

Perspectives

Examining the Influence of Fertility Policy Adjustments on Gender Equality in China During the Period of Exceptionally Slow Population Growth

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The Chinese population is entering a new stage of development, marked by the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age continuing to decline and concerns over their consistently low fertility rates. The number of newborns has been decreasing annually, with 2022 figures falling below 10 million for the first time since the founding of the People's Republic of China, resulting in negative population growth (1). Currently, China's population over the age of 60 years is nearing 300 million and is projected to surpass 20% of the total population during the 14th Five-Year Plan period. Furthermore, the working-age population, estimated at 900 million in 2018, is expected to decline to approximately 830 million in 2030 and 700 million in 2050 (2).

In response to the new stage of population development in China, adjusting fertility policy has become a priority to stabilize fertility levels, alleviate the pressure of aging, and promote supply-side reforms in population and labor fields. On November 15, 2013, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China launched a restricted two-child policy, marking the relaxation of the Chinese government's long-standing family planning policy, which was primarily focused on population control (3). On January 1, 2016, the Fifth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China formally implemented the "universal two-child policy," signaling a shift in China's family planning policy from controlling population size to encouraging fertility intention and improving population quality (4). On May 31, 2021, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee held a meeting to further optimize the fertility policy. This policy stipulates that a couple can have three children and outlines supporting measures, signifying the ongoing comprehensive adjustment and transformation of China's fertility policy (5).

Several scholars and practitioners have expressed concern about the potential impact of modifications to

fertility policies on gender equality, as well as addressing the quantitative, structural, and qualitative challenges faced by population development. However, the underlying mechanisms of these challenges have not been sufficiently explored. In this study, we introduce the Dualistic Theory of Career-Family Life Cycle, examine the consequences of adjusting fertility policies on gender equality, and contend that the subsequent pressure will influence women's careers and families. This change may raise women's career thresholds, weaken women's career persistence, and exacerbate women's work-family conflicts. As a result, challenges to gender equality in China might arise, which could hinder the implementation of a three-child fertility policy.

DUALISTIC THEORY OF CAREER-FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

The ecological systems theory in developmental psychology posits that individual development is directly influenced by microecosystems. For infants, these microecosystems are primarily limited to their families. As infants transition into childhood and adolescence, their scope of activities broadens, and their microecosystems increasingly encompass kindergartens, schools, and peer relationships (6). Ultimately, as they enter adulthood, the home and workplace emerge as the most critical microecosystems impacting their personal development (7).

Typically, career and family life cycle theories are utilized independently to describe and analyze the stages of family and career development processes in relevant research. However, examining individual development from a gender perspective reveals the significance of women's development in both the family and the workplace due to traditional gender norms that dictate their reproductive and familial roles. Furthermore, the ramifications of fertility policy adjustments on women's development have

implications for both the family and workplace settings (8).

Based on this perspective, we propose the Dualistic Theory of Career-Family Life Cycle, which integrates the two theories of career and family life cycles. In this approach, specific challenges and important tasks must be addressed and fulfilled at each stage. Individuals should strive to take responsibility in each phase to successfully meet these demands (8–9). Moreover, career and family life cycles are interrelated. Gender role divisions within families influence gender equality in the workplace, while gender inequality in the workplace perpetuates traditional gender divisions within families. This framework is depicted in Figure 1.

IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES OF FERTILITY POLICY ADJUSTMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN FAMILIE LIFE CYCLE

The revision of fertility policies will emphasize individual fertility events and take into account the various stages of the family life cycle as a temporal factor, ultimately generating a sequence of life event pressures that influence gender equality within

households. Central to this issue is the gender-based division of labor inside the family.

Marital and Childbearing Stages

The modification of fertility policies can potentially result in unease and stress for women concerning marriage and childbearing decisions. These policy adjustments have removed factors that previously suppressed childbearing intentions. In Chinese society, the longstanding cultural belief that “having many children brings many blessings” places emphasis on women’s reproductive roles, which may increase the probability of them encountering family pressures related to expectations regarding marriage and childbearing (10).

Child-Care and Child-Rearing Stages

The modification of fertility policy has the potential to cause unease and stress regarding childcare and child-rearing among women. Childcare encompasses the comprehensive care primarily given to toddlers aged 0–3 years, whereas child-rearing pertains to the education and upbringing typically provided to children aged 3 years and older. Due to established gender norms that define women’s roles within the family, they often experience heightened pressure in relation to childcare and child-rearing (11).

