

'I almost lost my will to live': Preference for sons is leaving young women in China exploited and abused

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

China has a [gender crisis](#). The country has [a huge surplus of men](#)—around 722 million compared to 690 million women in 2022. This is largely because of [sex-selective abortions](#) linked to China's one-child policy, which ended in 2015.

Though popular belief is that the policy was strictly enforced, many Chinese couples managed to [have more than one child](#) by paying fines, accepting benefit deprivations, or proclaiming their membership of a minority ethnic group. Often, they chose to do so because their first child was a girl. The [one-child policy](#) lasted three and a half decades, replaced by the two-child policy in 2016 and the three-child policy in 2021. But even today, the belief that boys have more value than girls persists.

Traditionally, having a male heir is believed essential in continuing the [family](#) bloodline and surname. Women, on the other hand, are expected to "marry out" of their kin into their husband's family, where they become obliged to take care of their in-laws and produce sons. But in some families who also have sons, the daughters are expected to financially provide for their birth families too.

This cultural norm has affected the well-being of young [women](#), many of whom now suffer from financial, labor and [emotional abuse](#) as a result of son preference.

Popular Chinese television series in recent years—[Ode to Joy \(2016\)](#), [All is Well \(2019\)](#) and [I Will Find You a Better Home \(2020\)](#)—have sparked renewed attention to the family discrimination and ill-treatment that many female children continue to endure in contemporary Chinese society.

Many of these women have taken to social media to discuss their situation. [In my recent research](#), I studied some of the thousands of posts and [video clips](#) dedicated to the topic of son preference, posted on Chinese websites like Zhihu (a Q&A forum) and Bilibili (a video-sharing site). My findings show how difficult it is for women to break this exploitative relationship, even when they have grown up.

'I almost lost my will to live'

In families with strong son preference, daughters are molded from birth to understand that they are unworthy receivers of family resources, forever indebted to their family for being born. This contributes to a deep sense of insecurity and low self-esteem and leads to a lifelong obligation to repay their "debt" by providing for the family.

A second-year senior high school student (roughly equivalent to year 9 in England and Wales) commented on how her destiny is being shaped by expectations that she support her family financially. This has left her feeling worthless, unloved and even suicidal:

"My mum has been very frank with me and keeps reminding me that, "I bring you up for old age security, you should give me how much a month later and you should provide for your younger brother and help with his studies financially." I have never felt loved, and I am always eager to be loved. I am insecure and I have very [low self-esteem](#) ... I wanted to jump from stairs to commit suicide so that I could finally be happy."

Another post highlighted how son preference is instilled even in young girls, through misogynistic and demeaning remarks:

"When my auntie was pregnant and I was still little, my uncle told me that I must pray it's going to be a little brother because only then we will get to eat chicken drumsticks. If it's a sister, we will only eat chicken-shit."

One woman described the desperation she felt, being forced to provide for her family's monthly living expenses. She wrote that during the Chinese New Year, she even gave the [hongbao](#) (a monetary gift) that she had received from her boyfriend, to her mother.

"All my giving is a total bullshit. The first few months when I had my first job, I was pestered by them so much for money, I almost lost my will to live. Even though I have a boyfriend now, I am prepared for a break-up at any time. I wanted to know why when they knew I was a girl, they didn't just strangle me to death."

Socially isolated

Many commenters expressed their frustration and anger against the tradition. But others showed little sympathy, not understanding why these women don't leave such abusive situations.

The struggles these women face are deeply culturally ingrained, due to values inherent in [Confucianism](#) that emphasize male patrilineal descent and inheritance, as well as submission to parental authority.

Within families, these values are socialized from an early age, making them difficult patterns to break. It is hard for women from strong son preference families to find fulfilling relationships outside of them, as they become socially isolated and more entrenched in family expectations.

While, in theory, these women are often financially independent and capable of managing their own relationships, they often lose their friendship circles and significant relationships over time.

Widespread beliefs persist among the general public, and men in particular, that devoted daughters will "drain your resources" to satisfy the endless demands and expenses of their natal family. Women are ridiculed as "Fu Di Mo" which translates into "monster of younger brother worshipping."

Like in many [western countries](#), promoting gender equality and women's

empowerment has recently become [a priority](#) to addressing the gender imbalance and low fertility rate in China. The [tradition of son preference](#) continues to cause emotional and social harm for girls in both rural villages and [modern, urban China](#).

China urgently needs policies and intervention programs that [tackle this tradition](#), or it will continue to limit women's opportunities and their ability to reach their full potential.

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