chinese government should fully respect reproductive rights--and stop regulating the number of children families are allowed to have, stop pressuring women to have children,

provide free access to safe and legal abortion and contraception, and ensure equitable caregiver leave policies.

- The Chinese government should make it a priority to halt both internal and transnational trafficking of women and girls for sale as brides in China, through prevention and enforcement efforts and providing services to survivors and those at risk, in collaboration with source countries in the region.

- The US government should call on the Chinese government to lift all restrictions on reproductive rights, urge allies and partners to do the same, and to do more to end human trafficking of women and girls.

- US companies doing business in China should ensure they are not engaged in or partnering with companies that engage in discriminatory employment practices.

- The US should assist countries that have become source countries for “bride trafficking” to China with technical assistance and resources to work to end this abuse.