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Rising sex ratio at birth in China: responses and effects of social policies

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ABSTRACT

China has seen a widely-distributed rising sex ratio at birth since 1980s, which poses severe threats to social stability and security and indicates son preference common in Chinese society and gender inequality. Chinese government has taken various measures to try to deal with this problem. However, despite all the efforts, the upward trend of national sex ratio at birth has not yet been restrained effectively. What are the problems with these policy responses? Why do they make little or limited effects?

This paper focuses on current social policies in China, analyzing them in gender perspective and exploring the causes of their ineffectiveness. The methodology is file analysis at national level and field survey at county level. The study finds three problems, which are shortage of gender awareness, weak-coordination, and ill-feasibility, may be responsible for the ineffectiveness of social policies to promote gender equality and correspondingly, to restrain the rising sex ratio at birth.

KEY WORDS

Rising sex ratio at birth; Social policies; Gender inequality; China

Introduction

The sex ratio at birth (SRB: the number of male live births per 100 female live births) in China was observed abnormal^① in some regions shortly after the 1982 national population census (Liu 2009: 57). The continuance of the abnormality not only in the degree but also in the scope has attracted wide attention since then especially after the 1990 census (Hull 1990; Johansson and Nygren 1991; Zeng et al 1993; Coale and Banister 1994; Liu 2007).

Much concern has been given to the impact of this unusual demographic phenomenon on China and on the world as a whole. Undoubtedly, the widely-distributed persistently imbalanced SRB will skew greatly the sex structure of population, which may confront China with huge social risks in its future development and pose severe threats to social stability and security of China and even the world as well. For example, the “bare branches” who fail to find spouses in squeezed marriage market assemble in the under-classes and may rise up to try to change their fate (Tuljapurkar et al 1995; Guo and Deng 2000; Boer and Hudson 2004). Females may be more prone to be the victims of trafficking, sexual attacking, and violence (Liu 2003). Female infants and baby girls may lose their lives in their parents’ hands intentionally and unperceived (Li and Feldman 1996; Li and Zhu 2001).

It has reached a consensus that the rising SRB problem in China is attributed directly to sex-selective induced abortion (mainly eliminating female fetuses) based on accessible type-B ultrasonic devices (Li Yongping 1993; Gu and Roy 1996; Chu 2001; Qiao 2004) under the background of socio-economic transformation and demographic transition especially rapid fertility decline which has been facilitated by national family planning program. However, it is the complicated social, economic and cultural factors that lay a profound basis on the sex-selective behavior and the rising SRB phenomenon, among which strong son preference (sons are better than daughters), the root cause of the rising SRB in China (Arnold and Liu 1986; Hull 1990; Zeng et al 1993; Liu 2009: 66), indicates gender inequality that prevails among the common people and in the traditional Confucian culture. In the long history of Chinese feudal society, the ethical principals set the tone of inequality among people. Women were inferior to and subordinated to men in such regulations that they must obey their father when unmarried, their husband when married and their sons when widowed. Although since 1949, women have acquired many rights, old ideas deeply rooted in traditional practices still have profound impact on current society. Accompanied with not-yet-perfect social security system and not-yet-developed way of production, son preference is not only a habit, but also a realistic need.

Policy-making is one of the most important measures to solve social problems. The importance of social policies is increasingly recognized by both the government and the public with the deepening of China’s reform and opening-up process when social conflicts emerging and worsening (Deng 2005). To improve women’s status and enhance gender equality, Chinese government consistently sticks to the principle of “women and

^① Normal SRB is in general between 103 and 107 male live births per 100 female live births.

men are equal” which has been made a basic national policy in 2005. Nowadays a policy system has been constructed and constantly revised to protect women’s rights in political, economic, cultural and social fields, in which the Constitution as the basis, the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women as the main framework, laws and regulations from different government departments and at various levels included (Information Office of the State Council 2005). Besides, with regard to the problem of rising SRB, Chinese government has taken various measures including formulating relevant policies, conducting a series of economic and social activities, encouraging and supporting important research and intervening programs, etc.

