

How Local Implementers Systematically Undermine Gender Equity in China's One-Child Policy

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Abstract

China's One Child Policy (1979–2015) presents a paradox: designed to control population growth while promoting gender equity, it instead exacerbates gender disparities. While existing research attributes this outcome to structural incentives such as top-down birth quotas and promotion tournaments, such explanations fail to account for why disparities persisted even after policy relaxation and why executors never cared to work against a controversial policy. This study bridges this gap by shifting the focus from institutional design to street-level implementation, revealing how bureaucratic agency actively shaped the policy's gendered consequences. Through a qualitative analysis, this study identifies three archetypes of implementers: (1) true believers, who internalize patriarchal norms and codify them into policy exceptions; (2) box-tickers, who prioritize quantifiable targets over equity, reducing human outcomes to audit metrics; and (3) performers, who weaponize progressive rhetoric to mask widely criticized practices. Together, these types demonstrate that structural pressures alone cannot explain the policy's failures—roots enforcers exercised discretionary power to reinterpret, resist, or hollow out mandates on the basis of personal beliefs, the career calculus, or performative compliance. By exposing this interplay of structure and agency, the study challenges top-down models of authoritarian governance. This finding shows that even the most rigid policies are filtered through street-level actors whose autonomy—whether ideological, pragmatic, or cynical—can systematically distort intended outcomes.

Keywords

one child policy, gender disparities, street-level bureaucracy, authoritarian implementation, patrilineal norms, public policy

1. Introduction to China's One-Child Policy

China's gender equality landscape presents a paradox of progressive legal frameworks coexisting with persistent cultural and structural disparities. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country has developed an extensive body of gender equality legislation, such as the Common Program of 1949 (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 1949)¹ and the Law of the People's Republic of China

¹ The Common Program (1949), adopted by the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference as a provisional constitutional document, first established gender equality as a constitutional principle the moment the People's Republic of China was founded. This laid the foundation for subsequent legislation, such as the Marriage Law (1950).

on Safeguarding the Rights and Interests of Women (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2018).²

However, criticism of these laws exists because the phenomena that these laws are trying to prohibit still exist. For example, despite legal protection against gender-based employment discrimination (e.g., equal pay and promotion rights under China's Women's Rights Protection Law 2018), workplace disparities persist, particularly in hiring practices and leadership representations (Gan, 2021). Furthermore, UN Women (2012) reported that 24.7% of Chinese women experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence. Finally, 29% of the women surveyed experienced some sort of gender discrimination in their job-seeking processes (Zhou, 2025). This tension between institutional progress and social realities forms the critical context for examining China's gender equality challenges.

Such tension becomes vividly apparent in China's population control policies—systems that simultaneously instrumentalize and subvert gender norms to serve demographic objectives. The one-child policy (OCP) (1979--2015) represents one of the most ambitious social engineering experiments in modern history,³ offering critical insights into how authoritarian governance balances demographic control with unintended societal consequences (Jiang et al., 2013). Its significance lies not only in its dramatic demographic impact—preventing an estimated 400 million births and reducing fertility rates from 6.0 to 1.6—but also in its paradoxical failure to achieve gender equity despite structural conditions that theoretically favour it (Zhu et al., 2009).

This paper conceptualizes gender equity advancement as state actions that substantively reduce institutionalized gender disparities, whether through corrective measures or structural reforms. Moreover, we examine the direct outcomes of a policy's enforcement (e.g., the sex ratios) and the policy's architectures that either enable or constrain equality (e.g., whether childcare subsidies require paternal participation). The policy's design mandated one child per household, which, in principle, should have eliminated son preference by forcing parents to invest equally in their only child, regardless of gender (Fong, 2002). Legal prohibitions on sex-selective abortions and female infant abandonment further reinforced this potential (Kubo & Chaudhuri, 2017). However, in practice, the policy exacerbated gender disparities. Over 30 years of China's OCP, millions of baby girls have disappeared due to sex-selective abortions or infanticide⁴.

The OCP was initially relaxed in 2013 to allow couples to have a second child if either parent was an only child. However, the tepid response to this adjustment—fewer births than anticipated—revealed deep-seated societal reluctance, prompting the government to fully abandon the one-child policy in 2015 in favour of a universal two-child limit. This shift reflected growing anxiety over China's demographic crisis: a rapidly aging population, a plummeting fertility rate, and a skewed gender ratio from decades of son preference (BBC News, 2015). By 2021, facing continued low birth rates, the state further loosened restrictions to a three-child policy, alongside expanded parental leave and childcare subsidies. China is now dismantling all remaining birth limits amid escalating concerns over demographic decline (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). This shift has lessened the parental investment allocated to their firstborn child. However, as Chen (2020) noted, firstborn sons with younger sisters do not experience a reduction in parental resources. Hu concedes this and then adds on: while

² The Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (1992, revised 2005 and 2018) is China's comprehensive gender equality legislation covering political rights, education, employment, property rights, and personal rights.

