

Analysis of the Impact of China's Comprehensive "Two-Child Policy" on Women's Employment

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Abstract: *Employment is a cornerstone of a nation's well-being, impacting economic prosperity and the lives of its citizens. Within this context, women's employment is a complex issue intertwined with social status, marital dynamics, and broader societal implications. This article explores the intricate relationship between women's employment and China's evolving population policies, with a focus on the "universal two-child" policy. This article conducts a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the "universal two-child" policy on women's employment. It delves into the current state of female fertility through a review of existing literature and explores the multifaceted challenges and opportunities women face in balancing family and career aspirations. The analysis reveals improvements in women's employment prospects after childbirth, yet significant challenges persist across economic, social, psychological, and occupational dimensions. Women navigate complex decisions, influenced by evolving family planning policies, societal norms, and individual circumstances. Recommendations are presented from both governmental and individual perspectives to address these challenges and promote gender equality in the workforce.*

Keywords: Women's employment; China; Two-child policy; Fertility; Gender equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Employment stands as a critical facet intricately intertwined with a nation's overall well-being, economic prosperity, and the livelihoods of its citizens. Within this context, women's employment represents a multifaceted issue encompassing matters of social status, marital dynamics, and broader societal implications. These considerations necessitate meticulous attention. The family status, lifestyle choices, developmental trajectories, and perceptions of fertility among women bear a direct correlation with the effectiveness of our country's population policies. The genesis of China's family planning policy was rooted in the aspiration to liberate women from the burdens of menial household chores and uncontrolled childbirth[1]. The aim was to integrate women into the social labor market, thus contributing to societal advancement and the realization of their own life aspirations. Nevertheless, with the exacerbation of challenges such as an aging population and declining fertility rates, the existing family planning policy no longer aligns with the current national landscape. In September 2015, during the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the country reaffirmed its commitment to the fundamental tenets of family planning. It concurrently refined its population development strategy, ushering in a policy allowing couples to have two children as a proactive response to the aging population—an initiative commonly referred to as the "comprehensive two-child policy[2]."

The implementation of the "universal two-child" policy undoubtedly carries profound implications for the development of women's employment. This article will delve into a comprehensive analysis of the current state of female fertility through an extensive review of existing literature. Furthermore, it aims to elucidate the far-reaching impact of the "universal two-child" policy on female employment. By gaining insights into the employment challenges faced by women, people can better inform the formulation and execution of population policies, thus facilitating societal progress.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF WOMEN AFTER CHILDBIRTH

2.1 Enhancement of Women's Employment Awareness Post Childbirth

In recent decades, the rapid industrialization and urbanization of China have instigated profound transformations in the role of women within the workforce. Historically, Chinese society adhered to conventional gender roles,

with women primarily assigned to domestic duties and child-rearing responsibilities. Nevertheless, the course of China's economic reforms and urban expansion has ushered in substantial modifications. The participation of women in the labor force has surged, driven by the influences of globalization and multiculturalism. Changing attitudes among the younger generation have heralded shifts in the roles women play.

Many young Chinese women today aspire to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between their careers and family life, eschewing the strict adherence to traditional familial roles. As women gain greater access to educational and professional opportunities, a significant number opt to prioritize their career development and pursue economic independence. This discernible trend underscores the heightened awareness among women regarding employment prospects after childbirth.

2.2 Balancing Family and Work

Following childbirth, women often find themselves confronted with choices that revolve around reduced working hours and career interruptions. These choices create episodic career trajectories, characterized by fluctuations that mirror the dynamic nature of women's employment status. This fluctuation is heavily influenced by the surrounding environment, where working mothers grapple with the need to strike a balance between their professional commitments and motherhood [3]. When re-entering the job market postpartum, mothers face the intricate decision of whether to continue working or take a leave to care for their child. This choice is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including national policies and institutional influences. In China, shifts in family planning policies, evolving norms in dual-income households, and the growing emphasis on the status and roles of women in both paid and unpaid labor exert varying impacts on the labor market for postpartum women.

This intricate dance between family and work commitments underscores the nuanced decisions that women must navigate as they transition into motherhood and attempt to maintain their careers. The interplay between individual choices, societal expectations, and policy dynamics significantly shapes the path that postpartum women follow in the workforce.

2.3 The Cognitive Labor Burden on Women After Childbirth

In East Asian nations like Japan and South Korea, deeply rooted in Confucian ideals, women often find themselves opting out of societal expectations rooted in gender discrimination within the labor market, limited childcare options, and systemic gender disparities. One significant outcome of this environment for women after childbirth is their departure from the workforce, a decision driven by a variety of factors, including reduced working hours, career interruptions, and other career changes—all collectively termed the "motherhood penalty"[4]."

