

# Rethinking Pregnancy-China's Three-Child Policy and Women's Predicament

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**Abstract:** *Gestational labour is usually unrecognised and uncompensated, which the state could exploit as a tribute to developing society. As a direct response to the sharp decline in fertility rate, Chinese authorities announced a three-child policy, which will aggravate Chinese women's motherhood penalty and place them in a further predicament. I will propose a rethinking of the pregnancy based on Sophie Lewis's family abolition theory, which I believe through valorising gestational labour and stressing the social responsibility of raising children, provides possible solution to the contradiction between women's right and country's prosperity.*

**Keywords:** *three-child policy, motherhood penalty, Sophie Lewis, pregnancy, women's predicament, family abolition*

"It is a wonder we let fetuses inside us". Sophie Lewis's radical reconceptualization of pregnancy proclaims that childbearing is a labour that has long been exploited and overlooked, and so is mothering (2019). In her new book, *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019), the Marxist-feminist declares that all gestators should be viewed as surrogates and that we should substitute the family with universal care. Although this perception is too idealized for the modern world and too "communism" in some critics' view, I believe that it offers an idea to reframe the system that endlessly exploits women's uncompensated labour such as gestation and housework.

## 1. Breeding Prosperity

Munro (2019) attests that the continuation of society relies on the reproduction of humans and the care of children who will grow up to form the next generation of waged and unwaged workers; gestators, in this sense, are "merely tools of the power structure engaged in the work of producing the endless supply of babies required by the construction of the nation". This theory can be testified by the latest update on China's pro-natalist policy. Chinese women's fate has always been deeply affected by the country's birth control policies. Since 1980s, China's government had prescribed a one-child policy for married couples, potentially leading to a looming demographic crisis. On the one hand, this policy put pressure on women as some of them had to go through abortions or conducted birth control procedures against their will; on the other hand, bearing and rearing only one child to some extent greatly liberated women from the culturally constructed private sphere of life and promoted their opportunities of receiving a higher education. Like any other country with a rapid development associated with population dividend, Chinese society faces a shrinking workforce and an ageing population. Hence, the government abolished the one-child policy in 2015 and began allowing couples to have two children. However, data suggests that the two-child policy did not result in the expected wave of births, and the pregnancy rate among young women continued to decrease. The number of newborn babies fell to a nearly six-decade low in 2020 (Wee and Myers, 2021). Consequently, on May 31st 2021, the Chinese administration declared a further relaxation of birth-control regulations by implementing a three-child policy, which, without following measures to protect women's rights, will harm women's prosperity in life and work.

## 2. Gestation is Uncompensated Work

All these changes in policies render women demographic tools at the ruling class's will, an idea that has been all too familiar with Marxist feminists. According to Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the family was "where patriarchy and capitalism worked in tandem to produce 'willing, alienated workers', where women became little more than 'instruments of production' for the

men who lorded over them”. Socialist feminists further developed this idea. In 1970 *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone identifies the family as the basis for women’s oppression. It makes women an underclass by forcing them to “bear the brunt of gestational labour”. This implies that gestation is a kind of work that puts women in an exploitable state, which was brought up again with the claim that “every miscarriage is a work accident” in *Wages Against Housework* (Federici, 1975). Marxist-feminist Mary O’Brien reaffirms in *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981) that gestators are workers and pregnancy is strenuous labour, of which the value is often underestimated. This kind of labour can be excruciating as well. In the memoir *The Argonauts* (2015), Maggie Nelson states that “you don’t do labour; labour does you”, and she describes the childbirth process as if something “runs you over like a truck...If all goes well, the baby will make it out alive, and so will you. Nonetheless, you will have touched death along the way. You will have realized that death will do you too, without fail and without mercy.” Thus, because of the immense physical and emotional labour it requires of those who do it, pregnancy is an “extreme sport”, claimed by Sophie Lewis (2019).

However, giving birth is just the starting point of the endless labour that women cannot escape. Lewis (2019) reminds us that we are the products of gestational work and its “equally laborious aftermaths”. Mothering is another set of responsibilities and hard work mostly placed on the gestators.

In Federici’s belief (1975), because housework is unpaid, it cannot provide the possible agency compared to a waged job. Thus, it is a “pervasive manipulation” perpetrated in the form of violence against women. Housework, she posits, has been “transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character” (2). Since pregnancy is coded into women’s biological identity, unwaged work, including housework and childcare, is conceived as feminine attributes, reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, and gestation is not labour. This is how capitalism exploits those intrinsic elements of humans – a natural connection between mothers and children in this case (Federici, 1975). And it is also what Chinese population policymakers forget to consider when they encourage women to perform more of the unrecognized work.