Nevertheless, all these efforts seem in vain to restrain effectively the upward trend of national SRB. The SRB has risen to 118.6 in 2005 (NSB 2005) from 116.9 in 2000 (Population Census Office 2000), and further to 119.3 in 2006 (NSB 2007), 120.2 in 2007 (NSB 2008) and 120.6 in 2008 (NSB 2009). What are the problems with these measures? Why do they make little or limited effects? This paper makes an exploratory research on the possible answers to the above questions by surveying present Chinese gender-related social policies in gender perspective.

Concepts and Literature

Gender, which differs from sex, refers to the socially constructed roles of and relations between men and women and is determined by social system and individual socialization process. The gender perspective looks at the impact of gender on people's opportunities, social roles and interactions, in which people observe social problems, construct policies and implement strategies taking the fact into consideration that their influence on men and women will be different in roles, attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, value, relationship and status, etc. (Lou 2001). By using gender perspective it is helpful to thoroughly recognize gender relationship and detect gender discrimination (Zhang 2004).

Social policies refer in general to the principles, guidelines and interventions taken by the government to do with various social issues and to help coordinate and enhance social development (Wang 1988: 251-252). Social policies, as the integral part of public policies, play an essential role in coordinating the interests among social groups to realize the optimum operation and healthy development of the society (Li Huiying 2002:1). In this paper social policies refer to all the laws, policies and regulations issued by the country and governmental departments at various levels aiming at solving social problems, promoting social progress and enhancing public welfare, involving many fields such as education, employment, marriage and family, resources allocation and so on.

Some researchers have paid attention to the relationship between gender and social policies in China. Studies show that Chinese government put gender equality into policies at an earlier time, but the adjustment and revision of the policies are lagging; gender-related issues are comparatively ignored in the focus of national policies; some gender policies are missing. At the same time, gap exists between the formulation and implementation of gender-related policies; gender orientation diverges in public policies related to women development and to other areas (Li Huiying 2002: 284-293). Chinese peasant family structure and gender ideology were not only influenced by but also

actually helped shape social, economic, and political policies (Stacey, 1983). Gender inequality is reflected in many aspects including survival opportunities of female fetuses and baby girls, women's educational attainment, career pursuit, job returns, family and social status, etc. (Bauer et al 1992; Maurer-Fazio et al 1999; Li Shuzhuo et al 2006: 196), which hinders women's participation in and contribution to the society and is harmful to the balanced development and harmonious relationship between sexes.

Several recent studies have related rising SRB phenomenon to problems of social policies (Song 2007; Zhang 2008; Yang and Li 2008), but more attention was paid to the impact of family planning policy on SRB problem (Yuan and Shi 2005; Yang 2006; Yang 2009) with divergent conclusions. A more comprehensive study is necessary to detect the relationship between social policies and imbalanced SRB.

Objective and Methodology

This paper surveys Chinese social policies in gender perspective under the background of consistently rising SRB and explores the factors hindering the effectiveness of social policies, aiming to thoroughly recognize the relationship between social policies and rising SRB in China, so that solutions can be detected to remove gender discrimination, enhance gender equality and solve the imbalanced SRB problem.

Considering the complexity of social policies which are formulated in different fields and issued at various levels, we assume theoretically that three elements may restrict the function of social policies from the viewpoint of gender equality. Firstly, the formulation of some social policies may be short of gender awareness; secondly, the contents or objectives of some social policies may contradict each other; thirdly, the implementation of some social policies may encounter problems.

The study is carried out at two levels: at national level, all relevant present social policies since 1949 have been collected and analyzed in gender perspective; at local level, one of the pilot counties for national campaign of "Care for Girls" is selected to do the field survey to support or supplement the findings of the policy analysis. Life cycle theory is applied to divide all social policies into categories according to women's life cycle from birth, education, job career, social participation, political involvement, health and protection, to retirement and social security.