³ While the One Child Policy (1979–2015) was formally relaxed in 2016, China's population control framework persists under revised objectives. Article 25 of China's Constitution still mandates family planning as a fundamental state policy, although its implementation has shifted from restricting births to encouraging higher fertility since 2021 (e.g., the Three Child Policy).

⁴ The OCP's enforcement intensified gender disparities, triggering a dramatic rise in China's sex ratio imbalance. By 2005, the policy had produced a surplus of 32 million males (Hu, 2017), with sex-selective abortions and postnatal discrimination against daughters persisting even in single-child households. Empirical studies attribute 7 extra boys per 100 girls to the OCP's restrictions for the 1991 to 2005 birth cohort (Li et al., 2010). Prenatal selection and infanticide led to 9.3 million "missing girls" by 2000, a sharp increase from the minimal female deficit observed in 1982 (Ebenstein, 2010). By 2015, the cumulative gap reached 34 million surplus men, with an estimated 62 million girls missing due to systemic gender bias (Beck, 2016).

only daughters receive more favourable treatment than do those in households with multiple children, they are still treated less favourably than lone sons are (Hu, 2017).

This study progresses through dual-lenses to expose the gendered failures of the one-child policy (OCP). First, through microlevel analysis of City X's enforcement cadres, it empirically validates this paradox: the interview evidence confirms the policy's controversial execution through sex-selective enforcement, contraceptive targeting, and institutionalized evasion tactics. The study then classifies implementers into three typologies—True Believers, who internalize patriarchal views; Box Tickers, who apply careerist compliance; and Performers, who conduct rhetorical hollowing—revealing how bureaucratic agency, not just structural constraints, reproduces inequality. This tripartite framework moves beyond the literature's focus on policy design by revealing the human intermediation that transformed demographic control into gender disparity.

2. Literature Review

This paradox—between the policy's demographic success and its regressive gender effects—is tied to its execution mechanisms: administrative contracting and the promotion tournament system (Zhou, 2017). To contextualize these mechanisms, administrative contracting and the promotion tournament system were originally theorized to explain China's economic governance, where local officials competed to meet GDP growth targets.

These governance mechanisms, although originally developed for economic management, were similarly applied to population control with profound demographic consequences. Under administrative contracting, the central government sets binding population targets (e.g., capping annual births at 18--20 million) while delegating enforcement to local officials, who operationalize quotas through sterilization rates (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005), IUD compliance (Teerman, 2021), and harsh penalties for violations (Zhu et al., 2009). China's promotion tournament system directly tied officials' career advancement to meeting top-down demographic targets (Zhou, 2022), creating high-stakes, zero-sum competition between government officials working in the same department that prioritized quantifiable outcomes over qualitative societal consequences (Jiang et al., 2013). Institutional safeguards across comparative contexts reveal alternative approaches to performance management: Nordic civil services institutionalize gender mainstreaming requirements that mitigate target-driven excesses (Christensen et al., 2020); U.S. federal agencies employ procedural checks such as the Civil Service Reform Act to prevent single-metric dominance (Stevenson, 1990); and EU governance embeds supranational human rights standards that limit domestic policy distortions (Danielsen & Trondal, 2024).

China's system is distinctive not in its use of quotas—a common administrative tool globally—but in its structural primacy over competing institutional logics (e.g., medical ethics, gender equity). Indeed, China's system prioritized cyclical compliance through rigid annual metrics—a design where cadres' career prospects depended on meeting yearly birth quota targets as evaluated in the year-end appraisal system. This led to tactics such as forced late-term abortions and tacit tolerance of sex-selective practices, as officials focused narrowly on avoiding penalties or winning promotions rather than addressing the policy's gendered externalities (Kubo & Chaudhuri, 2017). The tournament model's rigidity thus amplified distortions: by rewarding only measurable outputs, it systematically divorced incentives from long-term social welfare, a trade-off less pronounced in Western systems that balance accountability with professional autonomy.

While this structural explanation is reasonable, it fails to account for two vital things. First, the structural perspective fails to explain why the policy created over 500 million sterilizations and abortions (Huang, 2016) despite explicit bans in the 2002 Population and Family Planning Law (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2021)⁵. If rigid performance metrics were the sole driver, we would expect at least partial compliance with central directives on gender equity—especially when violations could theoretically trigger penalties—and yet studies show the prevalence of “missing girls” (Ebenstein, 2010; Zhu et al., 2009). Second,

⁵ The Population and Family Planning Law of the People's Republic of China, initially enacted in 2001 and amended in 2021, remains China's fundamental legislation governing reproductive governance. Article 17 prohibits sex-selective abortions, Article 20 mandates “informed consent” for contraceptive procedures (Standing Committee of the NPC, 2021).

