

How Can the Chinese Government Implement Policies to Help Improve the Fertility Rate of Working Women?

Yijun Shen^{1*}

¹High School Affiliated to Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai 200438, China, 2239120789@qq.com

ABSTRACT

China is facing a low fertility rate. If the government wants to encourage women to have children, the government should start from women by giving them enough welfare and sharing their burden. In this paper, the reform of paternity leave, parental leave, and maternity leave as well as the policy adjustment of pre-work training are introduced to provide support for working women in private companies. As a result, the fertility rate can be encouraged.

Keywords: low fertility rate, working women, Chinese government, policy.

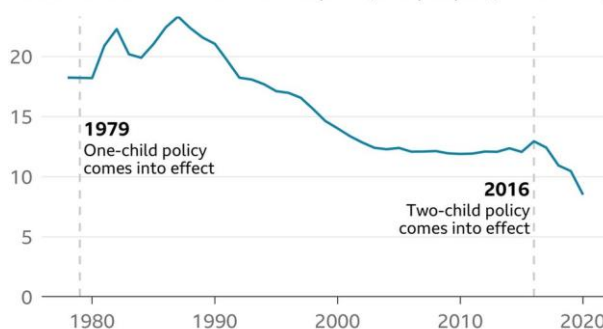
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The problem

According to data from the seventh National Census, China's total fertility rate in 2020 is 1.3 [1], which means that the average number of children born to Chinese women during their childbearing age (traditionally defined as 15 to 44 or 49 years old) is 1.3, lower than developing countries' standard total fertility rate of 2.3 [2]. Due to the lax supervision of the labor market, professional women, especially those working in private companies, do not have adequate policies to protect their careers from the effects of childbirth. Therefore, it is difficult for them to balance work and family. The association between female labor force participation and fertility is negative [3]. It is also worth noting that with the gradual improvement of women's education level, they gradually control their lives. According to two working women of different ages and jobs, they would rather spend more time in career and life than raising children. The low fertility rate has increasingly posed a severe challenge to China's population security and sustainable socio-economic development. According to the Women's Studies Institute of China associate researcher Yang Hui, although our government has formulated various policies to improve the fertility rate, such as "Two-child policy" and "Three-child policy", the effect is unsatisfactory. It is imperative to explore, study and formulate effective family policies [4-8].

China's birthrate has fallen in recent years

Total number of births in China per 1,000 people (1978-2020)

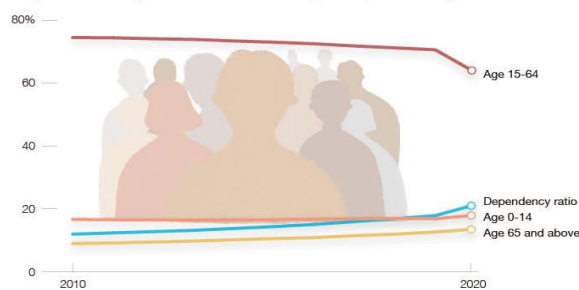


Source: China Statistical Yearbook

BBC

Figure 1 Total number of births in China per 1,000 people (1978-2020)

Population Age Structure and Age Dependency Ratio



Note: The age dependency ratio is the population of those ages 0-14 and 65 and above as a share of the working-age population of those ages 15-64.
Sources: China Statistical Yearbook 2020, the 7th National Population Census

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Figure 2 Population Age Structure and Age Dependency ratio of China in 2020

1.2 Hypothesis

The improvement of maternity, paternity and parental leave systems and increased pre-job training of laws about workplace are supposed to reduce the reproductive cost of women significantly at work and increase women's willingness to give birth, then improve the fertility rate. After the implementation of the policy, the targeted total fertility rate is 1.8 [9], which is the targeted fertility rate of China in 2020. Men and women working in the workplace enjoy equal remuneration and welfare, achieving gender equality. Women can balance work and family, so they are more willing to have children. Thus, the fertility rate can be improved.

Gender gap in labor force participation

Lines represent the difference in the proportions of male and female age 15-64 that are in employment or looking for work from 1990 to 2019

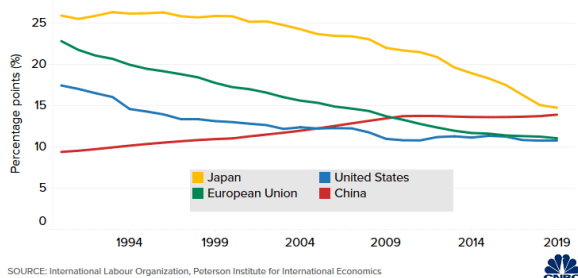


Figure 3 gender gap in labor force participation in China from 1994 to 2019

Widening gender gap in China's labor force participation

Chart shows the proportions of male and female age 15-64 that are in employment or looking for work in China from 1990 to 2019