The national campaign of "Care for Girls" is well known in China as one of active measures taken by the government to deal with the rising SRB issue. The National Population and Family Planning Commission of China (NPFPC), the leading government department who delivers public administration and services for population development and family planning, has been responsible for helping each province to select one pilot county (or county-level district) especially with extraordinarily high SRB which is encouraged to make some reform in changing current social policies at local level and to conduct some activities to facilitate girl's survival and improve women's status. Eleven counties were firstly chosen in 2003; another thirteen counties were selected in 2004, and

eight additional counties were selected in 2007^①.

In China a county is the most comprehensive and flexible administrative district where all policies issued by both central and provincial government are put into execution on one hand, and on the other suitable local regulations can be formulated and implemented on the basis of the local circumstances. In this sense, county plays the role of a bridge that connects the top-levels and the grass-roots. That is also the reason why many international and national projects prefer selecting a county or county-level district in each province as a pilot area.

County A, where we conducted the field survey in this research, is one of the earliest pilot counties for the national campaign of “Care for Girls”, located in South China where son preference is strong culturally and traditionally. With the help and support of local administrative bureaus, during the two years between 2006 and 2008 we interviewed more than 300 people including administrators in various local bureaus and common people in the town and many villages. What we heard and felt did support or supplement the findings of what we get by analyzing social policies at national levels.

Main Findings

Policy-making is the best way for the government to guide the ideas and behaviors of the people to achieve certain goals in line with the national interests. In China, lots of social policies have been issued by various ministries in recent years many of which involve protection of women’s rights and promotion of gender equality. Nevertheless, by documentation analysis and field survey we find the three assumptions about social policies, shortage of gender awareness, weak-coordination, and ill-feasibility, have been more or less confirmed, which may be responsible for their ineffectiveness to promote gender equality and restrain the rising SRB.

I. Shortage of Gender Awareness in Some Social Policies

Some social policies intended to protect women’s rights in their formulation but the effects go to the side or even opposite direction, the reason for which is that these policies are short of gender awareness. Fertility policy and retirement system are the typical cases in this point.

Fertility policy conditioned on the sex of the first child

According to current Chinese fertility policy, in most rural areas, a second child is allowed to be born if the first child is a daughter, while rural couples with the first child as a boy are encouraged to have only that child. The provision meant to care for the rural couples with only daughter by allowing them to have another child taking the fact into consideration that girls are inferior in hard physical work and families with only girl will encounter many practical difficulties in agricultural production since productivity in rural China is still at low level (Peng 1997: 322).

^① Two counties were selected in Xinjiang province; therefore there are 32 pilot counties in 31 provinces in total in Mainland China.

Our interview in the county shows that this provision is really appreciated by those couples with only daughter but not approved of by some with only son, who think it is unfair for them to have only one child just because they, by accident and of course luckily, have the first child as a boy. Because two children, one boy and one girl at best, is the ideal number of children which is repeatedly proved popular in China (Feng and Zhang 2002). Those couples with only son who show understanding of the provision also show sympathy for those with only daughter and pride for themselves as well. Meanwhile, a common idea prevails among those couples with only daughter that it is the government that provides them with another chance to have a child especially a son, and they have to try their best to catch the opportunity. Some of them, making use of the condition and duration regulated by the policy, by all means have prenatal sex identification and even termination of pregnancy if that is a girl fetus, even though it is illegal by the law, to achieve the goal of having one boy and one girl.

Why does such a policy from a good starting point bring finally disadvantages to girls during its implementation? Lack of gender awareness in the formulation of policies is an essential reason. The current fertility policy conditioned on the sex of the first child is not a good one to help promote women's status but a compromise to son preference common in the society and implies that sons and daughters are not equivalent, girls are inferior to boys and daughter-only couples need to be sympathized (Yang 2009). As a result, it may pose serious social consequences by intensifying the imbalanced SRB and even raising female mortality in some way.

