

# Having fewer children reduced the education gap in China

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A new study uses China's one-child policy to show that having fewer children leads women to achieve higher levels of education.

The research found that the [one-child policy](#) alone accounted for about half of the additional [education](#) that [women](#) in China achieved after the policy was put in place.

"The findings suggest that some Chinese women anticipated having fewer children due to the one-child policy and they postponed marriage and postponed having children while they increased their education," said Xuan Jiang, a postdoctoral researcher in economics at The Ohio State University.

Jiang's study was published recently in the journal *Contemporary Economic Policy*.

Population data collected by the Chinese government since 2010 made it possible for Jiang to analyze how fertility decisions affect education in women. There has been no other way to study the issue in this way before, she said.

As such, she emphasized that the study is not defending the one-child policy, which critics say led to human rights abuses. Moreover, the results may have broader implications beyond China for explaining the link between motherhood and education.

"Economists have wanted to know why the education gap between men and women has closed in many countries. This study shows that reductions in fertility may play an important role," she said.

Jiang used data from the ongoing Chinese Family Panel Studies, a nationally representative annual longitudinal survey conducted by Peking University and funded by the Chinese government.

China's one-child policy was instituted in 1979 to control the country's rapidly growing population. But it didn't apply equally to all groups. This

study focused on the Han, the ethnic majority in China who were most strictly controlled by the law.

Jiang compared two groups: an [older generation](#) (born 1950-1959) whose education decisions would not have been affected by the one-child policy and a younger generation (born 1960-1980) whose decisions would be impacted.

Overall, while men born in 1950 had significantly more education than women born that year, men and women born in 1980 had about equal levels—nearly nine years of schooling.

Jiang first compared Han women versus Han men from older and younger generations.

The results showed that, after taking into account other factors that could have affected [educational attainment](#), the one-child policy was responsible for increasing Han women's years of schooling by 1.28 years compared to Han men. That explains 53 percent of the 2.38-year increase in education attainment of women born between 1950 and 1980.

"Being able to explain more than half of educational attainment with one factor—the one-child policy—is enormous," Jiang said. "That is very surprising for economists."

She noted that in a broader context, women in countries worldwide experienced increases in education in the same time frame. Could there be other worldwide social forces at work that affected women in China?

To control for that possibility, Jiang conducted a second analysis that compared Han women to non-Han women in China who were not subject to the strict one-child policy.

The results were nearly identical to the first analysis: The Han women's educational attainment increased by 1.29 years compared to non-Han women.

Jiang did another test, looking specifically at young women who had one or more parents who were members of the ruling Communist party.

"The Communist Party implemented the one-child policy and there were punishments for party members whose families did not follow the birth quota," Jiang said.

"So you would expect that the one-child policy would have an even stronger effect for young women whose parents were members."

And that is indeed what she found: The one-child policy had a more robust impact on increasing education among children of Communist Party members.

Jiang also analyzed what happened to women after their schooling was over.

Results showed that the one-child policy delayed women's first marriages, delayed how soon they had a child and increased how many entered the job market.

"Women anticipated having fewer children, which may have delayed their entry into parenthood and even delayed the decision to get married, which allowed them to get more education," Jiang said.

"And with the further education, they were more likely to get jobs."

The results show the powerful influence that the one-child policy had on Chinese society, she said.

"The one-child [policy](#) fundamentally changed the lives and family structure of the generations born in the 1960s and later."

**More information:** Xuan Jiang. FAMILY PLANNING AND WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: EVIDENCE FROM THE ONE-CHILD POLICY, *Contemporary Economic Policy* (2020). DOI: [10.1111/coep.12462](https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12462)

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