

Fertility Support Policies and Female Labor Supply in China: A Systematic Review of Mechanisms and Outcomes

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Abstract. In response to persistently low fertility rates, China has shifted its population policy from strict control to active encouragement. This paradigm shift has led to the establishment of a multi-dimensional fertility support system encompassing economic subsidies, extended leave, childcare services, and healthcare security. As the main body of reproduction, women face a series of challenges and conflicts between reproduction and employment. This article systematically reviews the historical development of China's birth policy and the current state of female labor supply, and analyzes the influence of birth support policies on female labor supply. It is found that policies such as inclusive childcare, economic subsidies, and personal income tax reductions can help increase women's labor force participation rate and working time, while extended maternity leave and multiple child policies may have inhibitory effects due to rising business costs and increased burden of family care. On this basis, suggestions were put forward to optimize holiday cost sharing, improve childcare services, strengthen economic support, and establish a dynamic tracking and evaluation mechanism, aiming to provide a reference for future research.

Keywords: Fertility Support Policies, Female Labor Supply, Policy Impact Evaluation, China

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and problem statement

China is confronting a profound demographic transition, marked by a fertility rate that has plummeted to an alarmingly low level. In 2020, the total fertility rate fell to 1.3, a level classified as "lowest-low fertility", and the population entered negative growth in 2022 [1]. The natural population growth rate of China in 2022 is -0.6 ‰, entering a stage of negative population growth [2]. This demographic shift poses a significant threat to sustainable economic growth, primarily through its impact on the size and structure of the future labor force. With the decrease in fertility rate and the imbalance of population structure, it will not only accelerate the aging process of China's population, but also inevitably cause labor shortage, and even seriously threaten the future labor supply. Therefore, population aging and low fertility rate have become important challenges that currently constrain the sustainable development of China's economy and society.

At the heart of this demographic challenge lies a critical tension for women, who are both the primary agents of reproduction and an indispensable source of labor. The conflict between childbearing/rearing and career development represents a significant barrier to raising fertility rates, as many women delay or forgo childbirth due to concerns over negative employment consequences [3]. Consequently, fertility support policies have emerged as a pivotal instrument not only for adjusting population structure but also for potentially mediating this work-family conflict. The central question, therefore, is how these policies actually influence women's labor supply decisions.

In order to change the current situation of low fertility rate and improve the population structure, the country has successively launched a series of fertility policies, and has introduced multi-dimensional fertility support policies covering economic subsidies, holiday guarantees, childcare services, medical security, etc. The adjustment of fertility policies not only affects women's reproductive decisions but also has consequences for the supply of the female labor force by changing their employment willingness, employment quality, and employment structure. Sheng Yinan analyzed the data from the "2017 Survey on Fertility and Employment Status of Women" carried out by Capital University of Economics and Business, and found that the enforcement of the universal two-child policy would not only change female's childbearing behavior and population trends, but also profoundly affect women's employment willingness and enterprise employment decisions, ultimately having a sustained impact on the supply and demand of female labor force [4]. While such findings highlight the interconnection, the empirical evidence on the direction and magnitude of these effects remains mixed and fragmented across different policy dimensions.

1.2. Research gap and contribution

In recent years, domestic and international scholars have carried out a series of research on the link between childbearing support policies and female labor supply. This article aims to systematically review fertility support policies in China, the current situation of female labor supply, analyze the influence of existing policies on female labor supply, and on this basis propose future research prospects, in order to provide a reference for subsequent study and policy improvement.

2. China's fertility support policies: evolution and an analytical framework

Driven by the dual pressures of a persistently low fertility rate and rapid population aging, China's fertility policy has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift—from strict population control to proactive encouragement and multi-faceted support. Since 1970, China has mainly implemented a birth policy guided by controlling population growth. However, with the continuous low birth rate and the intensification of population aging, it has put certain pressure on China's future economic growth. In order to alleviate the problem of aging and change the low fertility situation, China implemented the "selective two-child fertility policy" in 2013, which permitted couples where one spouse was an only child to bear a second child, and introduced the policy of "fully implementing one couple can have two children" in 2016, gradually relaxing the restrictions on the number of births [5,6]. The Decision on Optimizing the Birth Policy and Promoting Long term Balanced Population Development issued by the Chinese government in 2021 established the "three-child" policy and supporting measures, emphasizing the establishment of a birth support system, marking the transformation of China's birth policy from a "control type" that controls population size to a "service-oriented" that encourages childbirth and provides comprehensive support; In October 2024, the "Several Measures on Accelerating the Improvement of the Policy System for Supporting Fertility and Promoting the Development of a Fertility-Friendly Society" further clarified the goals

and framework of the fertility support policy system, marking the formation of a systematic support system [7,8]. This evolution, summarized in Table 1, has resulted in a complex suite of interventions. To systematically analyze their potential impacts on female labor supply, this review categorizes contemporary fertility support policies into four distinct types based on their primary instrument: leave policies, economic supports, service provisions, and employment rights protections.

