

**AN ONGOING “GENDER AWAKENING”:  
CHANGING GENDER ROLES  
IN CHINESE SOCIETY**

SHAN Wei & CHUA Jing Yee

*EAI Background Brief No. 1741*

## Executive Summary

1. Debates on gender issues in China have seen a noticeable increase, particularly on Chinese social media where topics such as women's stereotypes and their representation in popular culture, including literature, movies and TV shows, have gained prominence.
2. Feminist movements have gained momentum in society. Initiatives to address gender discrimination and #MeToo movements are examples of the growing advocacy for gender equality.
3. These recent developments may represent fundamental changes in Chinese societal values and norms. Public opinion surveys are valuable tools for highlighting these changes.
4. Survey data show that younger generations, male and female alike, are more supportive of gender equality than older generations. However, the gap between men and women on gender issues has widened among younger generations.
5. Chinese respondents generally agree that men should shoulder half of household responsibilities. Younger generations are more inclined to affirm that women can have a career beyond family and marriage.
6. They are also more likely to disagree that men make better political leaders than women and more inclined to hold the belief that women should have equal rights as men in university education and employment.
7. Younger people are less likely to associate childbirth primarily with elderly care, filial piety and societal obligations. Women, more than men, tend to view childbearing as contributing to individual happiness.

8. While the Chinese government allows limited discussion on gender issues, it continues to restrict feminist movements and steer younger generations towards traditional family values. How effective such policies are remains uncertain.

# AN ONGOING “GENDER AWAKENING”: CHANGING GENDER ROLES IN CHINESE SOCIETY

SHAN Wei & CHUA Jing Yee\*

## Gender Issues on the Rise in China

- 1.1 Identity politics has emerged as a prominent political concern in Western societies. Discussions on subjects like race, ethnicity, immigration, gender, sexual orientation, social background and social class have intensified, even becoming central themes in national elections in both the United States and European countries. This phenomenon is seen as a consequence of economic development, leading to shifts in values across different generations.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.2 China has experienced four decades of market reform and increased engagement with the global community. These identity-related issues are also surfacing in Chinese society. However, stringent social control measures have largely stifled these identity issues, with gender-related matters being the sole topic that has seen some degree of open discussion and action over the past decade. This may be because women’s liberation and gender equality were once goals of the Chinese Communist revolution.
- 1.3 Chinese feminism movements have been on the rise in recent years. Workplace equality, sexual harassment and domestic violence are now at the centre of women’s rights discussion and advocacy for legal reforms. Prominent examples include the “Blood Brides” on Valentine’s Day of 2012,<sup>2</sup> a group of young women who marched in wedding gowns splashed with fake blood to raise awareness on domestic violence, and the “Feminist Five” activists who planned to place stickers on public

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<sup>1</sup> Inglehart, Ronald. *Culture shift in advanced industrial society*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/695889.shtml>, accessed October 2023.

transport to draw attention to sexual harassment in public transportation on the eve of International Women's Day in 2015.<sup>3</sup>

- 1.4 Following the global #MeToo movement—China's #MeToo movement took off in January 2018—a number of sexual harassment cases involving university campus and entertainment has been exposed. The hashtag #MeTooInChina on Weibo, the largest social media platform in China, had garnered almost 4.5 million clicks in two weeks, and its alternative tag 'rice bunny' which is a homophone for MeToo in Mandarin amassed five million clicks on Weibo before it was censored.<sup>4</sup>
- 1.5 Social platforms like Weibo, WeChat and Douban are filled with extensive discussions of gender discrimination, gender roles and stereotypes in popular culture. For years, Weibo users have questioned the use of terms such as 'female drivers' in trending discussions, insinuating that female drivers are more susceptible to accidents. They argue that this perpetuates gender stereotypes and introduces discrimination.<sup>5</sup> The gender perspective has become an important analytical lens in online discussions on many movies and TV programmes. The Hollywood blockbuster 'Oppenheimer', a biography of a male scientist that began screening in summer 2023, generated heated discussions on the marginalisation of female roles and lack of female autonomy when depicting history in movies and popular culture.<sup>6</sup>
- 1.6 These new developments may exhibit that Chinese society is undergoing a "gender awakening", a shift in awareness and recognition of gender-related issues and the evolving roles of women in society. Women began to reflect on their positions in families and society, paying more attention to their rights; men also started to join

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<sup>3</sup> Tania Branigan, "Five Chinese feminist held international women's day", *The Guardian*, 12 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/five-chinese-feminists-held-international-womens-day>, accessed October 2023.

Jinyan Zeng, "China's feminist five: 'This is the worst crackdown on lawyers, activists and scholars in decades'", *The Guardian*, 17 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/apr/17/chinas-feminist-five-this-is-the-worst-crackdown-on-lawyers-activists-and-scholars-in-decades>, accessed October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/sexual-misconduct/chinese-feminists-push-metoo-movement-amid-censorship-n870081>, accessed October 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Shu, Research on stereotypes of female drivers on Weibo: using the example of 'female drivers', *Journal of News Research* (xinwen yanjiu daokan), 2017(13):284-284.

<sup>6</sup> <https://movie.douban.com/review/15435526/>, accessed October 2023.

in this reflection, understanding women's demands for equal rights.<sup>7</sup> This signifies profound changes in values and norms in Chinese society.

- 1.7 Public opinion surveys conducted in China can help to describe and analyse the changing values of Chinese society. The China Family Panel Survey (CFPS) conducted in 2020 and the World Values Survey (WVS) in 2018 asked respondents how they perceive women's roles in households and society, and the purpose of childbearing. The surveys found that younger generations in China are more supportive of equitable gender roles and changing gender norms in family and work. On the other hand, the gender gap on gender issues is more evident among the younger generations.
- 1.8 Most Chinese respondents agree that men should share half of household responsibilities. Younger respondents are more open to women pursuing careers beyond family and marriage, more averse to the notion that men make better political leaders, and more receptive to having equal gender rights to university education and employment. Younger people are also less likely to associate the purpose of childbirth with elderly care, filial piety and social responsibilities.
- 1.9 Structural factors in Chinese society, including women's participation in the labour force, urbanisation, education and family structure, may contribute to these changes. The state policy in the 1950s had promoted Chinese women participation in the labour force, as encouraged by Chairman Mao's rhetoric of "women hold up half the sky".<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, female labour force participation in China was 84%, exceeding that of OECD countries and maintained close parity between men and women in terms of wage, professional positions and higher education.<sup>9</sup> After the launch of market reform, China's female labour force participation has fallen to 61.1% in 2023, still comparable to the 66% achieved by OECD countries.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_22163221](https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_22163221), accessed October 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Wang, Z (2005). State feminism? Gender and socialist state formation in Maoist China. *Feminist Studies*, 31(3), 519–551. <https://doi-org.libproxy1.nus.edu.sg/10.2307/20459044>, accessed October 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Li, H Z, Fraumeni, B M, Kui, Z Q and Wang, X J (2009). Human capital in China (NBER Working Paper No. 15500). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w15500/w15500.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w15500/w15500.pdf), accessed October 2023.

