

# *Research on female fertility welfare policy based on new population policy*

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of Chinese society, the era of population aging has quietly arrived. To address the increasingly intensifying aging phenomenon, the Chinese government has implemented a series of new population policies. This article, based on the background of these new population policies, focuses on researching reproductive welfare policies for working women. Firstly, it analyzes the reasons for the current policy contradictions in China and suggests potential solutions. Secondly, it examines the problems and reasons for the current reproductive welfare policies in China from the perspectives of policy design, policy implementation, and policy environment. The study finds that China's existing reproductive welfare policies have not fully realized their intended policy effects, with numerous shortcomings in meeting the needs of working women. Lastly, the article analyzes the reproductive welfare policies proposed by developed countries to increase birth rates, summarizing the lessons these experiences offer for optimizing reproductive welfare policies in China.

## 1. Introduction

Population issues have a significant impact on a country's long-term development and future. Professional women are a group of women that should receive special attention when optimizing our country's reproductive welfare policies, as their fertility directly affects the overall fertility level of our nation [1]. On one hand, due to the increasing independence of women in our country, the proportion of reproductive-age professional women among all reproductive-age women continues to rise, making them a key demographic in our nation's fertility landscape. They possess immense fertility potential. According to data, over 60% of women aged 25 to 55 in our country are professionals, positioning us at the forefront of global female employment [2]. On the other hand, compared to other female groups, the fertility intentions of professional women are more susceptible to the influence of reproductive welfare policies. The reproductive behavior of professional women inevitably leads to work interruptions due to maternity leave and entails higher childbirth costs. Therefore, a comprehensive reproductive welfare policy is essential to boost the fertility intentions of professional women and translate those intentions into actual reproductive behavior [3].

However, our current reproductive welfare policies are not yet comprehensive, and the effectiveness of the new population policies in increasing birth rates is not significant. Instead, they exacerbate workplace discrimination against women, forcing professional women into difficult

choices between child-rearing and career advancement. Therefore, in the context of our ongoing adjustments to population policies, it is of great significance to identify the issues within our reproductive welfare policies for professional women and continually enhance the welfare system. This is crucial for alleviating the sustained decline in our country's birth rates and achieving balanced population development [4].

This paper, based on the backdrop of the new population policy, focuses on professional women as the subject of study. It analyzes the contradictions between the new population policy and the current reproductive welfare policies, elucidates the issues and reasons underlying our country's reproductive welfare policies, and subsequently draws from international experiences to propose avenues for optimizing our country's reproductive welfare policies.

## 2. Current problems

To address the sustained decline in our country's birth rate and enhance the effectiveness of the new population policy, the government continually raises the level of reproductive welfare policies. However, during the process of optimizing these policies, issues persist, such as inadequate policy response to demands, poor policy implementation outcomes, and the absence of relevant social actors. This article identifies the shortcomings of our country's reproductive welfare policies for professional women from three perspectives: policy design, policy implementation, and policy environment [5].

### 2.1 Policy design

Professional women tend to have higher expectations for child education and a better understanding of childbirth costs compared to non-professional women. Typically, professional women enter the workforce after receiving higher education, accumulating more social resources and economic capital. These resources make professional women more capable and willing to provide better education for their children, including early education, higher education, and various forms of training and extracurricular activities. Consequently, their expectations for maternity insurance and other reproductive welfare policies are higher. However, the current level of reproductive welfare in our country falls short of meeting the expectations of professional women [6]. On one hand, the cash benefits of maternity insurance are relatively low and cannot cover the entire cost of childbirth and child-rearing for professional women. On the other hand, our country's reproductive welfare scope is narrow, mainly targeting employed individuals who contribute to social insurance. It lacks sufficient coverage for freelancers, part-time workers, and other groups.

Moreover, the demands of professional women regarding childbirth and childcare have become more diverse, individualized, and complex than ever before. They not only require comprehensive health protection and medical support during pregnancy and childbirth but also anticipate better early childhood education and parenting support after their child is born. However, the existing reproductive welfare policies in our country struggle to meet the personalized needs of professional women at different stages and contexts. For instance, in terms of working during pregnancy, our current maternity leave system is inflexible and doesn't cater to the flexible leave needs of professional women during pregnancy and after childbirth, causing significant distress for them [7]. These issues make the decision-making process around childbirth and childcare exceptionally challenging and stressful for professional women, impacting their career development and personal growth. Consequently, reproductive welfare not only fails to enhance the fertility intentions of the majority of professional women but also leads some who have such intentions to postpone or forgo childbirth due to various reasons.