Retirement system with sex-differentiated retirement age

Most women have a career or a paid job in China, whether married or not, which is one of the great achievements of Chinese government after 1949 and helps women independent financially and spiritually. However, women have to retire earlier than their male colleagues according to current retirement system which follows the regulations issued in 1950s when early retirement was actually a kind of welfare for women because they can quit work and enjoy the state pension earlier, while the pension as well as the pay for the job were at the same low level. At that time the working condition was relatively poorer with underdeveloped labor safety and protection, and the family burden was heavier with more children and fewer mechanical housework helpers. With the economic and social development over the past 60 years, people's especially women's life expectancy has greatly extended and physical health has improved in general; at the same time, the popularity of various kinds of domestic appliances such as washing machines and the rapid development of the tertiary industry have freed women from heavy housework for the most part. Meanwhile, the number of children each family has been reduced, women's extending years of schooling strengthening their competences. In this situation, the old regulations are inevitably out of date rigidly adhering to which results in women's unfavorable situation on economic benefits and political engagement.

Our field survey finds that the present retirement system involves people working in the government departments and state-run enterprises, having little effect on those working for private companies and for themselves. Most female administrators interviewed are dissatisfied with the regulation that women must retire at 55 while their male colleagues

can retire at 60 years old. Owing to early retirement, they have fewer opportunities of on-the-job training, career development and job promotion compared with their male colleagues with the same age and same years of schooling. Moreover, the level of pension, the amount of housing fund and the right to other welfare treatment are closely related to one's seniority and to whether he or she is on the job. As women retire five years earlier than men, their seniorities are inevitably shorter than men's and their pensions are lower than men's. The women workers suffer more because they have to retire at 50 and are more prone to early quit from the job once the company encounters financial crisis.

Early retirement is a waste of female human resources. It is hard to explain why women tend to live longer but work shorter involuntarily nowadays. The social policies in this field were gender-aware in old days but are not adjusted to the changing situation, and consequently, have become barrier to women's rights, hindering women to some degree from fully participating in the management of state affairs and developing their career. The retirement system seems to have violated its original intention of protecting women's rights.

II. Weak coordination between social policies

Social policies from formulation to implementation involve different ministries and departments. Even though many current social policies are more or less gender-aware, they are hard to play the full roles, owing to the lack of good communication and coordination between policymakers when formulated or between executive departments when carried out. A case in point involves girls' education.

In rural China girls are more prone to be the sacrifice of educational opportunities under limited resources of families (Song and Tan 2004; Jin and Lv 2007). In order to enhance educational opportunities of girls, promote women's status as well as help improving economic situation of some family planning households and facilitate changes in reproductive attitudes of rural parents, NPFPC launched the campaign of "Care for Girls" in 2003 and in alliance with Ministry of Finance cooperated by other related ministries initiated in 2004 a "system of incentive and assistance" (SIA) (*jiangli fuzhu zhidu*), which embodies a series of policies in favor of rural family planning households. Policies are locally made and vary with different regions. According to these policies, rural couples who have only child or have daughters only in compliance with family planning program deserve rewards and preferential treatments in production and in life. One widely welcomed and effective practice in many regions is to provide certain concessions for daughter-only families in education of their daughters including diminution in tuition fees for primary and junior secondary schools, addition of ten to twenty scores for local high school entrance exam and so on.

In 2007 the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been implementing a "system of two exemptions and one allowance" (STEOA) (*liangmian yibu zhidu*) in order to popularize compulsory education in China, in which free textbooks, exempted incidental expenses and certain amount of allowances for lodging are provided by the government to rural students who accept compulsory education in primary/ junior middle schools and come

from underprivileged families. This policy is of importance in promoting individual's educational welfare and enhancing quality of the whole people.

Undoubtedly, STEOA lowers the cost of raising children because in China nowadays paying for children's education has become one of the heaviest burden of each family (Ding and Xue 2005; Zhang and Lu 2007; Huang et al 2008; Hu and Wu 2008) and it is very common that rural children will stop schooling after junior middle school or even after primary school and move to towns or cities to find jobs. With the help of this policy, rural parents no longer worry about their children's educational expenses of accepting compulsory education even if they have additional children. Under the background that not every couple has accepted the concept of small families, some parents would prefer to have extra children (Qin 2006). Therefore, the policy issued by MOE has conflict in two ways with the policies issued by NPFPC: one is to partly weaken the effect of SIA by making no difference between girls and boys; the other is to disturb the implementation of family planning policy.