- 1.10 The past three decades have witnessed rapid urbanisation. Since 1990, the percentage of residents residing in cities had increased from 26.4% to 64% in 2020.<sup>10</sup> In 2022, there were 132.56 million rural migrant workers living in cities, with female constituting 41.7%.<sup>11</sup> In the same period, the population with high school education or higher had nearly doubled from 8,039 per hundred thousand to 15,088 per hundred thousand, while the population with college education increased 10-fold from 1,422 per hundred thousand to 15,467 per hundred thousand.<sup>12</sup>
- 1.11 On the other hand, China's long-standing one-child policy has profoundly changed Chinese family structure. Many are one-child families, which have led to the concentration of family investment and education opportunities on girls in singleton families. Traditional practices of relying on sons for old-age support have been challenged. As a single child, daughters are increasingly taking on the responsibility of supporting their biological parents.<sup>13</sup> The increased intergenerational investment and educational opportunities have allowed women to enjoy financial independence and fulfil career ambitions, as well as take on parental expectations for professional success.

### **Women's Role in Household Versus Career**

- 2.1 In traditional societies, it is a norm for women to stay at home and be responsible for housekeeping and childbearing duties. Economic growth and technological advancements have enabled female participation in the labour force.<sup>14</sup> An ongoing discourse on gender issues is the balance between women's role in the household and their potential for career advancement.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://data.stats.gov.cn/english/easyquery.htm?cn=C01>, accessed October 2023.

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.gov.cn/lianbo/2023-04/28/content\\_5753682.htm](https://www.gov.cn/lianbo/2023-04/28/content_5753682.htm), accessed October 2023.

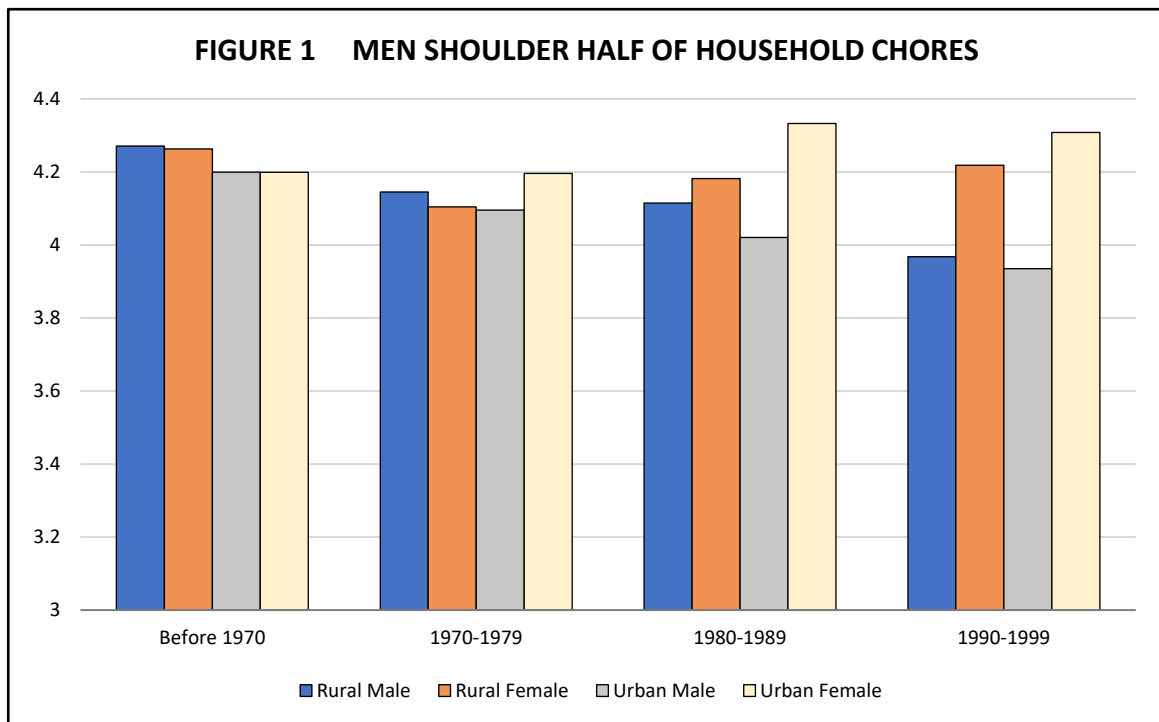
<sup>12</sup> <https://data.stats.gov.cn/english/easyquery.htm?cn=C01>, accessed October 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Hu, Yang and Shi, Xuezhu (2018) The impact of China's one-child policy on intergenerational and gender relations. *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*. ISSN 2158-2041 DOI: 10.1080/21582041.2018.1448941.

<sup>14</sup> Goldin, Claudia. *Career and family: Women's century-long journey toward equity*. Princeton University Press, 2021.

## Gender division in household chores

2.2 The CFPS survey asked respondents if men should shoulder half of household chores.<sup>15</sup> Figure 1 presents the results by genders in different age groups, in urban and rural areas respectively, based on a 1-5 scale, where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 5 indicates “strongly agree”. As scores average above 3.5, the respondents generally agree that men should share chores equally with women. Younger respondents showed larger disparity between the genders, with women agreeing more strongly than men that household chores should be shared equally. The economic development and labour mobilisation of China have created a consensus for an equal division of housekeeping responsibilities.



