

# **The Relationship between China's One-child Policy and Female Empowerment: A Systematic Literature Review**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The One-Child Policy was a family planning policy introduced by China to address the social and economic consequences of continuous rapid population growth in the 1970s (Kane and Choi 1999). The One-Child Policy started in 1979 and officially ended in early 2016 (Pletcher 2018). The policy aimed to control population growth by limiting the number of children per family (Zhang 2009). The policy required each married couple to have only one child, particularly for couples in urban households. It was enforced through various means, including the provision of contraceptives, economic incentives, and strict measures such as forced abortions and sterilisations, particularly targeting women (Brennan, Dawson and Kirby 1997).

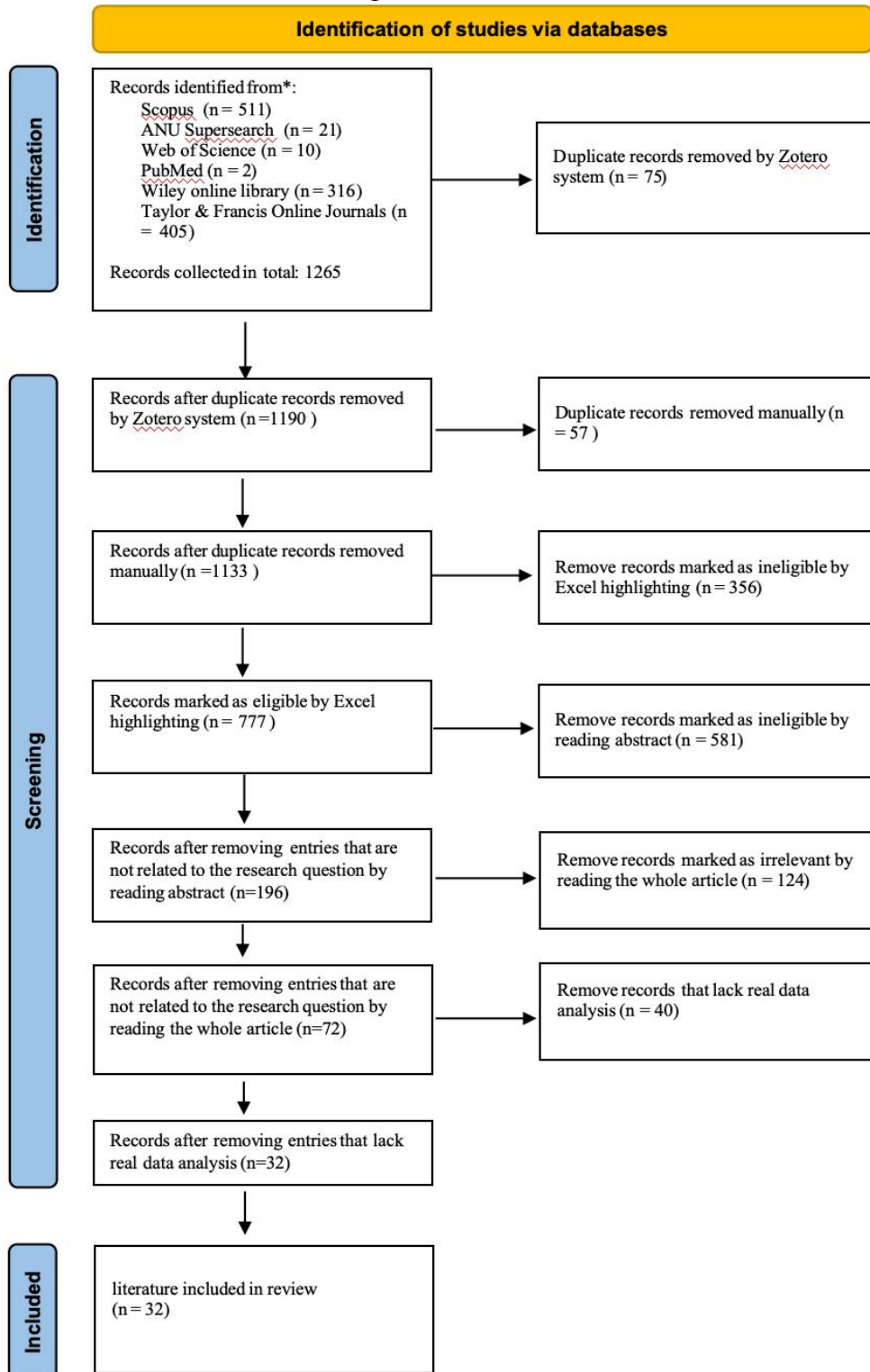
While implementing the policy contributed to lower fertility and slowing down population growth to some extent, it also contributed to negative consequences such as exacerbated son preference and sex-selective abortions, gender imbalances and undocumented children (Jiang, Li, and Feldman 2013; Kane and Choi 1999; Goodkind 2015; Pletcher 2018). Aside from its impacts on demographic, social and economic matters, the One-Child Policy also sparked debates regarding women's reproductive freedom and health rights (Fong 2002). In the early stages of policy implementation, especially in the early 1980s, many women were forced to undergo abortions and sterilisations, particularly in rural areas where resistance to the policy was stronger (Kane and Choi 1999). More recently, researchers started to understand the long-term effects of the One-Child Policy on empowering women in the new, one-child generation. This is pioneered by the study "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters" by American anthropologist Vanessa L. Fong (2002), where she explored how the One-Child Policy in China changed family structures, thus altering the patriarchal family investment model, especially in urban settings. Reducing the number of family members provided unprecedented family support to daughters, freeing them from competition with brothers and enabling them to challenge gender norms and seek power and opportunities (Fong 2022).