the structural account cannot reconcile why son preference persisted long after 2015, when the One-Child Policy was relaxed and career incentives for strict enforcement disappeared. A superficial explanation would attribute this solely to policy's limited capacity to transform deep-seated cultural norms, but such a view neglects two critical realities: (1) the OCP's three-decade saturation of society with compulsory gender equality propaganda (e.g., "Daughters Equal Sons" campaigns) and (2) the state's simultaneous reinforcement of patrilineal institutions through unequal land rights and inheritance practices. This contradiction suggests that the promotion tournament system did not merely override formal bans (Zhou, 2017) but rather more pervasively instrumentalized patriarchal norms when expedient: rewarding cadres who achieved quotas by tolerating son preference while performing egalitarian rhetoric. If the imbalance was purely institutionally driven, we would expect a rapid correction postreform. Instead, census data reveal a lingering male surplus (Beck, 2016), with a son preference enduring in fertility decisions, particularly in rural areas where patrilineal norms remain entrenched (Hu, 2017). This continuity highlights how structural incentives amplified but did not create patriarchal norms; when the policy faded, underlying cultural preferences resurfaced.

By shifting focus from structural incentives to street-level discretion, this research reveals an understudied dimension of China's one-child policy implementation: the role of grassroots actors as active interpreters (not just passive enforcers) of the state mandates, whose daily decisions can perpetuate inequality despite formal institutional commitments to equality. As Lipsky (1981) classically observed, frontline implementers inevitably abandon abstract goals to mitigate the immediate and persistent pressures of their working environment. This insight was later extended by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2021), who demonstrated how street-level bureaucrats actively reinterpret policies through the lens of local moral economies, weighing formal rules against community norms and personal judgments. In the context of China, local families planning cadres, facing incompatible demands between rigid birth quotas and patriarchal cultural norms (Tsai, 2007), make pragmatic decisions that systematically privilege male births. This explains why the policy's theoretical gender-equalizing potential collapsed in practice: street-level workers frustrated reforms that demanded behaviors incompatible with their daily routines, local economies, or cultural norms, transforming what was designed as a demographic control measure into an engine of gender disparity. Our study bridges this gap by showing how grassroots actors' power—not just institutional incentives—actively reproduces inequality. This microlevel lens enriches our understanding of authoritarian adaptability, showing how rigid systems rely on localized improvisation—a tension with implications beyond population control, from environmental governance to poverty alleviation.

3. Methodology

This disconnect between policy intent and gendered outcomes necessitates a closer examination of how and why local implementers made decisions that systematically undermined gender equity—questions that cannot be answered through macrolevel structural analysis alone. To uncover the mechanisms behind this implementation gap, this study adopts a grounded, microlevel approach, focusing on the very actors who translated national directives into local practice: street-level bureaucrats.

This study focuses on City X in southern China, as Guangdong Province is one of the most economically developed regions in China, and historically, it has also been under stringent enforcement of population control measures due to its skewed sex ratios. Owing to confidentiality protections, this study refrains from reporting the exact sex ratio for the research site. However, comparable data from neighboring jurisdictions reveal similar trends of skewed sex ratios, from 111.61 males per 100 females in 2006 to 109.75 by 2010 (Foshan Municipal Government, 2011). Furthermore, City X encompasses a unique inclusion of both urban and peri-urban areas, particularly urban villages. Specifically, because of this structure, the region ensures a diverse sample that captures variations in policy implementation and household-level responses across different socioeconomic and spatial contexts. Additionally, the researcher's established local connections facilitated logistical access to participants and key informants, enhancing the feasibility of data collection while maintaining methodological rigor. This combination of structural relevance (strict OCP enforcement, economic prominence, and urban-rural heterogeneity) and pragmatic research advantages (local networks) makes City X an analytically strategic site for investigating the policy's gendered and intergenerational repercussions.

To achieve depth of understanding rather than breadth of coverage, the study employs semistructured interviews with ten officials across City X's administrative hierarchy. Initial contacts at the Bureau of Birth Registration⁶ and Urban Street Office⁷ were identified through institutional directories, whereas rural informants were accessed through snowball sampling—a necessary adaptation given the limited formal records in village settings. This dual approach ensured representation from both urban (n=6) and rural (n=4) implementers, including veteran cadres who served during peak enforcement years (1999–2015) and younger officials who joined after policy relaxation. The interview protocol itself was carefully designed to balance comprehensive documentation with conversational fluidity, while most sessions allowed for real-time detailed notetaking, three cases required postinterview reconstruction via standardized templates when note-taking appeared to inhibit responses.

Conducted in Mandarin from 2024–2025, the interviews followed a meticulously structured questioning framework that progressed from broad conceptual understandings to specific operational challenges. The questioning sequence first established how respondents interpreted core policy objectives (population control versus gender equity) and whether these priorities shifted over time before delving down into their first-hand experiences with gendered implementation challenges. This line of inquiry naturally flowed into examining how local adaptations addressed (or failed to address) regional variations and temporal shifts, including recent transitions to the three-child policy. The final interview segments strategically assessed the role of propaganda and individual enforcer agency, creating a comprehensive picture of the policy ecosystem. All transcripts underwent rigorous back-translation verification, ensuring that conceptual precision was maintained across languages.