### 3. Motherhood Penalty and Women’s Predicament

The perceived cultural tension between the “ideal worker” and the “good mother” renders motherhood a devalued status in workplace settings (Blair-Loy, 2003). The gendered division of labour seriously undermines women’s socio-economic status. It entrenches the normative expectation that mothers will and should engage in “intensive” mothering that prioritizes meeting the needs of dependent children above all other activities (Blair-Loy, 2003). This cultural conception about the role of mothers is in the clash with what is believed to be the “ideal worker” - unencumbered by competing demands and sacrifices all other concerns for work. The contradiction between “family devotion” and “work devotion” (Blair-Loy, 2003) links motherhood with incompetence and inability to commit in the workplace, and therefore, forges a motherhood penalty featuring a wage gap, hiring discrimination, and a “motherhood ceiling” that hurls their career path. And this motherhood penalty becomes a womanhood penalty because employers assume that any woman wants more than one child. Regardless of their genuine commitment and effort towards their jobs, and with or without a child, women are seen as liabilities instead of valuable human assets to employers as they could have as many as two, and now three children, and therefore take maternity leave three times and increase human resources cost. Against the backdrop of increasingly intensive working rhythm in the Chinese job market, exemplified by the “996” working mode, which requires employees to work 12 hours a day and six days a week, the motherhood penalty for women is only going to worsen. As the work requires more dedication and time commitment from workers, women with children or could have children will be regarded as less hireable from a cost-benefit perspective.

The pressure does not just come from work. It also originates from family and social expectations. Jacqueline Rose (2018) wrote that “mothers always fail... in so far as mothers are seen as the fons et origo of the world, there is nothing easier than to make social deterioration look like something which it’s the sacred duty of mothers to prevent”. This tendency to blame mothers for everything suggests that women is usually prescribed the duty of parenting by rigid gender norms. It is the wish of family members and society that women are to be the uncomplaining, fully devoted mothers and housewives for the good of the family and the country. Based on the statistics by World Bank, HSBC points out in its demographic report that, compared with other Asian countries, China had the most significant fall in the employment rate among women from 2017 through 2020, which could be attributed to the two-child policy (Linde and Pomeroy, 2021). Faced with workplace discrimination and rising pressure from

society and family, more women chose to return to family life instead of pursuing a career.

Even worse, the current measures to protect women's rights against workplace discrimination are not enough. Women's marital status is still being asked during job interviews; public child care service is still lacking. From this perspective, the three-child policy is tantamount to urging women to participate in more unwaged labour, making them less competitive at work and pushing them back to family life.

In addition, while the state encourages women to be stay-at-home moms, Chinese women are becoming more and more career-oriented. With the highest higher education enrolment rate (Gender Gap Report 2021), Chinese young women seek a stable job for empowerment and a sense of security. However, having to do both paid and unpaid work as career persons and housewives/mothers means more laborious work instead of liberation.

Overall, the pressure from the government and family expectations, the discrimination from the workplace in the form of motherhood penalty, and the personal career ambition place Chinese women in a severe predicament.

#### **4. Even Tools Need Good Maintenance or They Will Strike**

If the government continues to view women as demographical tools, they had better provide better conditions for the "tools". With the clash between "dedicated workers" and "good mothers" unresolved, the pressure from the state for young women to get married, stay married and have children will only further estrange them from it. According to *The Economist* (Beijing, Jun 3r, 2021), China's fertility rate, 1.3, is among the lowest globally; only 12m babies were born in 2020, a drop of almost 20% from 2019. This suggests that the encouragement from the Chinese government to have more children is not getting the expected results. Many Chinese young women display reluctance to marriage and pregnancy. Zhang is part of that resistance. "I'm determined not to get married or have children," she said. "It is not only a personal choice but also my political statement against gender inequality in the whole system" (Yeung and Gan, 2021).

Brown (2020) believes that women can be united as a class to defy policy makers' will through a collective refusal to make more babies. In "The Hidden Fight over Women's Work" (2020), she argues that women participating in a spontaneous refusal to produce children is similar to "a wildcat strike in an industrial labour struggle". If women were to choose to go on a gestational "strike", the Chinese fertility rate would go in the opposite direction of the rulers' will. Thus, the Chinese government needs to stop the capitalistic exploitation of women as uncompensated gestators and starts to consider implementing proper population policy to protect women's rights. After all, a woman's uterus is not a "water tap" that the authorities can turn off and on for their wish to serve the country's prosperity.