In this paper, we explore the relationship between China's One-Child Policy and female empowerment through a systematic literature review. Several studies have been published since Fong's 2002 work, and they pointed to different aspects of female empowerment in Chinese women. In the paper, we ask the following research question: How has female empowerment in China changed in response to the One-Child Policy? Female empowerment is conceptualized and measured across several subfields: family investment, education, employment and career development, gender equality, intergenerational relationships, economic security, well-being and the division of gender roles within housework.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a systematic literature review to examine the relationship between China's One-Child Policy and female empowerment. Six databases, namely Scopus, Web of

Science, PubMed, Wiley Online Library, Taylor and Francis Online Journals, and Australian National University (ANU) SuperSearch, are used. Search terms are developed from Fong's (2002) study. In total, 1,265 studies were identified on 13 March 2024 from the six online databases. 32 studies are included in our final database. Our strategies and steps to identify and select studies are shown in Figure



1.

Figure 1. Stepwise strategies to identify studies for the systematic literature review and the number of studies included and/or excluded in each step

## SELECTED FINDINGS

Subfields of female empowerment	Number of studies	Result
Family investment and parental support	9	Complicated 1 Positive 8
Education	12	Complicated 1 No effect 1 Positive 10
Employment and career development	10	Positive 10
Gender equality and attitudes	14	Cannot show the relevance 1 Complicated 1 Negative 1 Positive 11
Intergenerational relationships	4	No effect 2 Positive 2
Female reproductive rights, autonomy and health	4	Negative 2 Positive 2
Other social dynamics (sex ratio and child sexual abuse)	4	Complicated 2 Negative 1 Mixed 1

*Table 1. Literature by female empowerment subfield and nature of relationship*

From the 32 studies, we have the following findings regarding how China's female empowerment changes and relates to the One-Child Policy:

- The One-Child Policy concentrated family resources on the only-daughters, benefiting their career advancement, education, gender equality awareness, and family decision-making.
- In multiple areas such as education, intergenerational relationships, and gender role attitudes, conflicting conclusions are reached in different studies regarding how these were affected by the One-Child Policy. This points to the complexity of the policy's effects.
- There is a debate over whether the only-daughters benefit more from the One-Child Policy compared to the only-sons. The debate extends to whether the One-Child Policy enhances gender equality in families and society.
- There are some debatable arguments in the existing literature, including whether gender imbalances should be attributed primarily to the One-Child Policy or the son-preference culture.

## DISCUSSION

This study finds that nearly all subfields of female empowerment, such as education, employment and career advancement, gender equality, intergenerational relationships, well-being, and economic security, are associated with increased investment in the only-daughters. The One-Child Policy empowered the only-daughters by reducing the family size, shifting the family mode from parent-centred to child-centred, and focusing family investment and parental support on the only child. There is a chain relationship between the One-Child Policy, family resources, and the other subfields relevant to female empowerment (Figure 2).

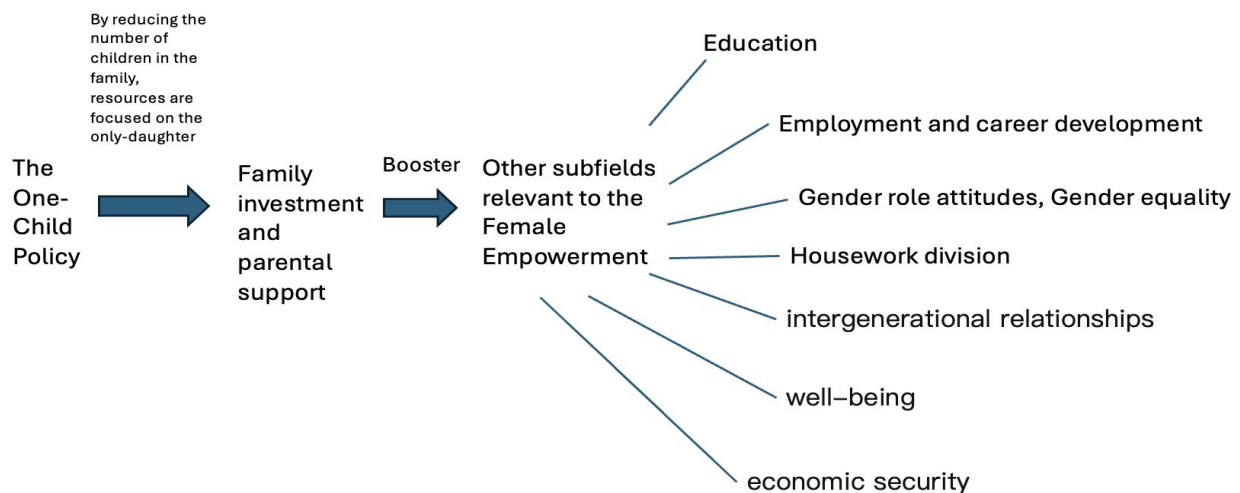


Figure 2. The chain impact between the One-Child Policy, family investment and other aspects relevant to female empowerment

The shift towards child-centred family structures not only elevated the status of women within their natal families during their daughterhood but also increased their status and decision-making power in their adult marital families. Women are empowered in both their natal families and extended families after marriage.

We also want to highlight that the impact of the One-Child Policy is complex and generalization should be avoided. The policy's impact on female empowerment is not uniform and evolves under the influence of several external factors. Even contradictory findings are identified across different subfields (measures) of female empowerment. External factors such as local educational and economic resources, traditional patriarchal norms, and parental education levels play a role in shaping the policy's impact on women. The complexity of the One-Child Policy's effects reflects the interaction between the policy and various external factors. Therefore, it is better to analyze the impact of the policy by factoring in external factors such as regional differences, economic disparities, and cultural practices (e.g. son preference).

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