While the study acknowledges limitations, including its focused sample size and gender imbalance among interviewees, these constraints are offset by the research design's intentional depth. The findings explicitly avoid claims of universal generalizability, instead offering a granular examination of how local bureaucratic practices in one strategically selected region systematically subordinated gender equity to demographic targets. City X's particular characteristics create an analytically powerful setting for understanding the broader tensions between authoritarian policy designs and their gendered implementation outcomes. The study offers a framework for analysing how street-level practices mediate between policy designs (however imperfect) and social outcomes, as exemplified by the OCP's unintended gender disparities.

4. How Enforcers Saw OCP Social Change

Interviews with local officials reveal how the OCP was enacted within a contested institutional environment shaped by three competing imperatives: (1) the formal gender-neutral mandate from central planners, (2) deeply rooted patrilineal kinship structures, and (3) the careerist logic of the promotion tournament system. This tripartite tension created schizophrenia, where bureaucratic survival required simultaneously demonstrating strict quota compliance to superiors while accommodating son preference demands from local communities. This generational socialization into bureaucratic dissonance explains why even post-2015 policy relaxations experienced persistent gender-skewed implementation. This section focuses mainly on breaking down the interviews as evidence, the context in which these officials carry out the policy, and what the policy truly looked like to an insider.

To comprehend how these deeply rooted cultural norms were institutionalized through policy implementation, it is imperative to first analyse the resilient son preference that not only survived but also adapted to the constraints of the OCP. This phenomenon manifested through multiple dimensions that revealed the policy's unintended consequences. First, the persistence of sex-selective practices, despite official prohibitions, became a perverse adaptation to birth quotas. Sex-selective abortions—the termination of pregnancies on the basis solely of fetal sex, ensuring that families have a male only child—flourish through

⁶ This, in China, is a municipal-level agency responsible for maintaining demographic records and enforcing birth quotas through household registration (*hukou*) systems.

⁷ This is one of the grassroots administrative units that implemented daily enforcement (e.g., fertility monitoring, fines collection) in urban communities.

underground networks. As Interviewee B⁸ revealed, “Clinics in Hong Kong and Macau offered gender detection services, often packaged to mainland families through WeChat trading.” This technological circumvention contributed to a demographic bomb, with City X, along with other Pearl River Delta⁹ cities, having a significantly higher male–female ratio than the national average (Yicai Global, 2022). The enduring cultural lexicon further reinforced this logic. Interviewee C¹⁰ described how the policy “intensified misogyny” in families where daughters were resented for “failing to be sons”. Some families channel this discontent into infantilism. There is cultural stigma against having female children; thus, the policy has subjected millions of female infants to being aborted, abandoned, or killed (Wall, 2009). However, even in less violent forms, the devaluation of daughters persisted through everyday idioms. Rural official Interviewee E¹¹ articulated this through traditional sayings she heard from the parents she worked with: “‘A married daughter is like water spilled’ - parents see sons as their only old-age support, while a daughter only looks after her in-laws after marriage.” Even educated enforcers such as Interviewee G¹² admitted that these beliefs persisted in modern contexts, noting that “back in my village, only boys sit at the dining table,” revealing how spatial and generational boundaries failed to contain these norms. Most systemically problematic was the policy’s explicit accommodation of rural demands through the so-called “1.5-child” provision. As Interviewee D¹³ explained, this clause allowed rural families a second child if the first child was female, which was justified by claims that “agricultural work requires male labor”. While framed as pragmatic, this exception codified gender essentialism into law, creating institutionalized son preference. These adaptations collectively demonstrate how the policy’s rigid constraints did not eliminate son preference but rather forced it into new, sometimes more virulent forms. As Interviewee G observed, even modern gender equity campaigns struggled against these deeply embedded norms, revealing the limits of social engineering when cultural change is treated as secondary to demographic targets.

Structural unfair treatment for women was also an unintended consequence of the policy, manifesting in forced abortions as well as contraceptive inequalities. Since the policy’s enforcement relied heavily on surveillance and compliance, it often disproportionately targeted women’s bodies. As Interviewee B, a premarital checkup examiner, recounted, “Forced abortions, even at 8 months of pregnancy, were common in rural villages.” This was corroborated by Interviewee D’s account of their cousin being “forced to undergo an abortion after already having a son.” Such practices reflect how demographic targets overrode bodily autonomy. Furthermore, the policy’s implementation reinforced systemic inequalities regarding contraception. In many Chinese provinces, local governments have implemented strict monitoring of IUD insertion rates as a key metric for enforcing birth control policies after the birth of the first or second child. In fact, according to data from the China Health Statistical Yearbook (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010), during the three decades of population control from 1980–2009, China performed a total of 661 million contraceptive procedures on women nationwide, including 99 million tubal ligations, 275 million abortions, and 286 million IUD insertions. These IUD compliance rates often serve as critical performance indicators for family planning cadres and are directly tied to their career evaluations and promotion prospects. As Interviewee E, a rural family planning official, noted, “Our annual assessments included specific targets for IUD insertion rates - typically above 85% for women with one child and 95% for those with two children.” As Interviewee D noted, “Departments were called ‘IUD/Fertility Monitoring,’” referencing the intrauterine device, a female-specific contraceptive requiring invasive insertion, with women as the default site of intervention. Medical leave policies further reflected bias: “Women got three days’ leave for IUD insertion versus seven for male vasectomies” (Interviewee E).