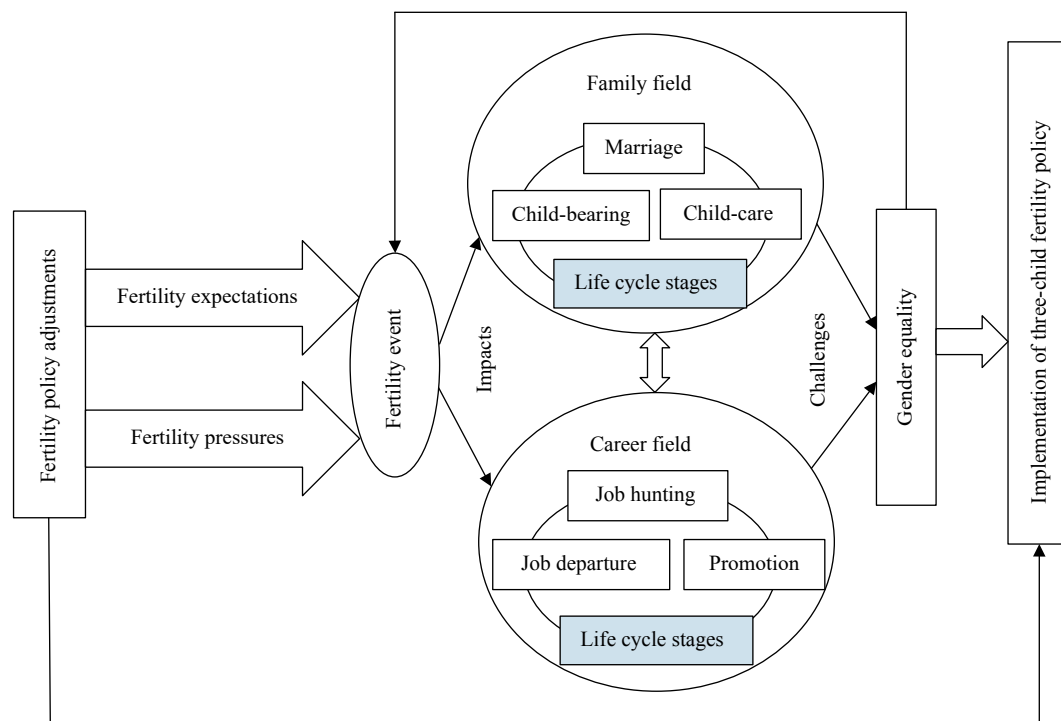


FIGURE 1. Framework for the influence of fertility policy adjustments on gender equality in China.

Consequently, an increase in the anticipated number of children resulting from adjustments in fertility policy will directly intensify this pressure (12).

IMPACTS OF FERTILITY POLICY ADJUSTMENTS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN CAREER LIFE CYCLE

The revision of fertility policy should be centered around fertility events while incorporating the career life cycle stage as the temporal dimension. This approach will address a series of life event stressors that influence gender equality in the workplace. The primary focus will be on women's work-family conflicts, which serve as the core issue in promoting workplace gender equality.

Job-Hunting Stage

The modification of fertility policies can potentially result in employment pressure due to heightened fertility expectations. As a consequence of such policy adjustments, employers may develop increased psychological expectations regarding women's childbearing, leading to gender discrimination and exclusion of women from the job market (13). Furthermore, these changes in fertility policies could diminish women's bargaining power in the labor market, thereby exacerbating the challenges in effectively protecting women's labor rights and interests (14).

Job-Promotion Stage

The modification of fertility policies may place a strain on the balance between fertility and career advancement. Making such decisions is challenging, and even women who smoothly return to their workplace after their first childbirth often face a choice between having a second or third child and pursuing job promotions. Typically, career-oriented women within childbearing age are also experiencing their professional growth phase. When confronted with workplace competition, increased childbearing coupled with childcare and child-rearing responsibilities often become significant obstacles to women's career development (14). The demands of childbearing, childcare, and child-rearing consume women's time and energy, frequently causing a considerable negative impact on their work performance. Additionally, subtle discrimination against women in the workplace undermines their opportunities for advancement (13).

Job-Departure Stage

Changes to fertility policies can potentially result in the exclusion of women from the workforce due to childbearing considerations. Moreover, these policy adjustments may present women with a significant challenge in balancing childbearing and career advancement (13). Existing research has demonstrated that employment stability for women diminishes as the rate of childbearing rises, and once a woman elects to leave her job for childbearing purposes, the probability of her re-entering the workforce and continuing her career declines (15).

DISCUSSION

According to worldwide examples, lower fertility rates are observed in societies with a relatively low level of gender equality in the public sector, predominantly due to a disparity between gender equality in public and private domains. Women are assuming increasingly significant roles in the public sector, such as the labor market, but continue to experience a relatively low degree of equality within the private sector, specifically within families. An increase in fertility rates occurs only when gender equality in the private sector improves (16). As an intrapersonal event, fertility events primarily impact the private sector, specifically the gendered distribution of labor within families. Nevertheless, gender inequality in the familial division of labor translates to the public sector—namely, the workplace—through women's labor force participation, thereby exerting pressure on women in both settings. This ultimately manifests in gender inequality within the public sector (17–18), which consequently influences family fertility intentions and behaviors, resulting in decreased fertility rates.

Central and local governments are currently examining fertility support policies, such as extending maternity leave, introducing paternity leave, enhancing childcare services, and relieving the burden on families during childbearing, childcare, and child-rearing, in an effort to encourage higher fertility rates. However, the development and execution of these policies have not adequately addressed gender issues, which ultimately impacts the effectiveness of the three-child policy. It is essential to design and establish a new fertility support policy system that incorporates gender equality perspectives.

First, the maternity leave policy should emphasize

the involvement of fathers in childcare, and a superior quality childcare services system should be developed to reduce women's burden in childcare and promote gender equality within families. Second, a more comprehensive security system with a higher compensation rate and broader coverage should be established, with a focus on balancing the responsibilities among the government, market, and families, as well as between husbands and wives. This revised fertility support policy system will foster gender equality within the family unit, leading to gender equality in the workplace and ultimately throughout society. As a result, this policy system will enhance the effective implementation of the three-child fertility policy.

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