



Chinese Province to Let Unmarried People Have Children to Tackle Falling Birth Rate

Health authorities in China's southwestern province of Sichuan will permit unmarried individuals to have children, raise a family, and qualify for benefits previously allocated only to married couples in the most recent attempt to boost the country's plummeting birth rate.

Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mandates that only married women are lawfully permitted to give birth, record low marriage and birth rates in recent years have prompted the provincial authorities to revise a 2019 rule to include singles who want to have children.



Jack_Yue/iStock/Getty Images Plus
Chengdu, Sichuan Province

Starting February 15, married couples and any individuals who want to have children will be permitted to register with the government in China's fifth-most-populous province. There will be no cap on the number of children they can register for.

The measure hopes to "promote long-term and balanced population development," Sichuan's health commission declared in a statement on its website.

Previously, the commission had permitted only married couples who wished to have up to two children to register with the local authorities.

Notably, China's population contracted last year for the first time in about 60 years. Hence, authorities are pressured to unveil incentives and measures to enhance population growth.

Also, a nationwide registry system for couples to register with local authorities facilitates the provision of maternity insurance to cover medical bills, while allowing married women keep their salary during maternity leave.

These benefits will now be applied to single women and men in Sichuan, which ranks seventh in the nation in terms of those older than 60 — who comprise more than 21 percent of Sichuan's population, government figures indicated.

In other parts of China, local authorities have introduced a slew of measures to motivate couples to have children, including monthly stipends of several hundred yuan for new parents and one-off "birth bonuses."

Major cities including Beijing and Shanghai have increased maternity leave to up to 158 days.

Furthermore, health authorities last year introduced guidelines mandating local governments to provide nurseries, albeit for a fee.

A huge part of China's demographic downturn can be traced back to its draconian and anti-life one-child policy enforced between 1980 and 2015. Due to this policy, many parents who preferred males to



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females aborted their babies once they found out that their babies were female.

Consequently, China is presently experiencing a demographic crisis that observers caution could stifle economic growth and add strain to public resources, despite the country ending its one-child policy in 2016 and permitting couples to have up to three children in 2021.

Meanwhile, struggling parents in China have asserted that the challenges of balancing work and childcare in a costly and highly competitive society with limited help from the state are the main causes for the country's falling birth rate.

Chinese parents told AFP that juggling work in China's corporate rat race with their wish to give their children the best in life was discouraging many from having more children.

"Many households find it extremely difficult to raise one child and can't handle it very well," said Wenjing, a parenting blogger in her late 30s who lambasted "flimsy" government support.

"With the pandemic, a lot of households really suffered financially. Under these hard circumstances, many people decided not to have any more kids," she said.

"I think whatever policies released now will be very insubstantial."

Besides, many difficulties remain, with most workplaces lacking breastfeeding facilities.

A place in a private kindergarten can cost anywhere between 5,000 yuan and 20,000 yuan a month in Beijing, based on figures from the Asia Society Policy Institute.

Many urban youth also live far from their extended families, thus they are deprived of a traditional source of childcare.

For Nancy, a young Beijing mother in her early 30s who works in e-commerce, managing work and childcare is an uphill challenge.

"I can't balance it at all," she told AFP.

"If you want to breastfeed the child then you basically have to give up work," she said.

"But because of our situation, we cannot give up our jobs."

Social expectations about how children should be raised also contribute to parents' pressures, she admitted, with ambitious parents desiring their children to get the best.

In modern China, women usually have to choose between parenting and having a career.

"If you have lower standards then perhaps you won't be as tired, but everyone mostly raises their kids in a meticulous way," Nancy added.

"If you insist on leaving work at five to look after your child, less work may get assigned to you and you will be surpassed by your colleagues."

Many parents depend on family support networks, such as the role of elderly relatives who have traditionally helped out in the raising of children.

"The ability of our generation to go to work is basically through the exploitation of our grandparents, who help us raise our children for a few years," Nancy said.

Ivy Meng, in her early 30s, told AFP her young son was "mostly raised by his grandparents" during China's Covid-19 lockdowns, when schools were closed and she and her husband continued to work full-time.



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When it came to choosing between work and time with her child during the week, she chose the former.

“I really don’t do any parenting,” she admitted.

“I return home very late each night and don’t see my son much.”

Yet Meng told AFP she considers herself one of the fortunate ones, as many young Chinese women lack such support networks.

“A lot of the time, their husbands don’t want to shoulder the responsibility of parenting and their parents or in-laws are not willing to help,” she said.

“No matter how much the government gives me or if they offer a better environment, I wouldn’t choose to have more kids,” Nancy said.

“It’s not something that can be solved financially.”

In 2019, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated that the population would peak in 2029 at 1.44 billion, while a UN Population Prospects report projected it would continue increasing until 2031, topping out at 1.46 billion.



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