⁸ Family planning officer at a subdistrict since 2017, specializing in premarital health screenings and prenatal care administration.

⁹ The Pearl River Delta, China’s most urbanized region encompassing Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and seven other cities, has consistently reported abnormal sex ratios since the 1990s.

¹⁰ Women at a subdistrict employed since 2012, managing birth registrations and single-child incentive disbursements, offering longitudinal insights into policy shifts from strict OCP enforcement to selective relaxations.

¹¹ Female officer at a Town Family Planning Office since 2003, overseeing statistical reporting and IUD compliance monitoring.

¹² Shareholder-representative cadre at a Village Committee since 2017.

¹³ Male veteran cadre at one of City X’s District Health Bureau since 1999, providing rare perspectives on the One-Child Policy’s peak enforcement era and its bureaucratic evolution.

The policy's enforcement mechanisms were also systematically undermined by widespread evasion tactics devised by families who were reluctant to cooperate, revealing deep fractures between state mandates and local realities. At the heart of these evasion strategies was the manipulation of China's *Hukou* system¹⁴—the household registration framework that determines access to public services such as education, healthcare, and social welfare.¹⁵ Families exploited this system by registering their firsts, often daughters, under relatives' hukou records, effectively hiding births from authorities while ensuring that sons could still claim household resources. As Interviewee A¹⁶ explained, this practice became so institutionalized that it created generations of “invisible children”—particularly daughters—who lacked official documentation yet still strained family budgets. This systematic hukou manipulation created profound intergenerational inequities, particularly in terms of educational and healthcare access. The practice disproportionately harmed daughters who were registered under relatives' hukou in rural or less developed areas, whereas sons retained access to urban household registrations and their superior public services (Kennedy & Shi, 2019). As China's competitive education system increasingly ties school admissions to strict hukou-based zoning, these hidden daughters face permanent disadvantages. As Interviewee F¹⁷ noted, “These girls grow up knowing they were their family's second choice.” As communities learned to game the system, one cadre admitted, “Many villagers actively assisted others in having extra children, viewing one-child subsidies as inadequate” (Interviewee E).

The policy's enforcement apparatus was persistently circumvented through coordinated resistance and localized noncompliance. For example, some young couples simply refused to pay social maintenance fee penalties¹⁸ for extra children and refused to cooperate with cadres (Interviewee B). Others engaged in more calculated defiance: families who secured approval for a second birth after having a firstborn daughter would often reject mandatory sterilization if that second also turned out to be female (Interviewee C). This selective compliance revealed a shrewd understanding of the policy's patriarchal loopholes—families would play by the rules only when those rules aligned with their preference for male heirs. The state's response to this resistance was equally inconsistent, creating a vicious cycle of enforcement arbitrariness. Some local officials turned a blind eye to violations, whether out of sympathy or exhaustion, whereas others doubled down with extreme measures such as forced late-term abortions (Interviewee D). These patterns expose the fundamental paradox of authoritarian population control: the state created a policy that was simultaneously too brutal to ignore and too brittle to withstand everyday defiance.

5. Faces of the Bureaucratic Agency in China

At first glance, our analysis might seem to merely reiterate what existing scholarship has long established: that China's family planning policies were implemented within a rigid structural framework of top-down targets (Jiang et al., 2013; Zhou, 2017; Zhou, 2022), punitive incentives (Zhu et al., 2009), and systemic gender bias (Ebenstein, 2010). Of course, this study does not aim to deny that structural problems and policy designs

¹⁴ The term hukou has been variably translated as “household registration system”, “residence permit system”, or “domicile system”. This study uses hukou following convention in Chinese Studies, except when quoting sources with alternate translations.

¹⁵ China's hukou system categorizes citizens as either rural or urban residents based on ancestral registration, fundamentally shaping access to social services (education, healthcare, housing), employment opportunities, and internal migration rights. The system imposes institutional barriers through residency permit requirements and restricted hukou transfers, effectively regulating labor mobility and creating bureaucratic challenges for migrants - particularly low-resource populations supporting families across provinces (ORF Asia, 2023).

¹⁶ Female official at a Subdistrict Health Bureau (Family Planning Department), appointed in 2020 during the post-Two-Child Policy relaxation period.

¹⁷ A female village-level family planning official appointed 2016.

