



# The Dual-Edged Impact of Fertility-Friendly Policies from a Societal Role Perspective: A Study Based on 13 Samples from China

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**Abstract. Objective:** From a policy implementation perspective, this study explores the pathways and effects of fertility-friendly policies on women's career development. **Methods:** Using purposive and snowball sampling, a total of 13 participants were selected for semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts were analyzed through coding using grounded theory. **Results:** Professional women encounter a triple conflict between work and family roles due to time constraints, energy limitations, and stress. The implementation effectiveness of fertility-friendly policies exhibits a dual regulatory effect. When policies are effectively implemented at the organizational level, they can provide temporal flexibility, financial support, and organizational culture safeguards, thereby alleviating conflict and promoting a stable career transition and capacity attribution. Conversely, policy implementation blockages fail to resolve conflicts, potentially exacerbating stress, leading to reduced performance and compensation, fewer promotion opportunities, and perceived career stigmatization, ultimately inhibiting career progression. **Conclusion:** The effectiveness of fertility-friendly policies is highly dependent on the organizational implementation process. Through two pathways, namely "implementation and landing - conflict mitigation - development promotion" or "implementation blockage - conflict exacerbation - development inhibition," these policies substantively shape professional women's role experiences and career trajectories.

**Keywords:** fertility-friendly policies; working women; work-family conflict; policy implementation

## 1 Introduction

The primary contradiction in China's population development has shifted from overall demographic pressure to structural challenges characterized by rapid aging and a persistently low fertility rate. Building a fertility-friendly society is a crucial measure to alleviate population-related pressures.

Reproductive-aged professional women continue to face the dual pressures of family and workplace role expectations, with conflicts arising over time, energy, and social norms, creating persistent stress that makes work-family role conflict a widespread

dilemma (Li Shenglan, 2025)[1]. Such conflicts directly undermine women's career development; for instance, work-family conflict can induce emotional exhaustion, negatively affecting organizational citizenship behaviors (Wei Wu et al., 2020)[2], and significantly inhibit innovation behaviors among female knowledge workers (Zhang Lanxia et al., 2020)[3]. Despite policies implemented across regions aimed at supporting women in balancing work and family responsibilities, the “motherhood penalty” effect persists and may even intensify (Liu Yiwei, 2024, Zhao Menghan et al., 2024)[4-5]. The gap between the intended outcomes and actual impacts of fertility-friendly policies remains evident.

This study introduces a core research question: In the current Chinese context, how does the implementation process of fertility-friendly policies—aimed at supporting work-family balance—interact with the daily lives of working women, ultimately alleviating or exacerbating their role conflicts, and how does this influence their career development trajectories? To address this question, the research employs semi-structured interviews to construct an analytical framework centered on "role conflict—implementation regulation—developmental outcomes," with a particular focus on exploring the pivotal role of policy implementation in achieving the desired effects of fertility-friendly initiatives.

## 2 Research Methodology

### 2.1 Research Population

This study focuses on employed women who are currently experiencing or have previously faced challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. Inclusion criteria include: women within the statutory reproductive age (22-45 years), with at least one year of continuous employment at their current organization, and who have at least one child under the age of 12 or are pregnant. Additionally, participants must possess clear communication and reflective abilities. Participant recruitment was conducted through purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling until data saturation was achieved. A total of 13 participants were interviewed, with their basic demographic information summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of Interview Participants' Information

Range of identification numbers	Category	Gender	Age Range	Summary of Marital and Fertility Status	Description
F01-F05	Employees	Female	34-44	Married, with young children	Core research subjects
P01-P02	Employees	Female	33-35	Married, pregnant, with infants	Core research subjects
U01	Employees	Female	—	Unmarried and childless	Reference comparison
M01	Employees	Male	38	Married with children	Comparative perspective
H01-H04	Human Resources	Female	—	—	Policy implementation perspective

## 2.2 Implementation of the Study

All interviews were conducted via one-on-one telephone conversations, resulting in a textual database of approximately 13,000 words. The research employed grounded theory to analyze the textual data, primarily utilizing manual coding, categorization, and model development through Word and Excel software, strictly adhering to the three-stage coding procedure of grounded theory.