## Labour division between genders

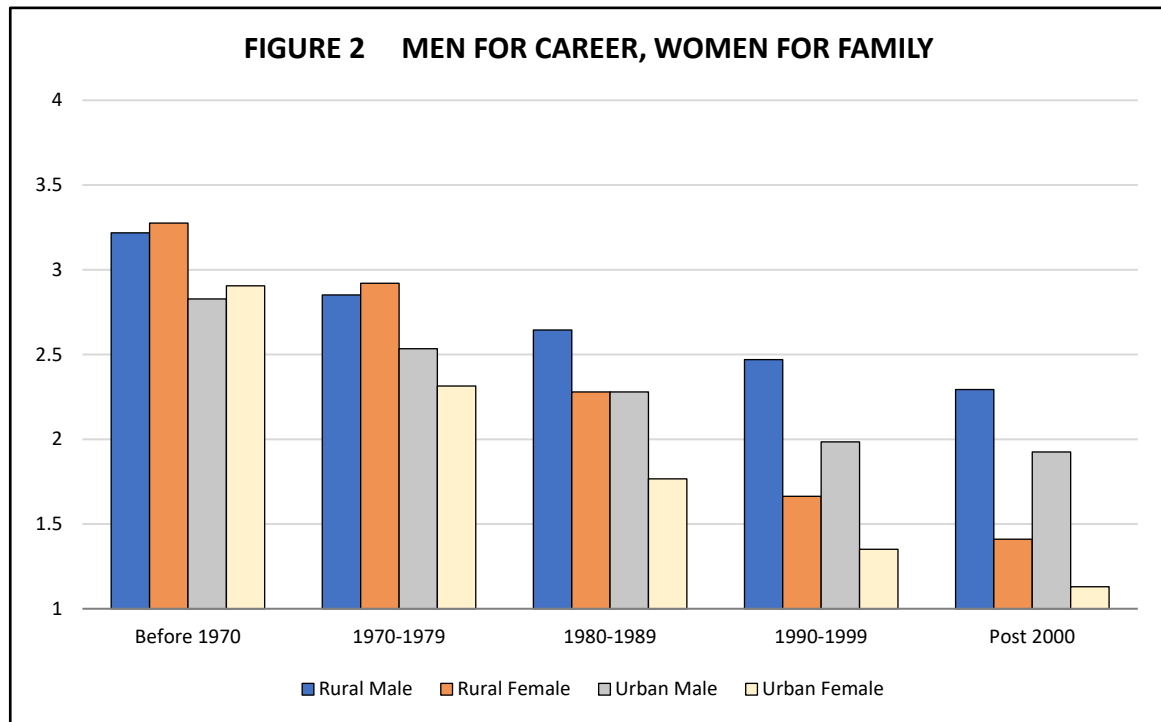
2.3 The CFPS survey asked respondents how much they agree with the statement “men should prioritise their careers, women should prioritise their families” on a scale of 1-5.<sup>16</sup> Figure 2 shows that most age groups score below 3, indicating a general

<sup>15</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020.



acceptance of women’s career role. More older respondents than younger respondents agree with the statement.<sup>17</sup> There is a bigger disparity between two genders in the younger groups, indicating that the younger women in both rural and urban regions have more progressive view on gender roles. China’s modernisation and one-child policy have increased access to higher education and employment opportunities for women, which allows women to develop career ambitions and be subjected to expectations in career success.



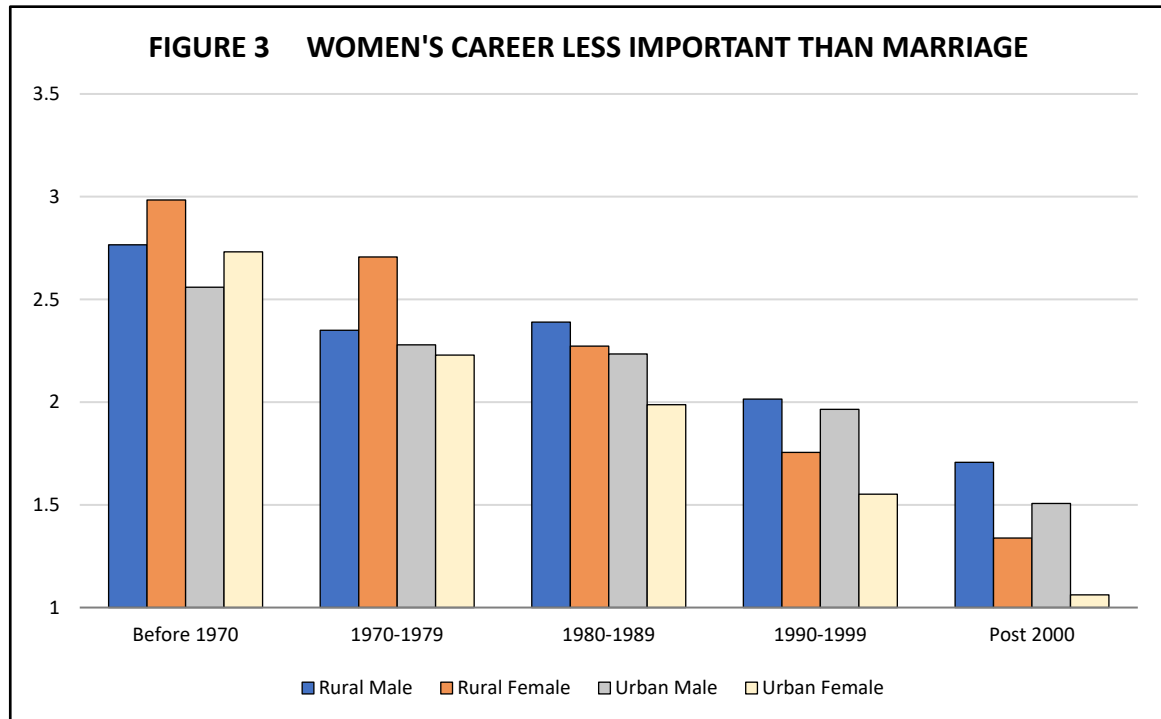
### Women’s career versus marriage

2.4 When asked if they agree with the statement that ‘a women’s success in her career is not as important as marrying well’, Figure 3 shows that Chinese respondents generally do not agree that a woman’s career is less important than marriage, as the scores are below 3 on a 1-5 scale.<sup>18</sup> More younger respondents than older respondents disagree with the statement, reflective of a different value system

<sup>17</sup> Figures 1-4 and Figure 8 are based on survey questions posed to respondents older than 16 years old in the 2020 CFPS survey. A significant group born between 2000 and 2004 has been included in the analysis, which constitutes the age group ‘post-2000’. Data for ‘post 2000’ are mostly missing values and hence omitted from Figure 1. For other figures, survey questions were asked of those born before 2000.

<sup>18</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020.

across generations in a woman’s duty in family and marriage; younger respondents do not view marriage as the most important part of women’s lives. Notably, there is no significant gender disparity within all age groups.