¹⁸ China's family planning penalties, known as “social maintenance fees,” imposed severe financial burdens on families violating the one-child policy. These fines varied significantly by region and income level, with urban residents facing particularly steep penalties. In Shanghai, for instance, the typical fine for a second child was equivalent to three times the city's average annual posttax income. Wealthier families could be fined over one million yuan (\$160,000), while rural penalties averaged approximately 40,000 yuan (\$6,000), still representing multiple years' income for most villagers. Government records indicate these fees generated an estimated 2 trillion yuan (\$314 billion) in revenue between 1980 and 2013, creating a significant economic disincentive while also becoming a substantial income source for local governments (Secombe, 2013).

are flawed and have played a role in distorting the original equity goal of the OCP. Nearly all the cadres we interviewed acknowledged, explained, and provided examples of the structural inequities embedded in the policy—from the disproportionate contraceptive burden on women to the economic logic underpinning rural son preference. However, their responses to these inequities diverged radically. This divergence forces us to confront a deeper paradox: if the actors are aware of systematic flaws, how might they process these flaws themselves? Ultimately, this study aims to prove that structures matter, but structures are also inhabited by people with personal thoughts and psychological autonomy, the same system that compels some officials to force forced abortions to compel others to quietly approve of unauthorized births. The spectrum of autonomy from complicity to resistance cannot be read off institutional blueprints; it emerges in the interstices where policy meets personhood. Through analysis of interviewee quotes, the study was able to identify three archetypes: believers, who internalized patriarchal norms in their execution of the policy; box-tickers, who recognized inequalities but prioritized meeting quantitative targets; and performers, who reduced gender equality to empty compliance rhetoric.

5.1 Son Preferences in Policy Executioners

The first and most ideologically consequential category of implementers consisted of cadres who not merely enforced patriarchal norms but also actively believed in their cultural and practical necessity, embedding gendered biases directly into policy execution through both formal exceptions and informal discretionary practices. Our interviews reveal how deeply internalized cultural beliefs in officials actively shape policy implementation beyond what structural analyses can explain. Furthermore, our results echo scholars who claim that bureaucratic officials are autonomous people who “confront rules in relation to their own beliefs”. This dynamic transcends structural analyses by showing how shared beliefs (e.g., patrilineal essentialism) bridge the preferences of administrators and operators, transforming policy instruments into tools of gendered reproduction (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2021). Interviewee D, a rural family planning official with 22 years of service experience, articulated this trope explicitly when she defended the so-called “1.5-child” exception: “This household’s contracted farmland requires male labor.” This ostensibly pragmatic justification exposes how policy adaptations codified essentialist gender ideologies into law, creating what Tsai (2007) calls “patrilineal policy feedback loops”. Moreover, even among the most educated urban enforcers, patriarchal notions persist. Interviewee G, a university-trained official in City X’s birth registration bureau¹⁹, confessed: “Just between you and I, even with my degree, I still believe the more sons the merrier.” Her interview revealed systematic noncompliance with geographic restrictions—while official policy mandated automatic approvals only for rural families with a firstborn daughter, she confessed to extending this privilege to urban families by deliberately circumventing the required ‘discreet inspections’ and documentation reviews that urban applicants were supposed to undergo: “every family deserves a chance at a complete set”—a phrase revealing how pronatalist values coexisted with policy enforcement. Operating from a paternalistic logic, Interviewee G admitted to bending rules to enable son-bearing for urban families that she deemed “incomplete” with only daughters. Her actions reflected benevolent sexism, assuming that women’s fulfilment required male offspring, thus justifying noncompliance with geographic restrictions.

The Believers’ impact extended beyond passive rule-bending to active policy distortion. This institutionalized triage system, never codified in policy documents, created *de facto* differentiated citizenship on the basis of reproductive outcomes. When Interviewee D admitted prioritizing IUD checks on women with daughters while occasionally overlooking follow-ups for mothers of sons, his stricter enforcement against daughters’ mothers, paradoxical from G’s lenient treatment of them, also stemmed from son preference: he presumed these women would resist contraception, as he believed sons were more desirable. These interviewees revealed how daily administrative practices cumulatively skewed demographic outcomes beyond what the 32 million missing women statistic (Zhu et al., 2009) can capture. Their internalization of patriarchal norms was so complete that they became what some might call “ideological enforcers”—agents who actively reshaped policy around deeply held beliefs rather than passively responding to structural incentives. This finding forces us to reconsider Zhou’s (2017) promotion tournament theory: while career incentives mattered,

¹⁹ Also known as the Bureau of Birth Registration mentioned previously. The interviewed official here is in charge of overseeing urban applications, her primary duty involved verifying compliance with the “1.5-child” exception (officially restricted to rural families with a firstborn daughter) through household inspections and document audits.

for these actors, patriarchal values provided an independent motivational logic that sometimes overrode even performance metrics. When Interviewee G risked repriming to approving a second birth for her cousin (“because no daughter should grow up without a brother to protect her”), she demonstrated how cultural scripts could trump bureaucratic rationality—a phenomenon understudied in the literature.

The persistence of these attitudes post-2015, as documented in Interviewee D’s claim of her continued approval of third-child applications for families with two daughters, challenges the assumption that relaxing birth restrictions would diminish gender disparities (Chen, 2020). Instead, it suggests that policy shifts alone cannot undo decades of internalized bias among the very enforcers tasked with implementing change.