Table 1. The evolution stages and main contents of China's fertility policy

Stage	Time	Key policy/measures	Policy orientation	Core content
Control-oriented stage	1970-2012	Family Planning Policy	Control population growth	Advocating late marriage and childbirth, restricting the number of births
Relaxed Fertility Policy Period	2013	'Selective two-child' policy	Gradually relax	A couple can have a second child if one of the parents has no siblings
Relaxed Fertility Policy Period	2016	'Comprehensive two-child' policy	Fully relax	All couples are permitted to have two children
Service-oriented	2021	Decision of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Improving the Birth Policy to Promote Long-term and Balanced Population Development	Encouraging childbirth with supporting measures	Establishment of the "three-child policy," emphasizing a fertility support system
System Formation	2024	Several Measures for Accelerating the Improvement of the Fertility Support Policy System and Promoting the Building of a Birth-Friendly Society	Systematic support	Clarifying the goals and framework of the fertility support policy system

In this article, "fertility support policy" refers to the policies and supporting measures directly related to fertility behavior introduced at the national level, covering four levels: maternity leave (such as maternity leave and parental leave), economic support (such as maternity allowances, housing subsidies, tax incentives), service support (childcare system construction), and rights protection (such as anti-discrimination and employment), aiming to lower the expense of family fertility, upbringing, and education, and balance work family relationships.

2.1. Maternity and parental leave policies: provision of time and labor market implications

The maternity leave policy includes maternity leave, paternity leave, and parental childcare leave. Duan Jiawei's research summarizes such policies as "time support", which is characterized by extending maternity leave, adjusting paternity leave, and adding parental leave, aiming to relieve the pressure on families and women stemming from caring for infants and young children [9]. In terms of maternity leave system, currently all provinces (regions, municipalities) in China generally extend maternity leave to 158 days or more; And a paternity leave of about 15 days has been established for men, stipulating that wages will be paid during the leave, aiming to strengthen gender equality and shared responsibility for family parenting; In terms of the parental leave system, according to regulations, couples who give birth to children are entitled to 5 to 20 days of parental leave per person per year until their children reach the age of three, and their salary and benefits during the leave remain unchanged [10].

2.2. Economic support policies: alleviating the direct costs of childbearing

Economic support policies mainly refer to a series of economic subsidies, including maternity allowances paid by maternity insurance funds during maternity leave, reimbursement of maternity medical expenses, childcare subsidies, special additional deductions for personal income tax, housing incentives, etc., to help couples of childbearing age reduce the cost of childbirth [9,10].

2.3. Childcare service support policies: reducing the time burden of care

Service support policies mainly include childcare services and educational support, which aim to alleviate women's parenting burden by providing inclusive childcare services. The inclusive childcare service system is centered around the comprehensive childcare service center and adopts diversified service supply models such as community-embedded childcare and kindergarten daycare, providing convenient and accessible childcare services with guaranteed quality for children below three years old. This service system is also an important measure to improve the birth support policy system and strive for quality population growth [11]. Research has confirmed that making childcare services publicly accessible can raise the female work force participation rate by 2to3 percent, which is a feasible way to release female labor force [12]. The popularization of inclusive childcare services can alleviate the parenting pressure of working women and create conditions for their smooth return to the workforce.

2.4. Employment rights protection policies: mitigating discrimination and encouraging flexibility

The policy of safeguarding rights and interests includes employment protection and anti-discrimination policies, which clearly stipulate that employers shall not limit gender or give priority to gender in the recruitment process, and shall not use restrictions on childbirth as employment conditions. It encourages flexible work methods for women who raise children and expands their employment space [8]. The policy of safeguarding rights and interests is also an important pillar of China's fertility support policy system, which has effectively eradicated gender-based discrimination in the workplace and ensured equal employment opportunities for women of reproductive age.

