A Prosperous China Says 'Men Preferred,' and Women Lose

By Amy Qin

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TIANJIN, China — Bella Wang barely noticed the section on the application inquiring whether she was married or had children. Employers in China routinely ask women such questions, and she had encountered them before in job interviews.

It was a surprise, though, after she accepted a position as a manager at the company, a big language-training business in the northern city of Tianjin, when she was told the job came with a condition.

As a married woman without children, she would have to sign a "special agreement" promising not to get pregnant for two years. If she broke that promise, the company said, she could be fired, without compensation.

Ms. Wang, 32, fluent in English with a degree in international trade, was outraged — but she signed.

Such agreements are illegal but increasingly common in China, where discrimination against women is on the rise. From the womb to the workplace, from the political arena to the home, women in China are losing ground at every turn.

Driving this regression in women's status is a looming aging crisis, and the relaxing of the draconian "one-child" birth restrictions that contributed to the graying population. The Communist Party now wants to try to stimulate a baby boom.

But instead of making it easier for women to both work and have children, China's leader, Xi Jinping, has led a resurgence in traditional gender roles that has increasingly pushed women back into the home.

"When the state policymakers needed women's hands, they sent them to do labor," said Wang Zheng, professor of women's studies and history at the University of Michigan. "Now they want to push women into marriage and have a bunch of babies."

In a stark turnaround from the early decades of Communist rule, officials now look the other way when employers, reluctant to cover costs related to maternity leave, openly pick men over women for hiring and promotions. At home, women are increasingly disadvantaged in divorce and losing out on gains in the country's property boom.

As a result, Chinese women are being squeezed out of the workplace by employers who penalize them if they have children, and by party officials urging them to focus on domestic life. At the same time, those who have managed to keep working are increasingly earning less relative to men.

To get her job, Bella Wang was forced to sign an agreement promising not to get pregnant for two years.
Giulia Marchi for The New York Times

Mao famously told women they held up “half the sky” and outlawed arranged marriage and the practice of taking concubines. Despite political turmoil and persistent bias, Chinese women entered the work force in record numbers, began to enjoy greater rights and were celebrated for their economic contributions.

Thirty years ago, when the country first began implementing market reforms, Chinese women earned just under 80 percent of what men made. By 2010, according to the latest official data, the average income of women in Chinese cities had fallen to 67 percent that of men, and in the countryside 56 percent.

In a break with the Marxist ambition of liberating women from patriarchal oppression, President Xi has called on women to embrace their "unique role" in the family and "shoulder the responsibilities of taking care of the old and young, as well as educating children."

"No Communist leader before Xi has dared to openly say that women should shoulder the domestic burden," Professor Wang said.

Eager to preserve the stability of the family unit, the party has also done little to help women following a recent court ruling that weakened their claim to property in divorce proceedings. And with divorce numbers on the rise, millions of Chinese women have been cut out of the nation's real-estate boom, experts say.

To be sure, with China's rapid economic transformation, women are living longer, earning more money and graduating from university in greater numbers than ever before.

But the country's gains have disproportionately benefited men. Gender is now one of the most important factors behind income inequality in China, perhaps more so than even the longstanding divide separating Chinese cities and the countryside, according to a recent study.

Over the past decade, China's ranking in the World Economic Forum's global gender gap index has declined significantly — from 57th out of 139 countries in 2008 to 103rd in 2018.

China once enjoyed one of the highest rates of female labor force participation in the world, with nearly three in four women working as recently as 1990. Now the figure is down to 61 percent, according to the International Labor Organization.

“When it came to promoting women’s rights, China used to be in the lead,” said Feng Yuan, a feminist scholar in Beijing. “But now we are falling behind.”

“The approach to raising children has totally changed,” said Wang Yan, a stay-at-home mother in the eastern city of Yantai. Many women are leaving the work force as a result. Yan Cong for The New York Time

'Either way, we will lose'

Since signing the special agreement two years ago, Ms. Wang has been terrified of getting pregnant, and for good reason: In her first months on the job, a pregnant co-worker was fired.

Ms. Wang wanted to have a baby, too, she recalled, but signed the contract because she was excited about the job. Reporting her employer to the authorities also seemed unlikely to do much good.

"I'm still a Chinese woman," she said recently in a coffee shop in Tianjin. "Even though we have some complaints, we cannot risk bringing them up. Because either way, we will lose."

Forced to choose between career and family, Ms. Wang chose career. Many other Chinese women are dropping out of the work force.

The return of Chinese women to the home began in the 1980s, when mass layoffs at state factories meant women were often the first to be let go. It accelerated with rising expectations around child rearing.

Wang Yan, 35, a stay-at-home mother in the eastern city of Yantai, said that her parents "only needed to make sure their kids weren't hungry."

Office workers taking a lunch break in Beijing last year. Women in Chinese cities earn 67 percent of what men make on average, and that gap is growing. Gilles Sabrié for The New York Times

Now, facing a more competitive economy, parents, usually mothers, are expected to supervise homework, after-school tutoring and extracurricular activities — all while navigating safety scandals involving baby formula, day care and vaccinations.

At work, managers are eager to rid their payrolls of women who might need maternity leave.

