China: One Child

China's Communist Party first implemented the "one child" rule—perhaps the best-known population policy in the world—in the 1970s amidst growing concerns over whether the famine-prone country could continue to feed its skyrocketing population. The rule, which reportedly is more lax today, stipulates that urban couples should have only one child. Couples in rural areas, where 80 percent of the population lives, may have two or possibly more children but should delay getting married initially and then space their children. Families that violate the rule where it is most strictly enforced face mandatory abortions and severe financial penalties, while single-child couples throughout the country are entitled to better child care, preferential housing assignments, and cash bonuses. The policy has generally worked, and fertility rates have fallen to an average of about two children per woman, down from more than five children per woman in the 1950s. However, the number of Chinese women having children today is still much greater than were having children in the previous generation, so China's population growth continues.

National ad campaigns promoting "one child" link the policy to prosperity and good Communist citizenship. By showing happy single female children, many of the ads also seem to respond subtly to the traditional preference for boys, which some critics maintain has led to the killing of female infants. To view the posters, click on the thumbnails below.

India: Changing Attitudes

India's population has more than doubled since its family-planning policy went into effect in the 1950s, and current projections predict that India will overtake China's position as most populous nation by 2050. However, India's total fertility rate has declined by more than 40 percent since the 1960s, and today the average number of children per woman is around three. The country's most recent approach to population issues focuses on the advancement of women economically, academically, and socially, as independent women are more likely to have small families. This is a change from the darker days of India's population policy. In the 1970s, the government declared a population "state of emergency," began implementing forced sterilizations in the nation's poorest regions, and even rewarded medical workers who performed the most operations. The national focus on sterilization hindered women's acceptance of family planning, as many considered birth control an all-or-nothing proposition and chose to forgo it entirely.

The posters below illustrate the range of important issues India's population policy addresses today, including advocating child spacing, informing women and men about the range and availability of contraceptive methods, promoting small family size, and presenting sterilization in a more humane light. Another key issue that Indian public information campaigns have widely targeted is favoritism for boy children, a deeply ingrained tradition that drives couples to have more children. To view the posters, click on the thumbnails below.