3. Trends and challenges in the female labor force supply in China

The 'female labor supply' refers to the quantity of labor which women are willing and able to provide at a certain market wage level, which includes two dimensions: (1) whether women enter the labor market, that is, labor participation decision-making, usually measured by the female labor participation rate; (2) For women who have already participated in work, how many hours of working time can be provided, i.e. labor time decision [13]. Understanding both dimensions is critical for assessing the impact of fertility support policies, as such interventions aim precisely to influence women's decisions to enter the labor market and to devote more time to a paid job.

3.1. A persistent reduction in labor force participation

With China's economic development and demographic shifts, the supply of female labor has also undergone significant changes. The latest data from the World Bank shows that the labor force participation rate of women aged 15 and above in China has shown a significant downward trend, dropping from 63.0% in 2012 to 59.0% in 2024. At the same time, the gap in labor supply between

women and men has been increasing year by year. In 2012, the ratio of female to male labor force participation rate in China was 82%, while in 2024 it was about 85% [14,15]. This increasing ratio indicates that the decline in female labor force participation has been more pronounced than that for men, pointing to gender-specific barriers. Zhao et al systematically analyzed the trend of changes in the rate of labor force participation among women between the ages of 25 and 44 in China from 1990 to 2020, finding that the rate stood at 90% in 1990, significantly higher than the world average during the same period. By 2020, the female labor force participation rate had decreased to 71%, a decrease of 22%. In comparison, the labor force participation rate of men decreased from 98% to 90% during the same period, representing a decrease of only 8 percentage points. The study also found that the married women with multiple children group exhibited the lowest labor force participation rate, indicating that the caregiving burden of preschool children has become an important factor affecting labor market participation [16]. This finding provides direct empirical evidence that the caregiving burden for young children is a primary constraint on the labor market participation of women, especially mothers.

3.2. Gender time gap: intensive margin and unpaid work

In terms of labor time decision-making, influenced by factors such as gender and family responsibilities, the labor supply of Chinese women presents the characteristics of "short paid labor time and long unpaid labor time" [17]. According to data from the National Time Use Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2024, the average daily time spent on paid labor was shorter for women than for men (5 hr and 55 min vs. 6 hr and 44 min). In terms of paid labor participation rate, males are 60.2%, while females are only 47.7%. In the field of unpaid labor (household chores and caregiving), women bear the vast majority of time costs, spending 1.86 times more time on household chores and caring for family members per day than men [18]. This stark disparity in time use underscores a profound gender imbalance in domestic responsibilities, contributing to women's "time poverty" and constraining their capacity for paid employment and career advancement. Policies that successfully redistribute or socialize unpaid care work are therefore fundamental to unlocking the female labor supply.

4. Mechanisms of influence: promotive and inhibitory channels

4.1. Promotive channels: alleviating constraints on female labor supply

4.1.1. Reducing the direct and opportunity costs of childbearing

Fiscal support measures like maternity insurance, child-rearing allowances, and tax deductions can effectively decrease the cost of childcare for families and increase the net income of women in the paid labor force. Studies have shown that providing family subsidies and tax exemptions considerably raises the rate of labor force participation among urban women [19].

There is research showing that the personal income tax reduction policy has a positive incentive effect on increasing women's paid labor time. In the 2018 personal income tax reform in China, some special additional deductions allowed women who gave birth to children to receive income reductions in areas such as female education, rental housing, and housing loans. The study by He Wei et al. assessed the influence of the tax reform policy on female labor supply and found that the personal income tax reform reduced women's household chores by about 0.39 hours compared to women who were not affected by the tax [20].

4.1.2. Substituting and socializing unpaid care work

The research by Li Xiaohe et al. also shows a causal relationship between infant and toddler care services and female labor supply. Institutional childcare services can significantly increase women's labor participation rate, increase the overall female labor supply, and improve the quality of labor supply [21].

Studies have shown that public childcare services can free up women's caregiving time, reduce the proportion of women who are forced to shorten their working hours or withdraw from the labor market due to having no one to take care of their children, and extend their working hours [22]. When the responsibility of caring for infants and young children is shared by professional childcare institutions, women's time for market labor can be increased. The implementation of childcare service policies has alleviated the "work-family" conflict and effectively released the labor supply for women.

4.1.3. Securing employment and mitigating discrimination

Gong Qiannan pointed out that the policy of supporting childbirth can alleviate the risk of immediate employment interruption caused by childbirth for women and enhance the stability of women's employment through multi-dimensional policy coordination, such as improving maternity leave, guaranteeing maternity allowances, and building maternity-friendly workplaces.