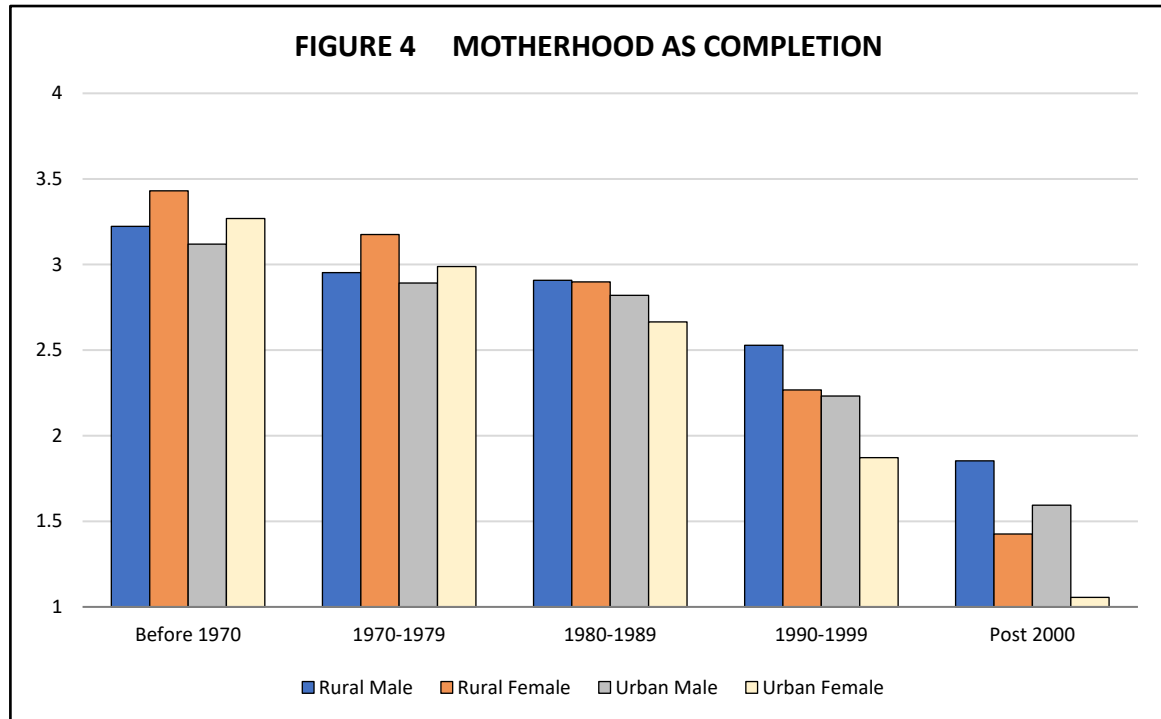
2.5 Changing perceptions of marriage and career in a woman’s life are the results of increasing financial independence and career ambitions that allow women to take on roles outside the traditional roles of caregivers and homemakers for the family. Since family nucleus has become smaller and more family income is now vested in women’s education and career, this reduces the need for reliance on marriage and male counterparts to provide income to support the family.

Motherhood as completion

2.6 The CFPS survey asked respondents how much they agree with the statement that ‘women need to have children to be considered complete’ on a range of 1-5.<sup>19</sup> Figure 4 shows the relationship between age and motherhood as a purpose in women’s lives. Younger respondents are more open to the view that women can have fulfilled lives without motherhood. Notably, the average score of the youngest urban female

<sup>19</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020.

group is 1.05, indicating that almost everyone in the group strongly disagrees with the statement, which implies a potential challenge to the Chinese government's policies of boosting fertility rates. This reflects the impact of urbanisation and modernisation that introduced more progressive perspectives on gender norms and options for women outside of motherhood.



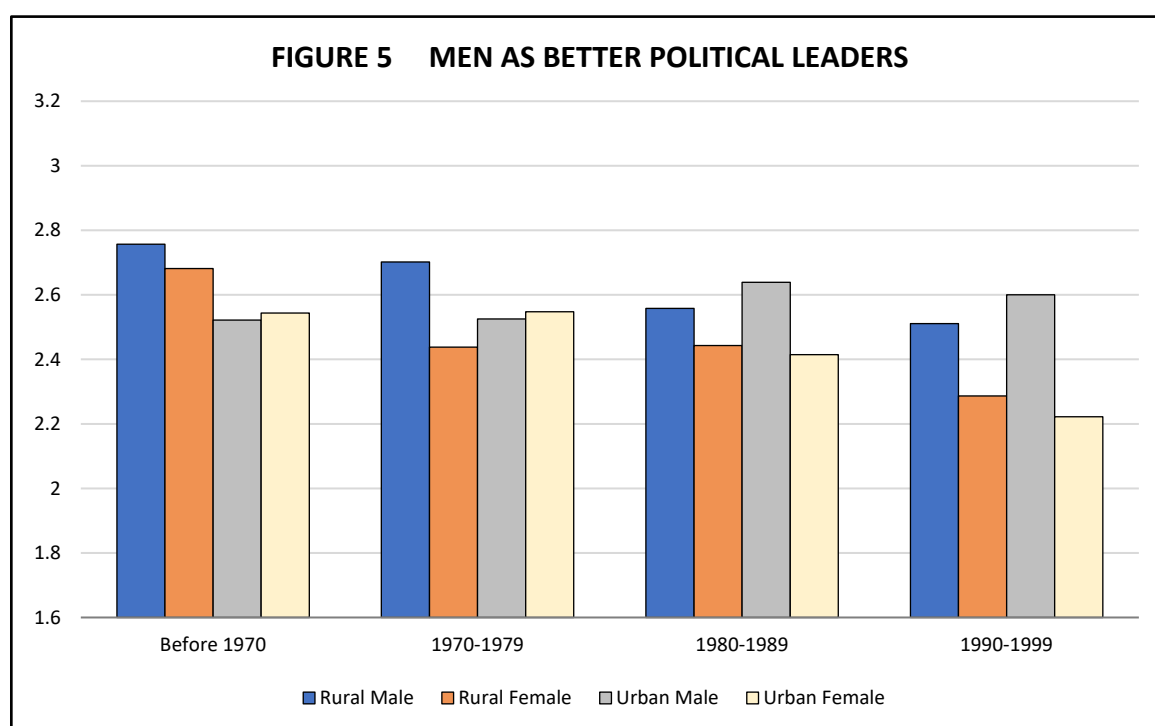
2.7 The findings explicate generational difference in the perspectives on traditional women's roles of family, marriage and motherhood. The increase in education and career opportunities for younger women has a part to play in the different perception of traditional gender roles and measures of women's success and preference for more equitable division of labour between home and work.

### Gender Roles in Society

3.1 Another major debate in gender issues is the role and rights of men and women in society. Historically, men have traditionally occupied leadership and breadwinner roles while women played supporting and subordinate roles. This model gives men privileged access to higher education and employment opportunities. With increasing inclusion of women in all aspects of society, the roles of gender in higher positions are being contended.