5.2 Prioritizing Career Advancements Over Abstract Equity

The second category of implementers, whom this study terms “The Box-Tickers,” comprised cadres who recognized systemic gender bias but deliberately subordinated ethical considerations to mechanistic compliance, treating policy enforcement as an exercise in bureaucratic box-checking rather than a transformative social intervention. According to internal documents from Huarong County (2011), one among many jurisdictions with similar requirements, officials faced strict performance criteria, including (1) recording zero (or exceptionally one) unauthorized birth annually; (2) achieving a $\geq 80\%$ child-rearing fine collection rate over three years; and (3) fulfilling $\geq 80\%$ annual surgical contraception quotas (Huarong County Government, 2014). These quotas and criteria address how the quantification of human lives under China’s administrative contracting system (Zhou, 2017) and promotion tournament system (Zhou, 2022) produced a distinct moral detachment, and while not nationally standardized, such requirements reflect widespread practices in multiple counties. In fact, this is a continuing trend, even in the most developed metropolis: the Shenzhen²⁰ Government had already mandated that special attention be given to ideological work concerning late marriage, late childbirth, IUD insertion, sterilization, and remedial measures for unplanned pregnancies, particularly achieving breakthroughs in sterilizing couples with only two daughters. Officials were praised if they achieved a late marriage rate $\geq 90\%$ and a late childbirth rate $\geq 95\%$ (Shenzhen Municipal People’s Government, 1990). In this context, the central government set binding demographic targets and delegated enforcement to localities through contractual obligations (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2015), whereas the promotion tournament system tied cadres’ career advancement to measurable outcomes such as sterilization rates or IUD compliance, thereby incentivizing the reduction of complex social realities into auditable metrics. This is echoed by scholars such as Li and Zhou (2005), who analogously view the Chinese political hierarchy as “a single internal labor market without outside options”. This, coupled with the enormous difference in terms of personal benefits between staying in power and relinquishing power, greatly reinforces the incentive for Chinese officials to hold onto their power (Li & Zhou, 2005). Interviewee C epitomized this submissiveness described by Li and Zhou (2005). When confronted with evidence of sex-selective abortion rates in her jurisdiction, she dismissed scrutiny with bureaucratic fatalism: “This isn’t worth answering - we just followed orders.”

This deflection is often repeated across multiple interviewees, revealing how some people comply without critically pondering the intent of the policy. Interviewee B, a mid-level family planning officer, embodies this mindset. Although she acknowledged the prevalence of forced abortions in her jurisdiction—“We all knew about the late-term cases in Village Y”—she framed her role as merely processing paperwork: “My team did not perform the procedures; we just logged the forms afterward.” The act of masking coercion under the guise of formal compliance lacks specific examination of its manifestations in the OCP enforcement routine. However, crucially, Interviewee B’s team went further and explained how the policy only required one of the parents to sign and agree to sterilization. “After the child [’s birth],” she noted, “sometimes officials would wait until her husband signed the form, even if she never agreed.” Here, the very mechanisms designed to prevent abuse—written consent requirements—were weaponized against women. This logic permeated all levels of implementation. Interviewee A reduced her duties to statistical alchemy: “Every month, the provincial office expected 92% IUD compliance. If our city did not fulfil the quota, government officials working in the

²⁰ Shenzhen’s 1990 directives are striking given its status as China’s most developed metropolis: from 1981 to 1993, Shenzhen’s GDP growth averaged approximately 40% annually, a remarkable rate compared to China’s 9.6% average (Kwan, 2016).

city's reproductive agencies mentioned many National People's Congress meetings as bad examples." When asked about skewed sex ratios in his district, he shrugged: "My evaluation had 27 KPIs. Gender balance was not one. However, if I were to prioritize it, I could lose the potential promotions or salary raises fulfilling tangible quotas could bring me." This lacuna in performance metrics explains why officials could simultaneously acknowledge disparity and perpetuate it: they choose not to resist the system rendered gender inequities invisible by design.

The policy aftermath proves their lasting harm. After 2015, when China shifted to a two-child policy, Box-Tickers had to adapt expeditiously to new quotas. "Suddenly, increased birth rates were a KPI," Interviewee A recalled. "Again, our KPI did not include ensuring maternity leave or single-mother subsidies; it only included the number of new babies born." Thus, we see that systems that incentivize compliance without justice will reproduce inequality, regardless of policy wording. The Box-Tickers also had the convenient excuse of moral outsourcing: cadres such as Interviewee B would often, during the interview, deflect responsibility to uphold equity onto policy wordings using phrases such as "the rules tie my hands up" and "it's not up to me to do anything when I have a family to feed". This rhetorical manoeuvre of invoking policy as an immutable force reveals how bureaucratic systems convert ethical dilemmas into administrative trivia. This group of bureaucrats contrasts with the first category of "True Believers" because where "True Believers" distorted policy through ideological conviction, Box-Tickers did so through amoral pragmatism.

