



The Individuals in the Numbers: Reproductive Autonomy in the Shadow of Population Planning in China and India

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It was never quite her decision. 'I wasn't ready to be a mother, but it was impossible not to,' Hui (a pseudonym) said during our interview in 2016, not long after China's decades-long One-Child Policy ended. Her husband had made it clear to her that the 'DINK' (Double Income, No Kids) life—which Hui had long idealised and believed would ease the pressure of living in Beijing—was unacceptable to both him and his parents. From the moment Hui turned 25, well-meaning family members never hesitated to point out that her 'most fertile years' were quickly drying up. Eventually, Hui relented, giving birth to a baby girl at 28, a year after her marriage. 'It's fulfilling an obligation,' she quietly noted.

Sitting among a small group of women in an infertility clinic in Lucknow, India, Amrita (a pseudonym), a Sikh woman, explained to us: 'Whatever happens, the one who has nobody—' She trailed off and then started again: 'To become a mother is the most important job. Outsiders say: "That poor lady." The one who doesn't have any children learns what their importance is.' The other women around her nodded in agreement. They understood the criticism women endured for being childless, not only from family members, but also from more distant relatives, neighbours, and even strangers.