## Men versus women as political leaders

3.2 The World Values Survey asked respondents on a 1-4 scale if they “strongly disagree” (=1), “disagree” (=2), “agree” (=3) or “strongly agree” (=4) with the statement that men make better political leaders.<sup>20</sup> Figure 5 shows the relationship between the age of respondents and their views on gender in politics. Among younger age groups, male respondents are more likely to agree with the statement. The average scores of all four groups are around 2.2-2.8, between “disagree” and “agree”, which illustrates that Chinese society does not overwhelmingly believe that only men can be effective political leaders. However, it has not entirely embraced women in political leadership positions.



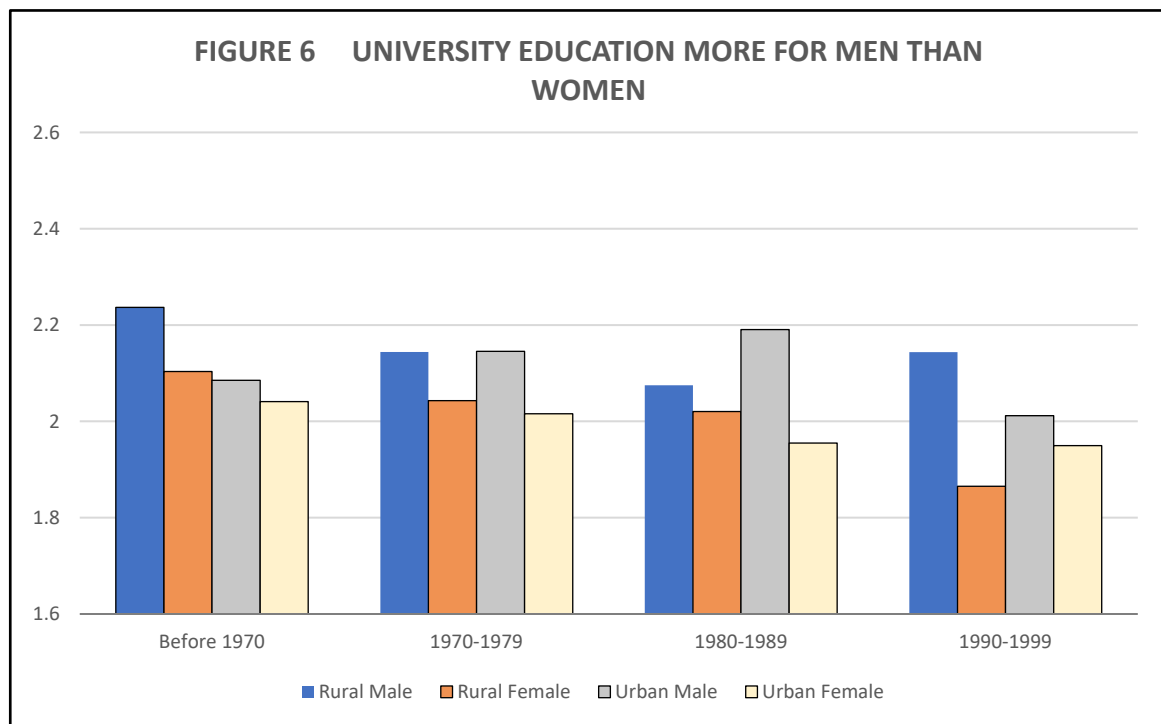
## Gender rights to university education

3.3 WVS respondents were also asked if university education is more important for boys than for girls.<sup>21</sup> Respondents generally disagree with the statement, as scores are between 1.8 and 2.3 (2=disagree), within the range of 1-4, with female respondents

<sup>20</sup> World Values Survey, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

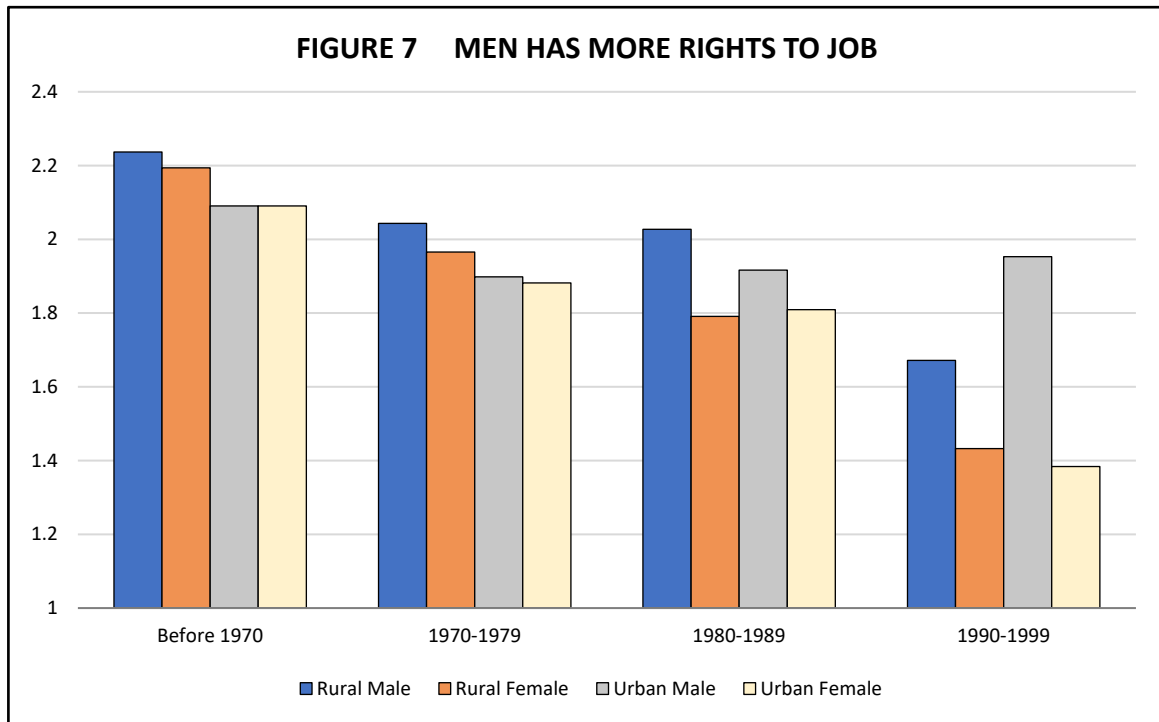
showing slightly stronger disagreement. This shows that Chinese respondents tend to accept the idea that both genders should receive equal rights to education.