To ensure the reliability and rigor of the analysis, systematic measures were implemented to uphold both trustworthiness and validity. During the coding process, all textual data were collaboratively coded by the researcher and a secondary coder with expertise in social science research methodologies. Initially, the researcher conducted a preliminary three-tier coding of all interview transcripts, which was then cross-verified by the secondary coder. Discrepancies in coding were addressed through multiple rounds of discussion and revision until consensus was reached. The final intercoder reliability coefficient reached 98%, thereby ensuring the stability and consistency of the coding system.

## 3 Research Findings

### 3.1 Coding Presentation

Researchers conducted line-by-line coding and iterative analysis of all interview transcripts, strictly adhering to the three-tiered coding process of Grounded Theory. During the initial coding phase, a total of 203 meaningful utterance units were identified. Through continuous comparison, induction, and integration, 22 primary codes were ultimately abstracted from the text, which were further aggregated into 7 secondary codes and 3 tertiary codes. The comprehensive coding framework, associated reference points, and representative raw statements are illustrated in Table 2.

### 3.2 Research Findings

#### 3.2.1 The Triple Dimensions of Female Occupational Role Conflict.

Research indicates that the conflict faced by career-oriented women between work and family roles is not a unidimensional dilemma but a complex interplay of temporal, energetic, and pressure-related conflicts.

Temporal conflict primarily manifests as scheduling contradictions, where established family plans are frequently interrupted by spontaneous work commitments. The tension becomes particularly acute when urgent family needs coincide with unavoidable professional obligations. Additionally, lengthy commutes reduce available time for household duties or rest, and the caregiving responsibilities in multi-child families further fragment women's time, intensifying their constant shuttle between different settings. As respondent F01 mentions, *"When both kids are sick, I can only take half a day off to take them to the hospital... then I have to return to work, leaving the children with grandparents."*

**Table 2.** Grounded Theory Coding System of Fertility-Friendly Policies and Occupational Women's Role Conflict Experience

Tertiary coding	Secondary coding	Primary coding	Reference point count	Respondent's verbatim example
Work-family role conflict	Temporal conflicts	Routine time conflicts	7	<i>Working overtime on weekends. I planned to spend time with my child, but if I'm asked to work overtime without choice, I have to leave my child to a family member.</i>
		Urgent time conflicts	6	
		Commuting intensifies time conflicts	2	
		Childcare-related time allocation pressure	2	
	Energetic conflicts	Exhaustion from parenting	10	<i>Due to demanding job tasks, high expectations, frequent revisions, uncertain notification times, and often working overtime; taking care of a young baby adds to the stress on both physical and mental health.</i>
		Distraction from work focus	8	
		Work and parenting energy overlap leading to depletion	2	
	Stress conflicts	Responsibility hierarchy dilemma	13	<i>Someone must do the work; if I don't, it shifts to others, effectively increasing their workload.</i>
		Motherhood ethical obligations	8	
		Career identity anxiety	9	
Policy-related guilt		8		
Policy content and implementation	Smooth policy implementation	Temporal support	14	<i>Maternity allowances are sufficient; the unit disburses them based on the previous year's salary, sometimes even more than regular wages.</i>
		Economic support	6	
		Guidance support	3	
	Blocked policy implementation	Insufficient resolution of temporal conflicts	8	<i>Currently, such policies are not implemented here... we just follow regular working hours.</i>
		Insufficient resolution of energetic conflicts	7	
		Insufficient resolution of stress conflicts	8	
Impact on career development	Negative effects	Reduced performance and salary	18	<i>If the child is under 12... regardless of gender, my career might be limited. Competition is so fierce now...</i>
		Reduced promotion opportunities	19	
		Perception of professional stigma	11	
	Positive effects	Attribution to personal capability	19	<i>I believe as a woman, I should not see myself as a 'special group' and shouldn't expect to be treated differently at work...</i>
		Smooth career transition	15	