The field survey in the county finds that the local administrators felt confused about the conflict of SIA and STEOA. Both policies help improving educational attainment of rural people, they admit, but the SIA seems better in changing people's negative attitude towards girls and help enhancing women's social status. After SIA was carried out, some daughter-only couples would prefer to give up the legal opportunity of giving birth to a second child, because they think they can benefit from this policy especially get pension-like subsidy from the government when they are getting old, which is better than having a son if the son is unfortunately not filial piety. In this sense, SIA does more than helping family planning households by changing people's opinions of childbearing. STEOA benefit all children, which is good, but Chinese rural people still have strong will to have more than one child and to have at least one son, the policy makes family planning program harder to conduct to some degree and waters down the preferential treatments girls get from SIA and its corresponding influence on people's attitude.

Negotiation and cooperation between departments on some significant matters is possible but it is impossible for all departments to keep in step all the time. Some work considered very important by one department may be insignificant in another department's view. That can explain in part the conflict of social policies. The coordination at grass-roots level tends to depend on individual attention, action and influence of the local leaders and thus coordination mechanism is unstable. It is obvious that the diversities in interests of stakeholders weaken the enforcement of related social policies.

III. III-feasibility of some social policies

Besides the coordinating problems, the implementing problem also damages the effectiveness of social policies, either because more principles than details in a policy makes it flexible and hard to implement, or because there are only regulations on prohibited behaviors but no corresponding detailed implementing rules makes regulations exist in name only.

In China the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women is a comprehensive

legal framework that plays a strong role in safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of women, under which many laws and regulations are drawn up. However, many of them are programmatic documents with too abstract and vague expressions to be interpreted and enforced, resulting in the fact that either executive departments have much flexible space to interpret policies arbitrarily even to replace the policies with local measures as they want or the regulations remain on paper only.

For example, current laws regulate women and men have equal employment rights, but it is not rare to see when companies recruiting new employees in labor market, males are preferred. Such conditions even may appear on want ads while women are more likely to be dismissed once companies encounter financial difficulties. An important reason is that relevant detailed implementing measures are lacking, there are neither incentive compensation measures supporting the employers or enterprises which follow the law nor supervising and punitive measures against the companies which broke the law, under such circumstances, the realization of women's equal employment right can hardly be guaranteed.

The same is true for women's involvement in political affairs. Although the central government states in policies that the local governments should make sure women who participate in various political affairs at local level no less than a certain figure in proportion, which seems to be clearly defined, there is still a lot of flexible space for implementing departments to change the "no less than" minimum into a "no more than" ceiling. Such practices put women at a big disadvantage in labor market and in social and political life, and what's more will lead to potential negative consequences by strengthening family's preference for boys.

In the efforts to tackle rising SRB problem, one of main policy responses of the government is to diminish "two non-medical necessary practices" (*liangfei*) which are non-medical-necessary fetus sex determination and non-medical-necessary termination of pregnancy that is administered by the Ministry of Health (MOH), accompanied with other relevant ministries. Both practices are regarded as the direct causes to imbalanced SRB in China. Tackling the problem is essential to control the disordered SRB.

However, our field survey finds that executive administrators are encountered with many difficulties in this process. The first challenge is that it is very hard to detect such illegal behaviors. Pregnant women or their families (usually husbands and /or parents-in-law) with strong son preference tend to see some familiar doctors to identify the sex of the fetus and then decide whether or not to remain it. Although the non-medical-necessary fetus sex identification is illegal, driven by the common interests, doctors and clients may communicate with each other by gestures or some obscure signals, outsiders can hardly recognize its meaning even if they are standing aside. The tougher thing for the local administrators is that no effective measures can be taken to those doctors who have helped their clients to make non-medical-necessary fetus sex identification and non-medical-necessary termination of pregnancy, because all the related policies such as the Law of Population and Family Planning and the Law of Care for Mothers and Babies just regulate such behaviors are strictly forbidden but without support of detailed

implementing rules. Penalty with only small amount of money is nothing for the violators compared with the possible huge potential market and benefits behind. Under such conditions, despite many policies issued by various ministries on prohibiting the “two non-medical necessary practices”, they are popular than ever.

