



Caring Across Generations: Policy Challenges for China

Despite tremendous economic growth and poverty reduction, gender inequalities continue to persist for working women in China. Women work significantly longer hours than men when taking into account unpaid care work.

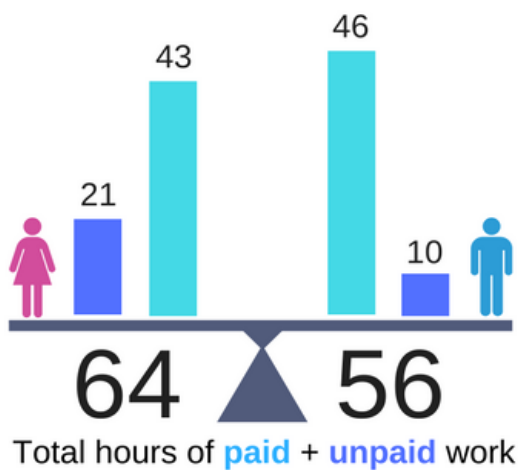
WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Before the reforms during the Maoist era, many care roles and responsibilities were provided by the state and by collectives. As the country embarked on a path of economic reform, care responsibilities shifted back to the household. The economic reform lifted 600 million people out of poverty, but also increased inequalities across socio-economic groups. Only at the turn of the century did China begin to integrate equality and social development back into the policy agenda.

KEY RESULTS

- Women's unpaid care responsibilities adversely affects their employment choices, opportunities, and reduces their earnings
- The absence of affordable daycare and preschool programs disproportionately impacts poor, remote, and migrant families
- The aging population and the lack of support for care duties in the workplace are increasing women's double burden of care and work
- Not all women benefit equally from social policies; women of low socio-economic status have less access to paid maternity leave while elderly women receive significantly less benefits from their social pension than men.

With the reforms, women's roles have changed substantively, especially due to increased rural-to-urban labour migration, a prominent feature of structural change that places a heavy burden of care on those left behind in rural villages. As elsewhere¹, women in China are primarily responsible for care work, keeping family members nourished and healthy, and taking care of children, the elderly, and the sick.



While in China's cities women are employed for almost as many hours as men (43 vs. 46 hours per week), they work many more hours in unpaid care activities (21 vs. 10 hours) such as cooking, cleaning, and household management

METHODS

This brief is based on a summative paper by Dr. Xiaoyuan Dong (University of Winnipeg) and Dr. Yaohui Zhao (Peking University) that synthesizes a series of research papers for the project "[Care Economy, Gender and Inclusive Growth in China](#)," funded by the International Development Research Centre of Canada (IDRC). For the project, Chinese researchers led by scholars at the University of Winnipeg and the Peking University documented the economic and social trends and policy developments in the reform period

by drawing information from English and Chinese literature, as well as official documents and statistics. Using data from ten national representative surveys, the researchers studied the impacts of unpaid care work and how they interact with labour force participation, time use by gender, well-being, and policies on retirement, pension, and maternity leave.

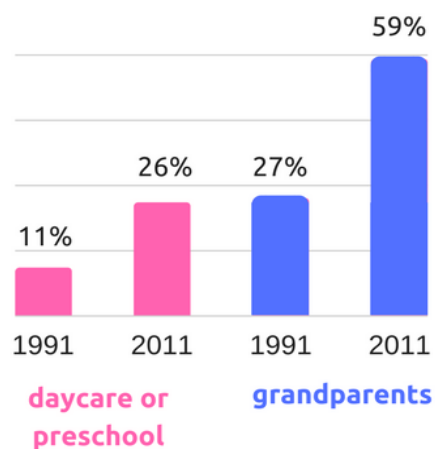
KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of the research stress that care-related public policies in China are a work-in-progress. Benefits are less comprehensive than intended, and significant deficits remain.

Grandparents are key care providers

As more women migrated between 1991 and 2011, the proportion of rural children in daycare or preschool programs increased from 11% to 26%, and those cared for by grandparents increased from 27% to 59%. Despite the increase, families in low-income villages still have limited access to affordable childcare facilities.² Children in their grandparents' full custody receive significantly fewer hours of care (11 hours less per week if guardians are over 55 years old) than those with younger guardians under 25 years old.

Care provision of rural children 1991-2011



Women have less access to adequate eldercare

Family centered, traditional eldercare remains the primary form of provision in China. About 11% of elderly who are in need of care do not receive it, and 68% of the neglected are women. Elderly men are more often cared for by their spouse, while elderly women tend to rely on their children. Elderly women are therefore at a disadvantage because spouse-care is likely to be more reliable than care provided by adult children, especially in cases where the child migrates to the city for work.