### Gender rights to job

3.4 Difference in roles between gender in society can also be seen in views on job priority between genders. In the World Values Survey, respondents were asked if they agree with the statement that “when jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women” on a 1-3 scale, with the options of ‘disagree’, ‘neither’ and ‘agree’.<sup>22</sup> As shown in Figure 6, older respondents showed more agreement with the statement. Among young people, the gender gap become more prominent with women showing stronger disagreement. This shows that a gap in the perception of men as providers and options available for women between the generations. In the younger age groups, women in rural area have almost exactly the same scores as urban women, showing that after 40 years of market reform, rural women’s perception of right to jobs is no less progressive than their urban counterparts. Younger women who have more access to higher education also increased their pursuit for greater equality in job opportunities.

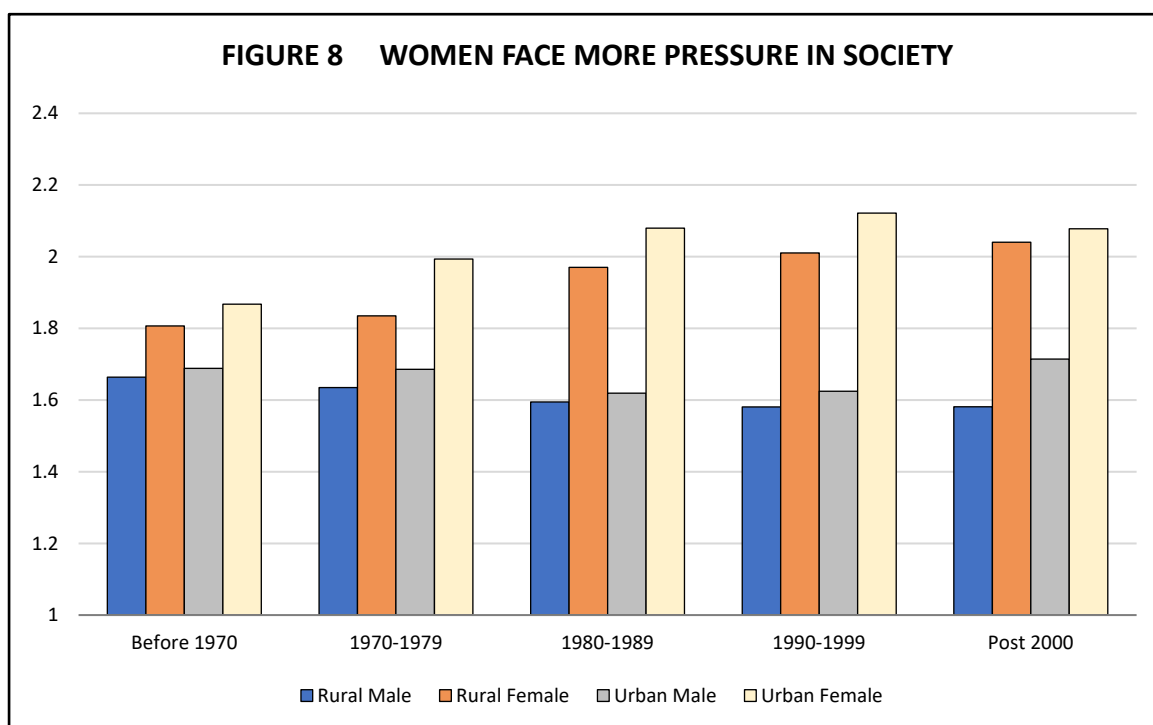
<sup>22</sup> World Values Survey, 2018. Respondents were given 3 choices, 1- disagree, 2 – neither and 3- agree.



Men versus women: pressure in society

3.5 People’s perception of the pressures that different genders face in society is related to their expectation of how much responsibility each gender shoulder. In the CFPS survey, respondents were asked which gender they perceive face more pressure in society, with the options of ‘men’, ‘both’ or ‘women’.<sup>23</sup> Figure 8 shows the relationship between the respondent’s age, gender and their responses. The result from male respondents tends towards men facing more pressure in society, scoring below 2. Female respondents are likely to believe that both genders face equal pressure in society as their scores average around 2.

<sup>23</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020. Respondents were given three options, 1- men, 2-both and 3-women.



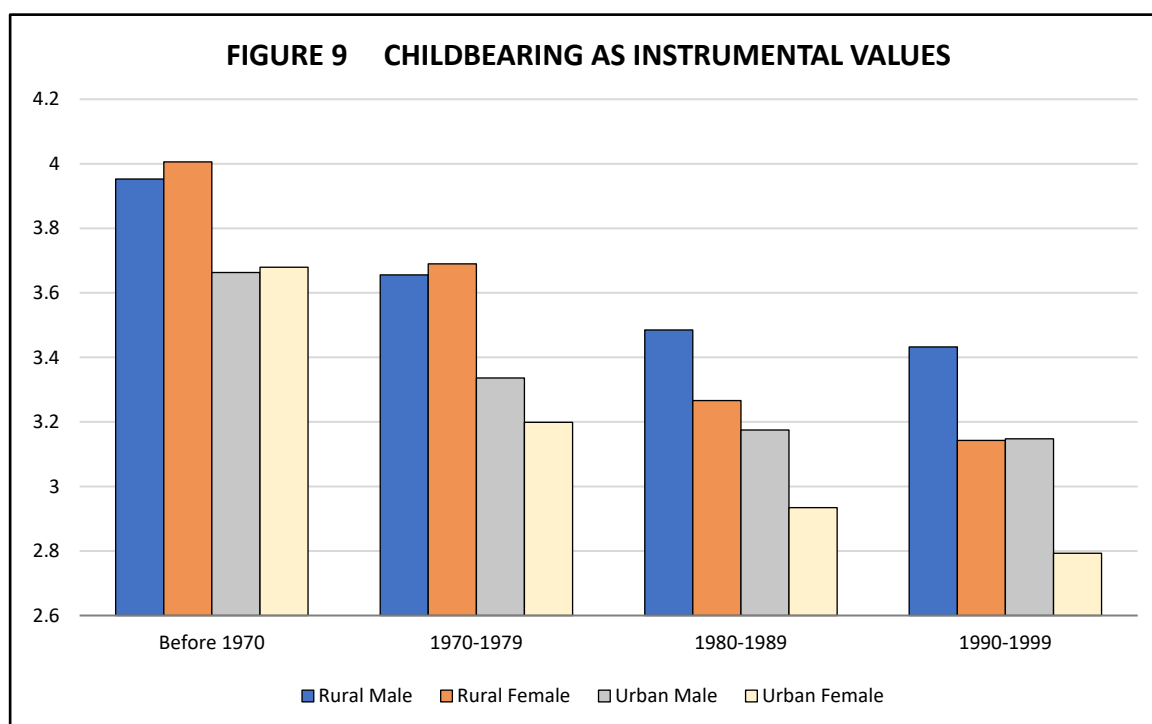
### Purpose of Childbearing

- 4.1 Declining fertility rate has been widespread among developed countries, especially East Asian countries. China also faces declining birth rate and the challenge of a rapidly ageing society. Studies found that a significant factor contributing to the declining birth rate is gender inequality. In many countries, even with relatively equal access to education and employment opportunities, significant gender inequality in terms of norms and culture in workplace and household results in an unwillingness to have children.<sup>24</sup>
- 4.2 The CFPS survey poses nine questions on the purpose of childbearing which can be grouped into three categories, namely instrumental values, societal responsibility and emotional value. Each category has three questions. Composite indicators for each of the categories have been created by generating arithmetic mean of scores from the three questions.