Since 2012, China has required companies to offer at least 14 weeks of paid leave to women having children. Fathers typically get two weeks. The disparity means help-wanted ads often openly specify "men only" or "men preferred."

This is illegal, but even government agencies do it. One ministry in Beijing specified "men only" for more than half the jobs it advertised over the course of a year, an investigation by Human Rights Watch found.

Employers often see women like Ms. Wang who are married without children as the biggest gamble for hiring or promotions. And reports abound of pregnant women being reassigned to less important positions, or returning from leave to find their jobs have been filled.

As a result, opportunities for women to advance to company leadership roles have stagnated in recent years. Only 21 percent of Chinese companies had women in top manager roles last year, according to the World Economic Forum's gender gap report.

The problem has become more apparent since 2015, when party leaders, worried about the impact of slowing population growth on the economy, ended the one-child policy and began allowing all couples to have two children.

In an official survey in 2017, about 54 percent of women said they had been asked about their marriage and childbearing status in job interviews.

Beijing issued a directive in February urging stronger enforcement of laws against gender discrimination. But it has not been a priority, and the party-controlled courts have not sided with women on other issues.

China’s highest court has made it harder for many women to win the family home in divorce proceedings. That has cut millions of women out of the real estate boom. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

‘A man’s law’

When Sharon Shao approached several divorce lawyers in the spring of 2013, they all had the same advice: Don’t bother taking your husband to court. You have no hope of getting the apartment.

It did not matter that she had been the primary breadwinner for most of their marriage and had made all the mortgage payments.

It did not matter that he hit her. It did not matter that he had cheated on her.

None of it mattered because her husband’s parents had put up the down payment and because her name was not on the property title.

Under a ruling issued by China’s highest court in 2011, the lawyers said, that meant the apartment was his.

For Ms. Shao, 36, who had no other home because her parents died when she was young, it was devastating. “After the divorce, I wandered around with no sense of belonging,” she said. “I was just floating.”

Growing numbers of women in China have been through a similar experience. In a country where real estate accounts for over 70 percent of personal wealth, the high court’s ruling has been a significant setback for women.

Chinese law had previously recognized a family’s home as joint property in divorce proceedings. But the 2011 ruling held that real estate purchased before marriage, either outright or on mortgage, should revert to the buyer in a divorce — and that is usually the husband.

Driven by the popular belief that a woman will only marry a man if he owns a home, families often save for years to help their sons buy an apartment. Experts say the high court was responding to fears that women were using marriage to swindle their in-laws out of their savings.

A mother and a child in Tiananmen Square last year. The end of the "one-child" policy has led to hiring discrimination by employers worried about rising maternity leave costs. Gilles Sabrié for The New York Tim

Though the ruling makes no distinction between men and women, it is a "man's law," said Lü Xiaoquan, a lawyer at Beijing Qianqian Law Firm.

There are about 31 million more men in China than women, an imbalance caused by a traditional preference for sons, the one-child policy and sex-selective abortions.

But Chinese women often accept marriage on unfavorable terms.

One 2012 survey by Horizon China, a research firm in Beijing, found that 70 percent of married women contributed financially to the family’s purchases of real estate but that less than a third of home deeds included the woman’s name. Researchers at Nankai University in Tianjin in 2017 examined 4,253 property deeds and found the wife’s name listed on only about one in five.

These missing names have been disastrous for women in divorce proceedings since the 2011 ruling, said Leta Hong Fincher, author of a book about the subject.

“The entire deck is stacked against women in so many ways,” she said.

A couple having a drink in Chongqing. Women are under pressure to marry early to avoid becoming “leftover women,” a derogatory term for those who remain single into and past their late 20s.
Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

Ms. Shao, who graduated with a degree in computer science from one of China’s top universities, said her ex-husband suggested investing in an apartment together even before they were married. At the time, he was finishing a doctorate and she was making about $600 a month as a computer programmer.

His parents made the $29,000 down payment, as a gift and investment, and she agreed to cover the $450 monthly payments.

“I was just very foolish, very innocent,” she recalled.

Ms. Shao asked her ex-husband to add her name to the deed several times, but he always talked her out of it, arguing that she could enjoy benefits as a new buyer later if they invested in another property, she recalled.

Years later, after they married and moved to Shanghai, Ms. Shao discovered he was having an affair. Because she had proof that she made the mortgage payments, her relatives managed to negotiate a cash settlement for her.

Most women in China, though, have fewer options, and many end up with nothing in a divorce. Others choose to remain in even abusive marriages.

Some women in China have remained in unhappy or even abusive marriages because they might get littl or nothing in a divorce. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

Taking cues from #MeToo activism overseas and China’s own history of feminism, some Chinese women have staged street protests and campaigns on social media for greater rights.

There are also broader signs of dissatisfaction among Chinese women: The marriage rate fell last year to its lowest point since Mr. Xi took power, and the birthrate dropped to a level unseen in the 70-year history of the People’s

Republic of China.

The divorce rate is climbing, too, with women initiating most cases. In Beijing, the authorities reported one divorce for every two marriages in 2017.

"They aren't having kids and getting married," said Lü Pin, a prominent Chinese feminist activist. "That's their way of pushing back."

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