Employment protection and anti-discrimination rules are important parts of China's fertility support system. These rules clearly state that employers cannot limit or prefer one gender over another when hiring. They also cannot set childbirth restrictions as a condition for getting a job. The policy encourages flexible work arrangements for mothers. This helps to give women more choices for work [8]. The main goal of these policies is to lower the risk of job loss or unfair treatment because of having children. They try to stop employers from avoiding hiring women of childbearing age. When women feel their job is safer and fairer, they are more likely to keep working or to return to work after having a child. This helps to turn the potential female workforce, supported by other policies, into actual, stable employment.

4.2. Inhibitory channels: unintended consequences and increased costs

4.2.1. Employer-channel: increased perceived labor costs

Due to the additional labor costs (such as maternity leave and salary expenses) caused by female childbirth, enterprises are more inclined not to hire women compared to men. The enforcement of the two-child/three-child policy has made enterprises concerned about the secondary cost losses caused by female employees giving birth again.

The reform of maternity leave policy also has a substantial influence on women's labor hours. Studies have shown that extending maternity leave policies leads to a mean decrease of 2.6 hours in women's weekly working hours, which represents about 5.6% of their average working time. Moreover, the more extended maternity leave days, the more significant the reduction in women's working hours, while the labor supply for men has not been affected. The reason for this phenomenon may be that the reform of extending maternity leave has increased the labor costs for companies with female employees taking maternity leave, leading to a reduction in demand for labor from women of reproductive age and a tendency to reduce employment of women of childbearing age. At the same time, it can also generate gender discrimination effects, which may manifest as

implicit screening in the recruitment process, gender differences in promotion, and unequal pay for equal work [23].

4.2.2. Family-channel: reinforced gender roles and increased care burden

Although fertility support can affect population development and changes, in the short term, encouraging an increase in the number of children means that more and more women of childbearing age will be forced to withdraw from the labor market due to their reproductive behavior, which invisibly accelerates the current decline in female labor force participation. According to the data analysis conducted by Sheng Yinan et al. using the "2017 Survey on Women's Fertility and Employment Status", it was observed that after the introduction of the comprehensive two-child policy, women's willingness to work declined. Based on the data, it is estimated that about 8% of women no longer have the willingness to work after giving birth to another child, and this phenomenon is especially evident in females over the age of 30. Song Yang's survey also found similar results, with women's willingness to participate in labor decreasing after having a second child. About 47.74% of respondents chose to return to their families, indicating a significant impact of childbirth on women's labor participation decisions [24].

Dong Y et al. analyzed data from the China Household Finance Survey (CHFS) and observed that the enforcement of the comprehensive two-child policy led to a 4.7% decline in the female labor force participation rate and a 2.6% increase in that of the elderly population, while male labor supply remained stable. Research has revealed that the gender and intergenerational redistribution of this labor supply is mainly due to the increase in parenting burden and economic pressure [25]. Li and Liu used Chinese household tracking survey information to investigate the dynamic impact of the comprehensive two-child policy on female labor force participation. The results revealed that the female labor force participation rate significantly decreased within two years after giving birth, but in the fourth year after giving birth, the possibility of entering the labor market significantly increased due to the increase in family economic pressure. This discovery reveals that the effect of childbirth on women's labor supply is not static, but exhibits temporal heterogeneity [26].

An empirical analysis based on CHIP data by Guan Aiping et al. found that the relaxation of the birth policy has a notable inhibitory impact on Chinese female labor force participation. The increase in fertility will lead to an inverted "U" - shaped relationship in the change of women's labor supply time, that is, when the average number of children born exceeds 1.8, the labor supply time of women will significantly decrease with the increase as the number of children rises [27]. Using data from the Sixth National Population Census, Liu et al. found that women's labor supply decreased by 7.5 to 12.3 hours per week following the birth of a second child [28,29]. This might be due to the increasing number of children being born, which puts pressure on women's caregiving time. Each child requires a significant amount of daily caregiving time, directly squeezing labor time. When the number of children surpasses the caregiving capacity that a family can afford, women, as the main bearers of traditional parenting responsibilities, are forced to reduce or even give up paid labor time.