<sup>24</sup> Rossier, C, Bernardi, L, Social Interaction Effects on Fertility: Intentions and Behaviors. *Eur J Population* 25, 467–485 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-009-9203-0>, accessed October 2023.

## Childbearing as instrumental values

4.3 In the ‘instrumental values’ group, respondents were asked how much they agree that having children is for elderly care, continuing family lineage and providing economic support, on a 1-5 scale.<sup>25</sup> As presented in Figure 9, respondents from rural areas rather than urban areas view these instrumental values as more important reasons for choosing to raise children. This affirms the stronger traditional family structure of filial piety and limited access to eldercare and retirement support systems in rural regions, hence the reliance on childbearing to provide practical and economic support.<sup>26</sup> However, there is still a considerable gender gap in perception in both urban and rural areas. While younger respondents tend to see childbirth as less of an instrument for family support, male respondents see childbirth as an instrument more than female respondents.



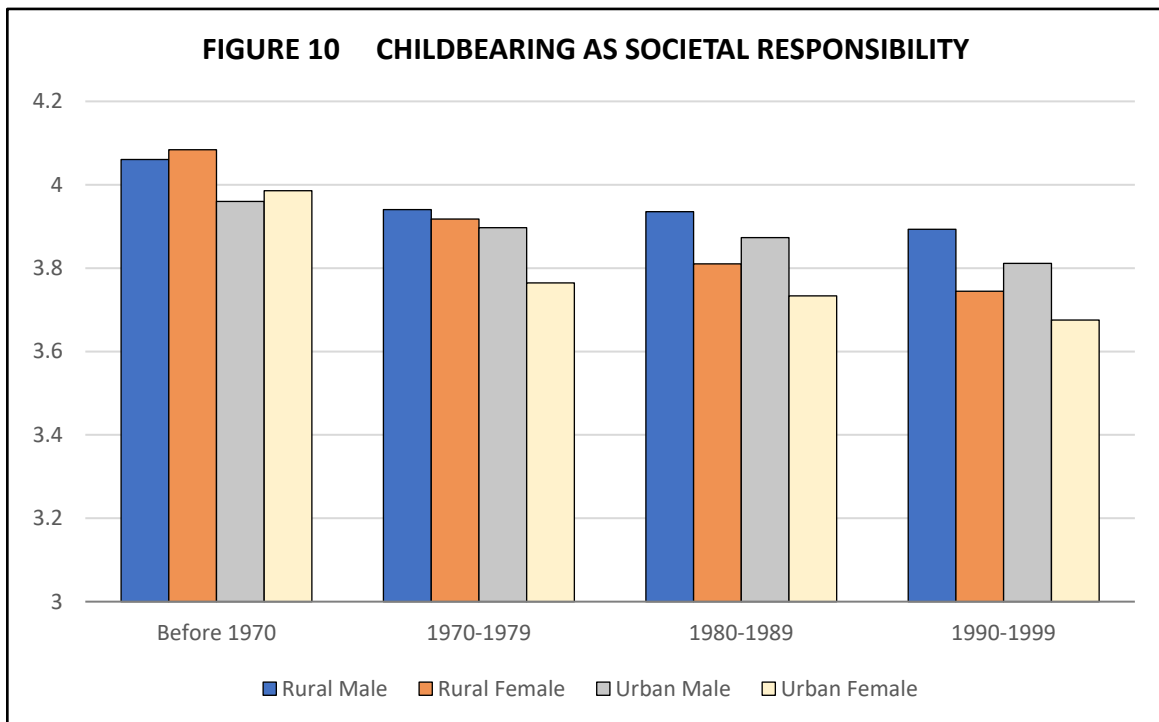
<sup>25</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020. Respondents were asked how much they agree with the following statements on a scale of 1-5 : 1. Giving birth to children is to have assistance in old age 2. Giving birth to children is to continue the family’s lineage. 3. Giving birth to children is to provide economic support to the family.

<sup>26</sup> You, J and Niño-Zarazúa, M. (2019), The Intergenerational Impact of China’s New Rural Pension Scheme. *Population and Development Review*, 45: 47-95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12248>, accessed October 2023.