## 2.2 Policy implementation

The behavior of some businesses falls short of legal requirements. Certain employers adopt various illegal methods to reduce labor costs, such as not complying with maternity insurance regulations, unlawfully terminating contracts with pregnant employees, and creating "maternity plans" that shift the pregnancy-related expenses, which should be borne by employers, onto employees. Additionally, some companies fail to implement specialized labor protections for female employees during the "three periods," neglecting to provide hygiene, delivery, and breastfeeding facilities, and even mandating night shifts. These practices create difficulties in terms of physical health and breastfeeding for professional women, potentially leading to health issues and increasing the cost of childbirth for them.

The implementation of maternity leave policies is suboptimal. Maternity and paternity leave are crucial components of our country's reproductive welfare policies, representing an essential concern for professional women and newborns. However, the current implementation of maternity leave is not ideal. On one hand, the implementation of maternity leave for professional women is lacking. Although maternity leave for female workers in China is 98 days, surpassing the minimum requirements stipulated by the "International Convention on Maternity Protection," in practice, some professional women return to work shortly after giving birth, failing to fully benefit from the maternity leave. On the other hand, paternity leave for men is limited. Maternity leave is usually a benefit enjoyed by women. However, during the breastfeeding period, men as husbands and fathers also need to invest time and effort in caring for their wives and children. Relying solely on women to care for infants and young children is insufficient. Currently, paternity leave for men in our country is relatively short, with weak implementation. There's also a mismatch between policy formulation and the application of paternity leave. Although some spouses of professional women may take paternity leave, it's not mandatory by law, and some employers don't strictly enforce the paternity leave system.

## 2.3 Policy environment

Currently, there are significant disparities among different employers regarding the provision of independent maternity leave benefits. These differences are related to the nature of employers and are most apparent between public institutions and private enterprises. Government agencies and public institutions can offer better safeguards for professional women in terms of maternity leave benefits. They take into account the unique needs of female workers during pregnancy and childbirth, providing early parenting support and economic compensation after childbirth. Moreover, these institutions have the most flexible leave arrangements, providing ample support for maternity and parenting leave while ensuring that compensation remains unaffected. State-owned enterprises and some large private companies are also relatively accommodating toward pregnant employees, but there might be fluctuations in pay during maternity periods. These companies provide more humane maternity protection and offer flexible and inclusive leave arrangements. However, small and medium-sized private companies are less accommodating and might even be overly rigid in providing maternity benefits to professional women. For instance, strict attendance systems and negative reinforcement dominate motivation strategies. Canceling leave and firing employees are common practices. This reflects the companies' principled attitude toward pregnant and postpartum women. The strict attendance policies lead to intense conflicts between pregnancy and work, making it difficult to balance work and life, often forcing professional women to quit their jobs. Currently, the majority of employees in China work for small and medium-sized businesses, which often struggle to provide maternity benefits to professional women. This means that the reproductive welfare available to most professional women in the labor market is limited

nationwide.

### 3. Cause analysis

#### 3.1 Unreasonable policy

Against the backdrop of continuous economic development and evolving social structures in our country, the level of reproductive welfare benefits for professional women has lagged behind societal progress. This phenomenon not only results in an overall low level of reproductive welfare but also significantly affects the effectiveness of the new population policy. For professional women, the current level of reproductive welfare benefits falls short of playing a decisive role in their reproductive decisions. However, this lag in reproductive welfare benefits compared to social development is not without reasons. Despite establishing a maternity insurance system in China since the founding of the new nation, this system has never been fully perfected, and complementary policies have not been comprehensively developed. Challenges and issues in terms of coverage, protection levels, and claims procedures have grown, creating unnecessary difficulties and obstacles for professional women in accessing maternity insurance benefits.

Moreover, the highly competitive nature and fast-paced lifestyle of modern society subject people to urgency and challenges across work, education, and life, adding more stress and pressures for everyone. Severe educational competition, along with the heavy burden of housing costs, negatively influence the fertility intentions and behaviors of professional women. Hence, there's a pressing need to reform and enhance reproductive welfare policies to boost the fertility intentions of professional women and safeguard their reproductive rights and interests.

#### 3.2 Difficult to implement

Although the Chinese government has made positive progress in reproductive welfare, there's yet to be a comprehensive legal protection system in place through reproductive welfare legislation.

Firstly, the legal framework for reproductive welfare is incomplete. Currently, China lacks a separate, unified "Reproductive Protection Law," and legislation regarding maternity allowances, maternity leave, and related welfare is not comprehensive. While the "Population and Family Planning Law" clearly stipulates rights and obligations related to reproduction, provisions for promoting reproduction are notably lacking. Simultaneously, the "Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests" provides relatively brief and ineffective provisions on safeguard measures for the entire process of women's pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, and postpartum recovery.