Energetic conflict stems from the physical and mental exhaustion resulting from continuous role investment. Child-rearing, being a high-energy activity, inevitably drains both physical and emotional resources, affecting work focus and cognitive

continuity. When job demands overlap with parenting responsibilities, it often leads to exhaustion, leaving female professionals in a state of persistent fatigue that is difficult to recover from. Respondent F04 exemplifies this experience: *“Taking care of my younger daughter is more exhausting...I carry a milk bottle and pump at work...even after pregnancy and childbirth, I still work overtime.”*

Pressure-related conflict generally appears as a psychological burden stemming from societal expectations, maternal ethics, and professional anxiety. Female professionals often find themselves caught in the dilemma of prioritizing family versus work responsibilities and are prone to guilt if either aspect is perceived as inadequate. The widespread societal approval of maternal strength can create invisible pressures, causing women to internalize overcoming every difficulty as a personal duty. When utilizing policies like maternity leave or parental leave, they worry about being stigmatized or having their professional reputation harmed, and feel guilty about workload division among colleagues. As P02 states, *“Despite understanding that workplace flexibility is normal, I still feel uncomfortable when colleagues gossip...I feel a sense of guilt when my supervisor takes care of me.”*

### **3.2.2 The Bidirectional Regulatory Role of the Implementation Process of Family-Friendly Policies.**

#### *3.2.2.1 Policy Implementation Facilitates Women's Career Development.*

Effective enforcement of family-friendly policies translates their initial design into tangible actions and resources, significantly alleviating role conflicts faced by women and providing robust support for their professional advancement. The positive realization of such policies is often reflected across multiple dimensions: temporally, some organizations explicitly implement regulations allowing mothers to arrive late or leave early by an hour daily within the first year postpartum, offering institutional flexibility to accommodate family needs; economically, disbursement of fertility allowances that meet or exceed standard amounts—such as *“Paying based on the previous year's salary before leave, sometimes even more than during regular work”*(F01)—effectively eases financial pressures during the perinatal period; organizationally, especially in state-owned enterprises, the strict enforcement of national and local policies has become a common consensus, ensuring the policy's seriousness and continuity.

The solid implementation of family-friendly policies creates a more supportive environment for women in their careers, resulting in dual positive effects on their professional development. Firstly, it supports a smooth transition through critical stages such as pregnancy, maternity leave, and return to work by providing stable time and economic security, thereby helping women maintain work continuity and psychological stability, and facilitating a seamless reintegration into the workforce. As interviewee P02 stated, *“I do my best at work, more relaxed about competitions; after having children, my mindset changed somewhat.”* This illustrates how a supportive environment can help women adapt to role transitions with confidence, sustaining their career trajectory. Secondly, it reinforces self-attribution of personal capability. Reliable and equitable institutional support encourages women to attribute their career progress to their own efforts and professional competence rather than to special treatment. F04

expressed, *“As a woman, I believe I shouldn't see myself as part of a ‘special group’ or expect to be cared for at work,”* thereby strengthening their professional agency and intrinsic motivation for development.