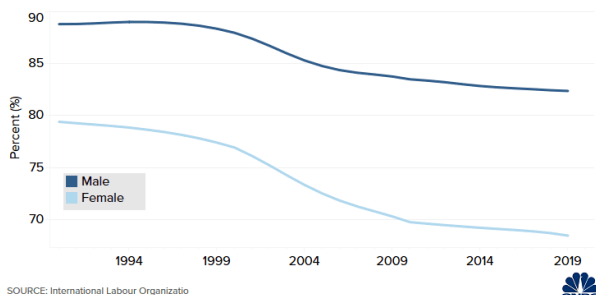


Figure 4 Widening gender gap in China's labor force participation

2. POLICIES

2.1 Paternity and parental leave

Regarding maternity leave, the state should improve the laws and regulations on paternity leave and parental leave for males, promote fathers' participation in childcare, and reduce the pressure on female childcare. The international maternity leave system includes three types: maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave. However, in China's "Labor Law", paternity leave and parental leave policies are incomplete. Suppose both men and women enjoy the same length and treatment of

maternity leave. In that case, it will not only benefit the healthy growth of newborns and the care of newborns by men and women, but also prevent women from giving up work to take care of children, so that they can catch up with work progress and return to work in time.

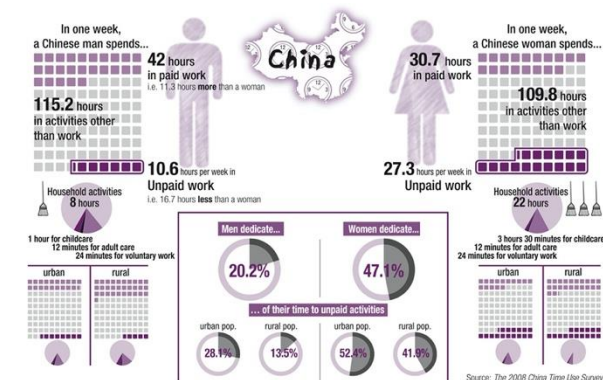


Figure 5 Time allocation of men and women in China

On the other hand, the government can ensure the same length of maternity leave for men and women by shortening women's maternity leave and extending men's paternity leave but stagger the maternity leave time. Parents can take turns caring for the child. In this way, the loss of enterprises is minimized; men's responsibilities in childbirth are better reflected, and women's childcare costs are also reduced.

When implementing this policy, the Chinese government can refer to the approach put forward by the Swedish government: fathers enjoy the "Daddy Quota", that is, they have 30 days of non-transferable paternity leave [10]. The vocation is not mandatory, but if males give up the opportunity, they will lose the one-month paid allowance provided by the government. This has dramatically increased the number of men taking paternity leave. This is also important for men to participate in the parenting process to help women share the burden of raising children and change the traditional idea: the man goes out to work while the woman looks after the house.



Figure 6 Sweden's parental leave length compared to other countries

Moreover, the government should continue to encourage trials of parental leave and the propaganda of childcare by fathers, which can effectively help implement the three-child policy, as proposed by the State Council.

In addition, the government should unify the differences in the national maternity leave duration. Due to the uneven duration and implementation level of maternity leave in China, the difference in the length of time causes female talents to migrate to areas with longer maternity leave, resulting in the uneven distribution of talents [11-13].

Maternity Leave in China

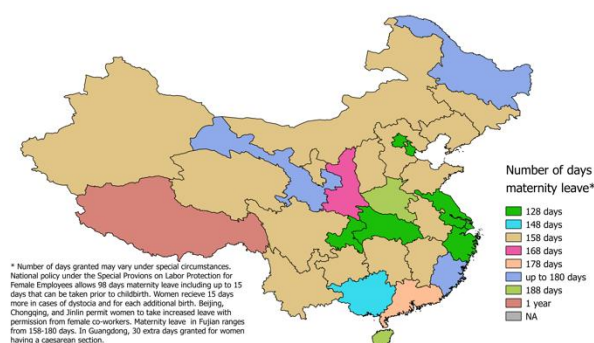


Figure 7 Different length of maternity leave in China

2.2 Maternity leave

Regarding the allocation of maternity leave for women, the government can refer to the British policy. That is, women can divide their maternity leave time [14]. The legal maternity leave for Chinese mothers is 98 days, and the first two and a half months (75 days) are mandatory. After ensuring women's health and recovering from childbirth, they can return to work. Women can freely allocate the remaining 23 days twice but must allocate the remaining 23 days within three years. This policy can alleviate the conflicts between employers and employees. Women can return to work when the work is more concentrated, thereby reducing the negative impact of maternity leave on employers to a certain extent. In addition, the policy will help women remain competitive in the workplace. Women can return to work at any time during maternity leave, maintaining familiarity of their work, and will not lose their competitiveness during extended maternity leave. Finally, it helps both parents share the burden of childbearing [15-19].