Elders without care

11%



68%
of the
neglected are
women

Elders with care

89%

Women receive less pension benefits than men

Unpaid care responsibilities put women at a disadvantage by reducing employment opportunities, length of employment, and earnings. These consequences also have an impact on pension benefits later in life. Women older than 60 years old receive only about half the benefits that men receive from their social pensions. This may also be due to the fact that women are less likely to be employed by State agencies, State-funded organizations, and urban firms that do offer pensions. The lower educational attainment of women is another major determinant of employment, and more women work in sectors that offer lower pension benefits.

Maternity leave matters

The proportion of urban employed women taking maternity leave is only 60%, a decline of 7% percent since 1988. Women with less education take leave less often (36%, with a significant decline after 1988). The research shows that not taking maternity leave reduces women's ability to sustain breastfeeding. Low-skilled and migrant workers tend to have less access to benefits.

Unpaid care limits work opportunities

Unpaid care responsibilities adversely affects employment, occupational choices, earnings, and pensions. Caring for grandchildren reduces the likelihood of participating in off-farm employment by approximately 20% and reduces annual earnings by approximately US\$258 for both middle-aged grandmothers and grandfathers. In cities, higher child care costs reduce women's labour force participation, particularly for migrants.

Unpaid care affects mental well-being

Women's double burden and higher workload impacts their mental well-being. Women's mental well-being tends to be worse off than men's, partly due to their larger number of hours worked. The findings also suggest, however, that men's mental well-being is strongly impacted by doing unpaid care work, even though they generally do less of it. The varying impacts on mental well-being demonstrates the need to further understand gender roles and how to better balance unpaid care workloads within the household.



Photo: Daily Travel Photos

POLICY LESSONS

Care needs and gender equality must be integrated into the broad development agenda; they are not just 'women's issues'

Economic programs should reflect the awareness that women are both income earners and caregivers, and integrate care needs and gender equality into budget commitments, programs, and policies, including on policies related to the hukou system, the two-child policy, employment, retirement and pensions.

Expand State provision and financing of care services, with greater attention to disadvantaged groups

Specific policies can help alleviate the pressures of care by, for example, gradually extending paid maternity leave to migrant workers and workers in the informal and private sectors. Making childcare and preschool programs accessible to children in low-income, remote villages, as well as to migrant and urban low-income families should be a policy priority. Eldercare policies should pay attention to the fact that elderly women tend to outlive men and have greater needs, yet have a limited ability to purchase care services from the market or bargain for care from adult children.

Expand private and community service provision

Policies that support a wide variety of actors are needed to meet the diverse needs of families at all socio-economic levels, especially as the population ages and grows under the 2016 two-child policy. This finding is echoed by a study from the China Population and Development Research Centre, which found that the lack of childcare services was a major hindrance for women contemplating their second child.³ Investment in the private sector can, for example, increase care provision and diversify care options, as well as create thousands of new jobs.

Accommodate family care duties in the workplace

Concerted efforts by the State are needed to minimise negative repercussions of the two-child policy for reproductive-age women in hiring and promotion. A culture of work-life balance should be encouraged, in addition to the establishment of family-friendly

provisions such as on-site breastfeeding rooms, subsidized childcare, and other family services. The State should play a more active role in providing training and bolstering the reputation of care work. Professionalizing care work will help to ensure decent work conditions and pay for care workers.

Commit to transforming gender attitudes and norms

Educational campaigns that involve men in unpaid care work are required to change gendered attitudes towards care. This would promote a more equal division of labour in the household, reduce gender inequality, and improve well-being.

This brief presents findings and policy lessons identified in a series of papers by scholars from the University of Winnipeg and Peking University for the IDRC-funded project 107579 "Care Economy, Gender and Inclusive Growth in China," approved in 2014 and closing in 2017.

Brief produced by Olivia Tran, Edgard Rodriguez, Arjan de Haan, Xiao-Yuan Dong, and Yaohui Zhao. Opinions stated in this brief and the papers it draws from are those of the academic authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDRC.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINNIPEG



北京大学
PEKING UNIVERSITY



International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Footnotes

¹ See other IDRC-funded research "[Counting Women's Work](#)" and "[Balancing Paid Work in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa](#)."

² Research on the [impacts of affordable daycare and mothers' labour force participation](#) in Kenya and on the [influence of affordable daycare on women's empowerment](#) in India was also conducted for the IDRC [Growing Economic Opportunities for Women](#) (GrOW) program.

³ Read the China Daily article "[No Child Care Means No Second Child for Many](#)."