5. Towards an integrated policy framework and recommendations

Existing research indicates that the impact of fertility support policies on female labor supply is objectively present and presents complex dual effects: on the one hand, policies including childcare services, economic subsidies, and rights protection help to increase female labor participation rates and extend working hours; On the other hand, policies such as extending maternity leave and having multiple children may have inhibitory effects due to rising labor costs for businesses and increased

burden of family care. To alleviate the above conflicts, this article proposes the following suggestions:

5.1. Rebalancing costs: from enterprises and families to society

Implement differentiated and progressive maternity subsidies: tilt towards low - and middle-income families and families with multiple children, link subsidy standards to local living costs and child age, and explore linking some subsidies to women's continued employment or participation in skills training.

Optimize the special additional deduction for individual income tax: increase the deduction amount and proportion for infant and toddler care and education expenses; establish a special deduction for "childcare service fees" to reduce the actual tax burden on families raising children.

Establish a cost-sharing mechanism for maternity leave: The government will bear part of the salary expenses during the extended maternity leave period through social insurance or financial subsidies, reducing the burden on enterprises and lowering their motivation to exclude women of childbearing age.

5.2. Redistributing care: promoting gender equity in unpaid work

Build a "government-led, diverse participation, and cost-sharing" supply model: increase public financial investment in building community childcare centers; Encourage enterprises and institutions to handle entrusted services through operational subsidies, service purchases, tax incentives, and other means; Develop inclusive pricing guidelines to establish a network of infant and toddler care services covering urban and rural areas: Based on the community, integrate daytime care, temporary care, home guidance, and other services, promote the integration of childcare services with flexible working hours, and meet the needs of different families.

Implement the "maternity leave and parental leave quota system": Within the existing total number of holidays, clearly divide "mother exclusive maternity leave", "father exclusive paternity/parental leave", and "family shared parental leave". Mandatory male vacation quotas and the use of "no use, no waste" or high subsidy incentives to promote changes in the household division of labor. Establish non-transferable father-specific parental leave to encourage men to share parenting responsibilities.

5.3. Enhancing implementation and evaluation for synergistic effects

Establish a cross-departmental coordination mechanism: Establish a high-level office for coordinating fertility support policies to solve the problem of "multiple policies and poor coordination".

Building a Policy Effect Monitoring and Evaluation System: Establish a monitoring system that includes core indicators such as fertility rate, female labor force participation rate and quality, gender wage gap, and family satisfaction, regularly conduct policy impact assessments, and establish a dynamic adjustment mechanism.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Key findings

The transformation of China's birth policy from a "control-oriented" to a "service-oriented" approach has initially established a multi-dimensional birth support policy system covering maternity leave, economic subsidies, childcare services, medical security, and other aspects. Existing research indicates that different fertility support policies have complex dual effects on women's labor supply. More studies are required to examine how various types of fertility support policies can cooperate with each other and form a synergistic mechanism. Due to the long-term and dynamic effect of childbearing support policies on female work supply, it is recommended to establish survey data that tracks women's fertility and employment trajectories over the long term to reveal the long-term effects of the policies.

In short, the influence of fertility support policies on female labor supply is a long-range and complex process that requires multi-party collaboration from the government, enterprises, society, and families. Only by creating a complete framework of fertility support policies, effectively reducing the costs of childbirth, nurturing, and education, eliminating employment discrimination, can this paper truly achieve a positive interaction between fertility policies and women's employment, and promote long-term balanced population development and sustainable economic development.

6.2. Research significance

This study systematically reviews the transformation of China's fertility support policies, clarifies the different mechanisms of the four types of policies, namely maternity leave, economic subsidies, childcare services, and rights protection, on the supply of female labor force, reveals the dual impact of fertility support policies on women's labor participation and labor time decision-making, and proposes targeted policy recommendations, including establishing a cost sharing mechanism for maternity leave, expanding childcare services, strengthening economic support policies, etc., which can provide reference for improving the fertility support policy system and fostering sustainable growth of female employment and population in the future.

6.3. Limitations and future research directions

This article belongs to a review study, mainly based on the induction and comparative analysis of existing literature, and fails to directly test the causal relationship between fertility support policies and female labor supply using raw survey data. Therefore, the judgment on policy effects in the article mainly comes from the conclusions of existing research, which may be influenced by sample selection bias. Future studies employing rigorous causal inference methods on longitudinal microdata are crucial to validate these relationships. Particularly, research is needed to quantify the synergistic or counteracting effects of different policy combinations, and to explore the heterogeneous impacts across regions, income groups, and sectors.

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