2.3 Pre-job training

Government should require companies to strengthen pre-job training for working women and men to understand their rights in the workplace. When people are discriminated against or unfairly treated in the workplace, the fundamental reason they can't speak up is that they

do not know the relevant policies and laws on how to combat inequality when formulating policies. At the same time, both women's and men's understanding of the maternity leave system is not deep enough, and their awareness of protecting their rights to maternity and paternity leave is not strong enough. When their rights in the workplace are compromised, they do not actively defend their rights, resulting in their work affecting childbirth. Therefore, the government should require each company to improve women's welfare and maternity leave policies and train women and men on relevant policies and laws before working to increase their awareness of safeguarding their reproductive rights. In addition, the government labor department should strengthen the investigation of the implementation of this aspect or participate in the company's training [20, 21].

3. UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES AND ALTERNATIVE POLICIES

Companies only consider their profit, while the full implementation of maternity leave policy will increase the cost burden of enterprises. Therefore, the full implementation of the maternity leave policy requires "flexible supporting measures" to follow up [22]. To make full use of the "Three-child policy" and fully implement the maternity leave policy, it is necessary to consider the actual conditions of enterprises. While emphasizing that enterprises should strengthen their social responsibilities and provide corresponding guarantees for women having a second child and employment, they should also adopt some preferential incentive policies to encourage enterprises to implement this policy. For example, tax cuts and more credits for fiduciary loans can ensure good corporate policy corresponding compensation for enterprise burden, to encouraging enterprises to carry out the maternity leave system, thus forming a virtuous cycle. It not only guarantees the implementation of the maternity leave system, and protects the legitimate rights and interests of women workers, but also makes it affordable for companies to provide employment benefits for women [23].

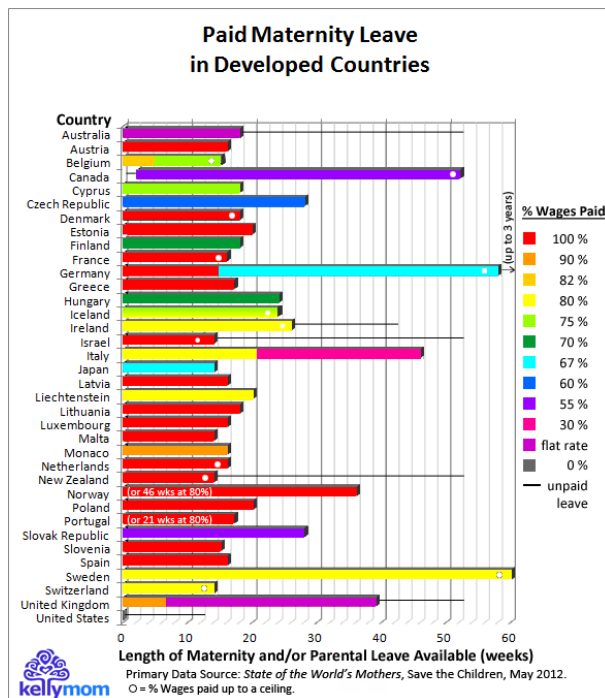


Figure 8 Paid maternity leave in developed countries

4. CONCLUSION

According to Wang Jun, a professor at Sun Yat-sen University, China has the world's top resources that can be mobilized. Along with the high efficiency of utilizing resources, they are the advantages for the development of China. However, China is a developing country, and there is a gap between China's per-capita welfare and that of highly developed countries. Therefore, it is normal that China's welfare policy will not reach the level of the welfare policy of Northern European countries in the short term [24]. Procreation is the fundamental right of human beings. It is the individual's freedom to give birth or not. If China's government implement the maternity, paternity and parental leave systems and pre-job training properly and propagandize them positively, fertility can rise without falling, said Yang Xueyan, a professor at Xi'an Jiaotong University.

Individual contribution:

I have read through 30 papers, reports and news and searched for women's labor participation rate and other data in World Bank and share what I have found in the group. Besides, I have contacted ten experts and one policymaker through e-mails and got permission to interview three of them with my teammates by WeChat video calls. Besides, I contributed to the interview questions and actively participated in the group discussion.

Interview:

Yang Hui. Personal interview, 2 August 2021

Wang Jun. Personal interview, 2 August 2021

Yang Xueyan. Personal interview, 2 August 2021

Tao Jiajia. Personal interview, 1 August 2021

Shi Qian. Personal interview, 1 August 2021

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