Conclusions and Discussions

The study finds by surveying gender-related social policies present in China and by conducting field survey in one of the earliest pilot counties of the national campaign of “Care for Girls” that many current Chinese social policies should take the blame for not effectively controlling the upward trend of SRB. It has been observed that few policies explicitly discriminate against women in China nowadays; on the contrary, all gender-related policies tend to promote gender equality. However, lack of gender awareness makes social policies start from a good point but may end up with being harmful to women’s rights; lack of communication between policymakers and/or executive departments makes social policies contradict each other, cost more and achieve less; lack of detailed implementing provisions makes social policies more or less empty talk on the paper or even worse, too flexible to be serious and be substituted with local countermeasures. All the problems damage the effectiveness of social policies or increase the cost of their implementation, which in turn hinders the process of gender equality.

Apparently the problems existing in social policies reflect partly the reality of China today. Chinese society is in the process of dramatic transformation. Since 1978, Chinese economy has successfully experienced transformation from a planned one to a market-oriented one. However, during this process, social development and social policies were ignored and left behind (Deng 2005). It is in recent year that people began to divert attention to the field of social development and social policies under the situation that some social problems are becoming prominent. Increasing SRB is just one of social problems reflecting gender inequality and policy defects.

Whether social policies could promote gender equality are subject to coordinating mechanisms and stakeholder-participating mechanisms when policies are made and carried out, that is to say, each step of social policy from formulation to implementation has a profound impact on the realization of the goal of the policy.

Promoting gender awareness and cultivating gender perspective among policy-makers and administrators are the first step essential to promote gender equality. In the pilot county, it is found that not only the ordinary people but many local policy makers and administrators know little about the concept of gender, to say nothing of applying gender awareness in policy-making and policy-implementation. Therefore, there is still a long and difficult journey to go to bring gender awareness into the mainstream, which is the basis for making gender-sensitive social policies.

Reforming and perfecting legal system is another step which involves not only gender-related social policies. After many years of ignorance and even subversive destroy in the “Cultural Revolution”, Chinese legal system is being reconstructed to which Chinese government has given priority because it has been realized increasingly that

managing state affairs according to law is prerequisite of good governance. In this sense, revising and improving existing social policies, and coordinating various policies as well, will get on the track sooner or later. With regard to those policies lack of gender awareness and lack of detailed implementing provisions, County A has made some efforts from the standpoint of local administration. They have collected and revised all relevant policies at county level in the field of family planning, health, social security, education, social welfare and poverty relief, ruled out provisions hindering girl's development, corrected conflicting terms between policies, and supplemented to policies some favorable terms for fostering gender equality. Furthermore, they have organized a coordinating leadership group members of which come from various bureaus and departments to help to coordinate social policies when formulated or implemented. Their efforts show that in China a county has the ability to find solutions to the problems existent, although it is restricted in the scope of the county.

The practice and experiences at county level reveal the possibility of establishing an authoritative independent coordinating agency (such as Gender Equality Promotion Committee) at national level responsible for communicating and coordinating policy-makers from various government ministries in formulation, promulgation and implementation of gender-sensitive social policies to improve gender equality. As a matter of fact, Korea has done so by establishing Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001 and help to solve the problem of abnormal SRB in Korea successfully. To achieve the same goal, an alternative way is to strengthen the function of Chinese current agencies such as National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council (NWCCW), which is the leading government department in managing affairs of women and children.

The rising SRB problem is one of the major challenges encountered by Chinese population and government in the 21st century. Considering its generative mechanism being complicated and entangled in social, economic and cultural system, this paper just makes an exploratory study to detect the possible reason and solution from gender and social policy perspectives. By combining reforms in policy-making and policy-implementation mechanisms from the government departments with the experiences from the grass-roots, promisingly China will eventually effectively tackle this serious problem and promote its gender equality.

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