#### *3.2.2.2 Policy implementation delays hinder women's career advancement.*

Policy implementation bottlenecks undermine the supporting function of gender-sensitive policies across multiple levels. Temporally, fertility-friendly measures such as flexible working arrangements often remain unimplemented due to enforcement gaps, as interviewees noted, *“Currently, those policies are not enforced here... We just follow regular working hours”*(F03). This results in a lack of reliable solutions when sudden demands arise, like a child finishing school and a manager suddenly calling for a meeting, forcing women to rely solely on personal negotiation and intensifying scheduling conflicts. In terms of energy conflicts, the original intent of such policies was to provide buffers; however, in actual management, taking maternity leave is implicitly viewed as a contribution loss. Some respondents openly acknowledged, *“Taking maternity leave does affect performance evaluations... After being away for half a year, it's understandable, but I still feel a bit uncomfortable”*(F01). This association of leave with negative evaluation not only adds to the physical and emotional toll of parenting but also heightens professional anxiety. Regarding psychological stress, policies have failed to systematically address the mental burdens intertwined with social expectations and ethical norms. When professional women seek work accommodations due to family emergencies, they are often caught in a difficult dilemma of prioritizing responsibilities and experiencing guilt, deepening the sense of failure in both work and family roles. Such profound frustration, rooted in unaddressed systemic pressure, is an unmet challenge of existing policy support.

The stagnation in policy enforcement diminishes the effectiveness of reproductive support systems when confronting complex conflicts related to time, energy, and psychological well-being. The well-intentioned measures fail to translate into tangible benefits, ultimately hindering women's career advancement. This manifests primarily through direct impacts on performance evaluations and compensation; since fertility leave is often viewed as a productivity gap or contribution reduction, income and recognition opportunities are limited. More insidiously, maternity and parental periods are typically considered career interruptions, leading to the reassignment from core roles or exclusion from promotion pathways, fostering perceptions of stagnation. Additionally, the use of such policies or maternal status can trigger implicit bias and professional stigma. Even when organizations offer supportive measures, women may remain sensitive to social judgments, fostering identity-related anxiety that damages professional self-esteem and suppresses proactive career development. Consequently, enforcement delays not only fail to alleviate role-related pressures but also transform these challenges into visible barriers and invisible ceilings, hindering continuous, equitable career progression and undermining psychological safety, thereby constraining women's professional growth on multiple levels.

### 3.3.3 Theoretical Model.

Drawing on the results of the three-level coding based on grounded theory, this study constructs a bidirectional moderating model. The model illustrates the dual-edged nature of policy implementation in the context of "work-family role conflict" and "women's career development." The actual effectiveness of fertility-friendly policies is highly contingent upon their execution at the organizational level. When policies are effectively implemented, some of the conflicts related to time, energy, and stress faced by professional women can be substantially alleviated, thereby creating favorable conditions for positive career development and serving as a positive moderating factor that mitigates conflicts and promotes growth. Conversely, when policy execution is hindered, not only is the expected support absent, but the failure to realize institutional commitments may also increase anxiety among professional women. Unbuffered role conflicts can have their negative effects fully transmitted, directly leading to adverse outcomes and functioning as a negative moderating factor that exacerbates conflicts and suppresses career progression. (Figure 1).