5.3 Bureaucratic Neutralization of Reform

The third and most institutionally sophisticated category of implementers—"The Performers"—mastered the art of performative compliance, deploying progressive gender equality language while systematically hollowing it of substantive meaning. Performers weaponize the policy's ambiguity to neutralize the gender equity mandate while maintaining plausible deniability. These groups of interviewees show how strategic cynicism can institutionalize inequality through the very language designed to combat it.

This phenomenon is extremely prominent in the policy pilot zones. There, officials deployed feminist rhetoric as performative compliance, using egalitarian language masks regressive practices. In the broader context of China's campaigns advocating for the acceptance of daughter-only households, billboards are a common deployment. The content of billboards varies but almost always overtly presents an ideology where females legitimately pass on the family name in a traditionally patriarchal society. Specifically, in City X, an iconic billboard presents a young girl wearing a blue dress and pink shoes, smiling and is centered on the billboard while her parents are in the background smiling. The caption would equalize having a boy and girl and assert that girls can also continue the family line (Dodge & Suter, 2008). However, as Interviewee E admitted, "Persuasion work and ideological education were tied to performance evaluations... our entire committee²¹ was mobilized to promote equity. However, they're not good posters, usually people just ignored them when we put them up. This is especially the case because the campaigns are conducted in relatively inconspicuous public places, and there are more pressing tasks than aggressively pushing these messages." This confession reveals how superficial solutions were given to address inequity while ignoring structural barriers, as echoed by feminist scholars, who criticize the poster as typical propaganda in a patriarchy and that it is more about redressing negative pressure from human rights organizations, not about improving the lives of China's girls (Zhang et al., 2024). Interviewee H, who oversaw educational campaigns, boasted about "integrating gender equality into 105 school curricula" while privately admitting, "No one checks if teachers actually teach it. The compliance report just needs the lesson plan templates."

More disturbingly, the performers did not merely neglect gender equity; rather, they perverted its mechanisms. Another official remark corroborates this further: "Mom-friendly jobs such as e-commerce livestream hosts...20-minute training network. Nevertheless, I believe that we fail to address structural issues. I mean, rural areas lack childcare, and without daycare coverage, mothers can't go to work; it would mean leaving their baby behind. This is impossible."

²¹ China's family planning bureaucracy historically operated through multilevel committees that coordinated policy implementation across party, government, and mass organizations. Every district, street, or city has cadres in charge of executing the OCP, and these groups included propaganda committees responsible for awareness campaigns, policy education, and ideological mobilization.

This category's theoretical significance is twofold. First, the performers demonstrated how bureaucratic careerism could sustain disparity through the calculated performance of compliance. Second, it reveals a loophole in Zhou's (2017) promotion tournament model: where cadres were rewarded for visible adherence to targets, they perfected the art of staged compliance—gaming systems not by resisting them but by only fulfilling their most measurable and least substantive requirements. The post-2015 policy shift magnified this dynamic. Interviewee E, now overseeing inclusive parenting programs, claimed that “we track attendance at equality seminars, not whether fathers actually change diapers.” This underscores our core argument: when performance eclipses substance, even progressive policy becomes regressive in practice.

6. Conclusion

This study begins with a paradox: China's OCP, designed to be female empowering in principle, failed to achieve equity in practice. While the literature attributed this failure to structural incentives—top to down quotas, promotion tournaments, and economic rationales for son preference—it could not fully explain why disparity persisted even after policy relaxation or why enforcers actively reproduced inequality despite formal prohibitions.

By shifting the analytical lens to street-level implementation, we uncovered the critical role of bureaucratic agency in mediating policy outcomes. Our microlevel methodology, focused on frontline enforcers in City X, revealed three distinct patterns of agency that collectively distorted the OCP's equity goals. True believers internalize patriarchal norms, embedding son preference into policy exceptions such as the rural “1.5-child” loophole. Box-Tickers reduced human lives to auditable metrics (IUD rates, birth quotas), prioritizing career advancement over ethical considerations. Performers weaponized progressive rhetoric to mask indifferent or ineffective practices, hollowing out reforms through performative compliance.

These findings align with structural analyses (Jiang et al., 2013; Zhou, 2017) but go further by revealing how grassroots actors actively reinterpreted mandates, confirming Lipsky's (1981) theory of street-level discretion while complicating it with the authoritarian context. Importantly, our typology bridges a gap in the literature. While Zhu et al. (2009) quantified skewed sex ratios and Hu (2017) analysed the cultural roots of son preference, we show how these outcomes were institutionalized through daily bureaucratic practice. This study's central claim is simple: policy shifts alone cannot undo the durable norms of enforcers who, whether through belief, careerism, or cynicism, transformed demographic control into gendered discipline. This study challenges the assumption that authoritarian policies operate through monolithic compliance. Even under rigid hierarchies, street-level actors exercise autonomy: not to resist but to reshape mandates in ways that reinforce inequality. Future reforms must confront not only policy design but also the human intermediaries who translate words into action. Equity requires dismantling the bureaucratic cultures that normalize disparity as “just following orders.”

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