## Childbearing as societal responsibility

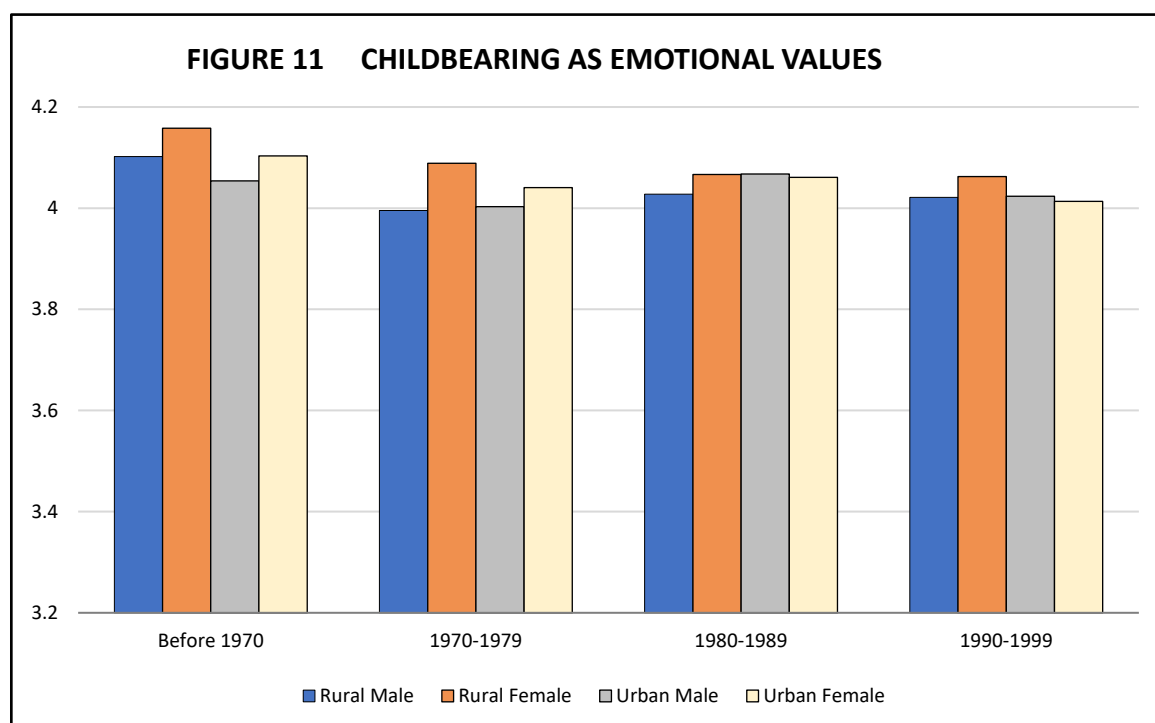
4.4 To assess if individuals choose to have children as a societal responsibility, the CFPS survey asked respondents if they agree that the purpose of childbearing is to increase their sense of family responsibility, prioritise family and improve relationship with relatives, on a scale of 1-5.<sup>27</sup> Figure 10 indicates that Chinese respondents generally agree that societal responsibility is an important factor for childbearing as all groups score above 3.6. Older respondents have stronger agreement with the statement and consensus between genders, whereas in the younger age groups, gender gap has slightly widened. In contrast to young men, young women in both cities and countryside disagree with the statement.



<sup>27</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020. Respondents were asked how much they agree with the following statements on a scale of 1-5 : 1. Giving birth to children is to strengthen one's sense of responsibility. 2. Giving birth to children is to make the family more significant in one's life. 3. Giving birth to children is to increase family connections.

## Childbearing as emotional values

4.5 Figure 11 reports the extent respondents feel that childbearing is to experience the joy of having children.<sup>28</sup> There is a high level of agreement among respondents as the scores are between 4 and 4.2 on a scale of 1-5. The perception of childbearing for personal happiness increases as the age of respondents increase. Across all age groups, women in both cities and countryside are likely to relate the purpose of childbearing to personal joy, especially among rural females. This could be due to the higher likelihood of women taking on primary caregiving roles for their children, and hence more involvement with the growth of children.



4.6 Out of the three reasons for childbearing, women tend to agree more with the view that having a child is for personal happiness and agree less with childbearing as a societal responsibility and for family benefits. On the other hand, the older generations of women strongly endorsed all three reasons for childbirth, while younger women are not as supportive in these areas. This indicates a significant overall decline in the fertility intentions of Chinese women.

<sup>28</sup> China Family Panel Survey, 2020. Respondents were asked how much they agree with these statements on a scale of 1-5 : 1. Giving birth to children is for the joy of witnessing your children's growth 2. Giving birth to children is for the happiness of having children by your side. 3. Giving birth to children is for the joy of experiencing having a little baby.

## Policy Implications

- 5.1 Overall, Chinese society may be undergoing a ‘gender awakening’. Younger generations, both men and women, are generally more supportive than their older counterparts of gender equality. The awakening of young women, in particular, may be the most pronounced, as among the younger population, gender differences in attitudes towards gender issues become more significant.
- 5.2 The roles of women in both the family and society have been evolving. The once-prevalent Confucian values of women as obedient wives and devoted mothers are being scrutinised and reevaluated.<sup>29</sup> Women are no longer confined to the household but can have successful careers in society and become accomplished leaders.
- 5.3 This could have a profound impact on Chinese society. Women who pursue careers and achieve economic independence may not see childbearing as a priority, which could further exacerbate China’s demographic challenge of declining birth rates. The rise of feminist consciousness and movements may empower more women on their rights and advocacy, potentially posing a threat to an authoritarian regime.
- 5.4 This is why the Chinese government has been continuously striving to restrict discussions on gender issues online, even though it permits a certain degree of discussion space. Discussions on feminism are constrained to non-political, individual and private topics. Once these discussions involve collective action or social movements, they often face suppression. In April 2021, at least 15 accounts of prominent Chinese feminists had been removed from Weibo for being ‘traitors’ and as ‘straight woman cancer’.<sup>30</sup>
- 5.5 There are also attempts at inculcating traditional family values in the younger generations to increase birth rate and family building. The All-China Women’s Federation, a party organisation on women issues, has the agenda of promoting the

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<sup>29</sup> Yang C and Zhou Y Y (2023) Shifting the struggle inward: Mainstream debate on digital grassroots feminism in China, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, 29:1, 69-96, DOI: 10.1080/12259276.2023.2183453.

<sup>30</sup> <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/04/after-shuttering-of-feminist-douban-groups-women-call-for-unity-online/>, accessed October 2023.

‘two unique roles’ of women, one in economic development and the other in traditional family values and the responsibility for family building.<sup>31</sup> In October 2023, Xi Jinping delivered a speech during a meeting with the new leadership of the Women’s Federation, reiterating the expectations for women’s dual roles. While he encouraged Chinese women to play an active role in economic development, he also urged women to promote traditional Chinese virtues and family values, calling for actively “cultivating a new culture of marriage and childbirth”.<sup>32</sup>

5.6 The effectiveness of the government’s efforts to promote traditional gender norms and encourage women to return to familial roles remains to be seen. Generational shifts in values, as described by Inglehart, are referred to as a “silent revolution”.<sup>33</sup> This revolution is driven by changes in certain structural factors within society, such as urbanisation, increased levels of female education and smaller family sizes.<sup>34</sup> As long as these structural factors continue to influence society, changes in values and norms regarding gender roles may indeed be long-term in nature.

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Best regards,  
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<sup>31</sup> [https://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2023-09/28/content\\_315353.htm](https://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2023-09/28/content_315353.htm), accessed October 2023.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/31/WS653fd8c4a31090682a5eb84c.html> and <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/xi-says-chinas-women-must-start-new-trend-of-family>, all accessed October 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Inglehart, Ronald. *The silent revolution: Changing values and political styles among Western publics*, Princeton University Press, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Hu, Yang and Shi, Xuezhu (2018) The impact of China’s one-child policy on intergenerational and gender relations, *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*. ISSN 2158-2041 DOI: 10.1080/21582041.2018.1448941.