

Pregnant woman's suicide roils China

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Ma Rongrong's labour pains were unbearable. For hours she had begged for a C-section to ease her agony. After multiple requests were refused, she jumped five floors from a hospital window in northern China to her death.

Ma's family and her doctors have blamed each other for denying her the surgery that could have eased her suffering.

The tragedy has attracted intense attention in China, with many wondering how Ma could be denied such a common procedure.

There is no clear answer, but the incident has sparked a national discussion on everything from the high cost of health care and patients' rights to the dangers of traditional Chinese family values.

The conversation reached fever pitch this week after leaked security footage showing Ma on her knees in front of her family in a hospital corridor went viral.

In response to the uproar, the official People's Daily said in an editorial that no matter who is ultimately to blame, the incident should serve as a national wake-up call.

"It is necessary to pay more attention to pregnant women's feelings, and pay greater respect to their autonomy," it said.

"We need to have more empathetic understanding and care for them. We

cannot only think about policies and interests."

Trading blame

The hospital and Ma's family have traded blame for refusing her request for a Caesarean, presumably provoking her to kill herself rather than continue suffering through an excruciating labour.

The hospital has said it recommended Ma undergo the procedure, but that she and her husband insisted on natural birth in the belief it was better for the child.

As evidence, the hospital posted Ma's surgery log on its official social media account, showing the family had denied her requests.

Ma had signed an authorisation granting her husband the right to make medical decisions on her behalf, it said, adding the hospital therefore "had no right to change the delivery method without (his) consent".

But Ma's husband, Yan Zhuangzhuang, told the Beijing Youth Daily that he had agreed to his wife's surgery: it was the doctor who said it was unnecessary.

Under Chinese law, the decision should have been made by the person herself, according to Feng Lihua, an expert on medical disputes at Beijing's Zhongdun Law Firm.

"It cannot be authorised by other people," he told AFP.

Online uproar

The controversy has been hotly discussed for days, and by the end of the

week the hashtag "Yulin pregnant woman jumps to death" was the third highest trending topic on the Twitter-like Weibo.

The incident is under police investigation, but the question for many is why Ma was not allowed to choose her own course of care.

Some commenters argued the family was not able or willing to pay for the surgery—a common problem in a country where anything other than the most basic medical care can be out of reach for the average person.

Others have wondered whether government policy was at least partly to blame for Ma's death.

China has long kept a tight rein on women's reproductive rights, sometimes using force.

After decades of promoting a strict "one-child" policy to limit its booming population, China has reversed course, pushing women to have two children in hopes of rejuvenating the country's greying labour force.

While C-sections are favoured in China as a less painful option, the government has pressured hospitals to reduce the Caesarean rate which is among the world's highest.

"The hospital wants to limit C-sections and the families don't want to spend money," said one commenter, airing a view that was widely expressed on [social media](#).

"This type of system and this type of family produced this type of tragedy."

The government has also pushed a return to more traditional, Confucian values that privilege the family over the individual.

What that means for childbirth is that husbands and their mothers—not women themselves—are more likely to call the shots.

"Why can't the [hospital](#) carry out a C-section upon her request?" wrote one commenter on Weibo.

"Simply because her [family](#) does not agree? What kind of rule is this?"

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