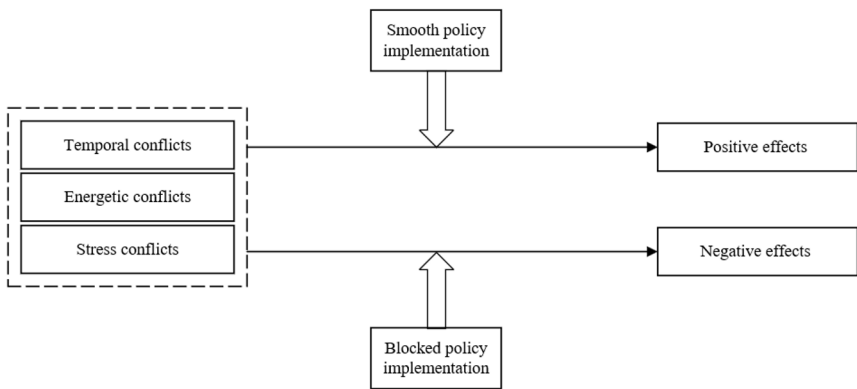


Fig. 1. Schematic Diagram of the Theoretical Model

## 4 Conclusions

This study employed semi-structured interviews and grounded theory analysis to uncover the dual regulatory role of fertility-friendly policies within organizational implementation, and their complex influence on work-family role conflicts and career development for professional women. The findings reveal that role conflicts among working women are a multidimensional interplay of temporal, energetic, and stress-related factors. The actual impact of these policies is heavily contingent upon their effective execution at the organizational level. When implemented successfully, such policies provide flexible scheduling, financial support, and organizational culture safeguards, alleviating conflicts and facilitating smooth career transitions and attribution of competence. Conversely, when policy implementation stalls, existing pressures are not alleviated and may be intensified by institutional unfulfilled promises and stigmatization related to performance evaluations, exacerbating role conflicts and

negatively affecting performance, promotion prospects, and professional identity. Consequently, policy implementation is far from a neutral transmission process; it acts as a critical contextual moderating variable whose quality directly influences the alignment or divergence between policy objectives and the lived experiences of professional women.

Existing research emphasizes role conflict-induced conflicts in time and energy allocation (Tang Yahui, 2014)[6]. This study finds that professional women's role conflict manifests not only as internal anxiety but also as daily life conflicts across three dimensions: time, energy, and stress. These conflicts extend beyond psychological discomfort, directly translating into tangible barriers to career development, such as limited performance prospects, narrowed promotion opportunities, and perceived professional stigmatization. This aligns with Li Shenglan's (2025) observations that academic mothers experience time anxiety due to dual exclusion from societal and institutional timeframes, develop identity anxiety in their pursuit of the ideal academic mother role, and encounter value anxiety through the dual alienation of academic and parenting labor. Some perspectives have observed the unilateral positive effects of fertility-friendly policies[7], which is further substantiated in this study. Beyond this, our research also reveals that fertility-friendly policies can generate negative consequences due to ineffective implementation. Specifically, when fertility-friendly policies are effectively embedded at the organizational level, they can substantially alleviate the aforementioned conflicts and support a smooth career transition. Conversely, policy implementation blockages can suspend institutional goodwill, potentially exacerbating role stress and career development challenges for women.

Hence, this research extends the external dimension of role conflict manifestations and underscores the pivotal role of policy implementation processes in shaping women's occupational realities.

Based on research findings, to effectively enhance the supporting role of fertility-friendly policies, targeted measures must be taken at the policy implementation level to address the triple conflicts faced by professional women—namely, conflicts of time, energy, and pressure. Regarding temporal conflicts, it is essential to promote the concrete implementation of flexible work arrangements, such as clear guidelines for flexible parenting hours and remote work, to provide institutional support for women in balancing work and family schedules. To mitigate energetic conflicts, efforts should be accelerated to develop accessible childcare services and encourage equitable division of household responsibilities, alleviating physical and mental exhaustion associated with balancing parenting and employment. Concerning pressure conflicts, policy enforcement should be integrated into organizational performance appraisals, with measures to eliminate implicit penalties related to leave policies affecting performance and career advancement. Additionally, fostering an inclusive organizational culture can help reduce women's professional anxiety and perceptions of stigma.

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small and primarily consists of urban professional women, which limits the generalizability of the findings to rural areas, women engaged in flexible employment, and those from diverse industry backgrounds. Further research is needed to validate the broader applicability of these conclusions. Secondly, as a qualitative investigation, this paper offers an

in-depth exploration of the interaction mechanisms between policy implementation and individual experiences but does not systematically examine the strength and pathways of causal variables through quantitative methods. Future research could expand in the following ways: on one hand, by broadening the sample to include women across more diverse regions, industries, and employment forms, and by incorporating interviews with policy implementers (such as managers and policymakers) to enrich explanatory comprehensiveness; on the other hand, by adopting mixed-method approaches, such as surveys, to quantitatively verify the moderating effects of policy execution on role conflict and career development, as well as their boundary conditions, thereby providing more robust empirical support for developing targeted and practical fertility support systems.

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