#### **5. Rethinking Pregnancy and Abolishing the Family – A Proposal to Save Women**

Rethinking women's default role as gestator could potentially save women from the strenuous double labour without dampening the nation's population goal. Federici (1975) advocates for wages for domestic labour, arguing that by doing so, we can stop the endless exploitation of women at home. Valorising gestational labour could not only raise gestators' status but also contributes to female empowerment. Munro (2019) suggests that to perceive gestation as labour is to "inscribe gestational workers with revolutionary subjectivity". Moreover, a reconceptualization of pregnancy is necessary to stop the capitalistic abuse of gestators' innate features. Separating mothers and gestators envisages a different future where pregnancy could be gender-neutral. In *Happy Abortions* (2017), Erica Millar argues that pregnant people "are not automatically mothers". Therefore, women's traditional work, such as mothering and gestating, can be refused or redistributed. Lewis (2019) adds that mothers are not natural entities, and nor is mothering some sort of "mechanical, automatic process"; "it's a practice of grounding sociality." For Lewis, this sociality requires us to rethink responsibility for care from the perspective of "mutual aid and comradeship" instead of "supposedly natural kin"; in other words, to build "a gestational commune" (5). She proposes a sharing mechanism, a gestational division of labour. To achieve this, public perception of gestation and children needs to change first. Angela Davis (1998) calls for a "reconceptualization of family and reproductive rights in terms that move from the private to the public, from the individual to the social" (220). For her, children are considered public goods because children will become tomorrow's workforce, an idea the Chinese government knows all too well. In conclusion, Lewis (2019) wishes to abolish the notion of family. "Everyone, regardless of

gender, is a surrogate; we mother each other.” For her, we should live in a society of universal care where everyone cares for everyone else.

Although family abolition and full surrogacy are utopian visions for the current society, it provides new angles to improve women’s situation while reproducing the country’s labour force. Including gestation and housework into the salary system sounds like a demanding task for any policymaker. However, it is not impossible. If the Chinese government wants women to undertake the “mission” of generating the country’s future, more stimulus could give rise to more responses. It could also help gestators earn their long-deserved respect. After all, going through the “extreme sport” from once to now three times is a great sacrifice for anyone worthy of an extra treat.

Besides, a gender-neutral pregnancy reconsiders women’s default role as caregivers, and presents them with more choices. Under this circumstance, giving birth but failing to be a caretaker is no longer solely a woman’s fault; society as a community shares that responsibility. We cannot blame mothers for the failure of society anymore. In reality, “a gestational commune” (Lewis, 2019) could be the establishment of more comprehensive child care facilities that will undoubtedly relieve some stress from small family units and solve some of the concerns women might have before conception. It also promotes the idea of a universal form of love and care that will not only free mothers from intensive mothering, but also give us an opportunity to learn to care for each other, bond with each other not from a biological point of view, and generate love and support in case we cannot gain satisfaction from blood relations.

Lewis’s conclusion is to abolish the family and redefine the reproduction of humans as a social function. This proposal is progressive because it entirely undercuts the importance of family units to the development of society. If the core family is no longer a fixed unit of care, involuntary labour will no longer be mandatory for supporting the functioning of the unit. The family will no longer be a “sweatshop” where women are forced to be the “instruments of production” (Marx and Engels, 1848) and “bear the brunt of gestational labour” (Firestone, 1970). By breaking up the evil of the family, gestators can retreat their independence and subjectivity. Chinese women can choose to give birth to as many young babies as the government wants without sacrificing anything that makes them good workers or passionate participants in social matters. If the state needs the reproduction of workers, then it should be the public’s shared responsibility to build up a system that could boost the welfare of all of the gestational labour.

Some might criticise Lewis’s theory, saying that it fails to account for the mysterious variety of love only biological motherhood can offer and sabotages the parent-child bond. But as far as I am concerned, family abolition is not abandoning the traditional family love we cherish and gain strength from, but rather purifying the intrinsic nature of family and detoxifying its exploitative social function. And promoting full surrogacy is not devaluing the mother’s importance or any family members’ love but expanding and proliferating our love for each other, which simultaneously give mothers and other caretakers more freedom to live. Just as Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, “abolition is not just absence, but a reconfiguration of relations among people to make something rather than erasing something” (Petitjean, 2018).

How to abolish the conventional way of thinking about pregnancy and boost the nation’s birth rate without placing the whole burden on gestators, and how to subsidise and support gestational labour are questions the Chinese government and any other countries that are suffering from a low fertility rate should consider. Instead of milking women as if they were cows, it is high time that the government did something to increase the welfare of its citizens. Otherwise, *The Handmaid’s Tale* will be another prophecy coming true.

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