Secondly, the legal deterrent effect of implementing reproductive welfare is limited. The penalties imposed by the state on companies for infringement are not significant, and the cost of corporate infringement is low. The "Social Security Law" lacks specific punishment measures for unlawful actions by employers, while the "Special Provisions on the Protection of Female Workers' Labor" issued by the State Council only stipulate fines ranging from 1000 to 5000 yuan for violations by employers. Furthermore, law enforcement against companies' misconduct is weak in China, labor protection supervision is insufficient, and labor inspection authorities often turn a blind eye to active supervision of violations of maternity leave systems, leading to a culture where companies force female workers to forfeit maternity leave or withhold maternity allowances.

Thirdly, the legal standards and classifications for reproductive welfare policies are not unified. The content of reproductive welfare fails to reflect the actual needs of professional women, and the welfare content concerning routine checks and child care is relatively low. Additionally, most reproductive welfare provisions are vague. Therefore, it's crucial to establish a more comprehensive legal protection system for reproductive welfare, develop more specific and effective regulations

and punishment measures, enhance the oversight capabilities of labor inspection authorities, and strengthen the implementation and supervision of maternity allowance policies.

#### 4. Experience reference

Worldwide, various countries have adopted different measures or strategies to achieve the common goal of increasing birth rates. These differences stem from the varying roles of the government, market, and society in countries with different welfare systems, as well as differences in values and even cultures.

In Japan, traditional values have deeply influenced the social security system, reflecting dominance, constraint, and control by the state. Japan considers social issues as societal responsibilities, resulting in a comprehensive, preventive social welfare system that covers all residents. Against the backdrop of traditional values and patriarchal culture, differing treatment between genders has been deemed acceptable. Early reproductive welfare policies seemingly favored a gendered division of labor and placed the responsibility of child-rearing on women. These policies reflect Japan's unique values and culture but have also sparked considerable controversy.

In Sweden, the government emphasizes collective belonging over individualism, resulting in a social welfare system rooted in egalitarianism. In this society, basic needs of individuals are collectively addressed by the entire community, with the state holding primary responsibility. This system is based on strong collective consciousness, where all members adhere to a set of values and ethical principles to promote social harmony and fairness. As such, Sweden's parental leave policies emphasize equality, gender equity, female employment, and the state's primary responsibility for reproductive welfare.

Currently, welfare states around the world have gradually evolved towards diversified welfare systems, with reproductive welfare policies reflecting multifaceted cooperation between the government, market, and society. While the welfare functions of states in reproduction vary across different types of welfare systems, the state consistently plays a key role in the institutional structure. For example, in Japan, societal cooperation is most evident in the provision of reproductive welfare. In the field of child care services, the government collaborates with communities to establish public childcare facilities like "kindergartens" and "community child care support centers." In Sweden, the focus has shifted from the state's complete dominance over maternity services to collaboration between the state and social organizations. The government provides universal welfare in the form of goods and cash, emphasizing public involvement in providing child care services.

In contrast, China's existing maternity allowances are primarily influenced by family and market orientations, with limited involvement from the government and the public in related social welfare measures. Therefore, the future design of China's reproductive welfare system should clearly define the roles of the state, market, and society in providing welfare. It's particularly important to clarify the primary responsibility of the state in welfare provision, establish communication and cooperation mechanisms between the state, market, and society, and ensure the effectiveness of various collaborative structures in providing reproductive welfare. Importantly, different types of welfare systems are implemented differently in various countries. Therefore, while drawing from foreign experiences, it's essential to consider local realities and cultural characteristics.

#### 5. Conclusion

To address the pressing demographic challenges in our country and resolve population development issues, this article explores the problems in China's current reproductive welfare policies against the backdrop of population policies. It also analyzes and discusses the reasons why

China's reproductive welfare policies struggle to promote the effectiveness of population policies, leading to the following conclusions:

Firstly, in terms of policy design, the current reproductive welfare policy design in China is not always aligned with the actual circumstances. In terms of policy execution, the inadequacies in laws and regulations lead to uncertain reproductive welfare benefits for working women. In terms of the policy environment, a reproductive-friendly society has yet to fully emerge, and the allocation of responsibilities for supplying reproductive welfare is not well-structured.

Secondly, to optimize reproductive welfare for working women under the new population policy, several aspects need to be addressed. Firstly, there's a need to shape the value philosophy of reproductive welfare to emphasize the value of working women. Secondly, the content of reproductive welfare should be enriched, particularly in terms of leave policies and infant education. Thirdly, the government should refine the legal framework of the reproductive insurance system to ensure the implementation of reproductive welfare policies. Lastly, the government should collaborate with families, employers, and social organizations to collectively build a reproductive-friendly society.

In conclusion, as China navigates its demographic challenges, it's imperative to address the issues within the current reproductive welfare policies. By aligning policy design with actual needs, enriching the content of reproductive welfare, refining the legal framework, and fostering collaboration between different stakeholders, China can enhance the effectiveness of its reproductive welfare policies and better support its population policies.

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