This motherhood penalty is particularly poignant as it results in substantial wage disparities and human capital losses for women, while men continue to experience wage increases and accumulate human capital. Paradoxically, the fatherhood premium, or the perceived advantages fathers may gain in the workplace, can inadvertently discourage their involvement in household chores[5]. This places an even greater burden on mothers, extending beyond physical housework to encompass a less visible but equally significant aspect known as "cognitive labor." Cognitive labor, marked by its ubiquity and intangibility, encompasses the mental and emotional exertion required to manage and make decisions in various aspects of family life. It often includes tasks such as organizing schedules, managing finances, planning for the future, and addressing the emotional needs of family members. The demands of cognitive labor can significantly impede a woman's ability to exercise willpower, make long-term decisions, and maintain her presence in the labor market.

This confluence of factors indirectly contributes to women exiting the labor market, exacerbating issues such as gender inequality. In essence, the burden of cognitive labor adds an invisible yet substantial layer of responsibility to women's lives after childbirth, further complicating their ability to balance family and work.

3. ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT UNDER THE "UNIVERSAL TWO-CHILD" POLICY

3.1 Economic Challenges: Dilemma of Women in the Labor Market

3.1.1 Decreased Employment Competitiveness and Diminished Female Labor Supply

The implementation of the "universal two-child" policy has the potential to exacerbate the employment hurdles confronted by women re-entering the workforce after childbirth. A key factor contributing to this challenge is the increased financial burden that companies bear for women's childbirth-related benefits. Prolonged absences from the labor market during maternity leave can lead to a decline in women's occupational skills. The longer the hiatus, the higher the likelihood that their original skills may stagnate or regress, resulting in a lower occupational status and potentially reduced salary upon reemployment[6]. Additionally, the demands of child-rearing significantly disrupt women's career trajectories, compelling them to gradually withdraw from the labor market. This also reduces women's available working hours as they shoulder greater responsibilities in childcare and household chores[7]. Consequently, the overall employability and competitiveness of women in the workforce decrease following childbirth.

3.1.2 Increased Employer Costs, Conflicts, and Reduced Demand for Female Labor

The existing policies extending maternity leave and introducing male paternity leave, while aimed at supporting families, can inadvertently shift the financial burden of expanding families onto employers. This, in turn, heightens the anticipated costs for employers, creating economic tensions within workplaces[6]. Furthermore, the inadequate societal and governmental support for women during pregnancy can foster mistrust between employers and employees regarding fertility issues, potentially impacting workplace productivity. Simultaneously, the conspicuous imbalance between labor supply and demand in the vast job market amplifies the risk of companies imposing artificially high standards and engaging in discriminatory practices against women. This exacerbates the challenges faced by women seeking employment opportunities.

3.2 Societal and Psychological Challenges: Gender Discrimination in Employment Faced by Women after Giving Birth

Becker, the economist who was the first to systematically study discrimination, explained employment discrimination as a preference of the discriminator. He creatively proposed that if an employer has discriminatory preferences, he may be willing to give up productivity [8]. As the boundaries of discrimination economics continue to expand, labor economics defines employment discrimination as: pay differences between individuals who are equal in all economic respects. Specific to female employment discrimination, it refers to the unreasonable differential treatment of women due to gender in the labor market [9].

Analyzing the gender discrimination problems faced by women in postpartum employment from the perspectives of gender theory and role conflict theory can provide a comprehensive understanding of this issue. Gender theory posits that gender differences are not primarily caused by innate abilities but are socially constructed through cultural norms, expectations, and institutional structures, highlighting how social beliefs about gender roles and expectations can lead to discrimination, including in employment settings [10]. After giving birth, women often face social expectations related to caring and nurturing roles that are traditionally associated with femininity, which can lead to workplace discrimination as employers may perceive women as lacking responsibility due to their perceived primary role as caregivers or ability. Role conflict theory further explores how women experience conflict when taking on multiple roles such as work and family responsibilities. The "universal two-child" policy will exacerbate these contradictions, create conflicts between work and family, lead to stress and reduced work performance, and lead to employment interruptions due to career interruptions. Institutional supports, including policies such as parental leave and flexible work arrangements, are critical to mitigating the negative impact of role conflict on women's careers.

3.3 Impact on Employment Levels

Yang Hui and colleagues conducted a study based on data from the "Survey on the Status of Chinese Women 2010." Their findings revealed that the impact of having a second child on the balance between family and work responsibilities is considerably more pronounced than that of the first child. Moreover, this impact is disproportionately greater for women compared to men, with women experiencing approximately twice the effect [11]. In light of these findings, women often engage in a careful deliberation of the opportunity cost associated with employment versus the expenses related to childcare. When the opportunity cost of working is high and income prospects are limited, many women may opt to forgo their careers in favor of prioritizing their family roles.

Furthermore, women in China contend with a lower overall employment rate, a higher prevalence of informal employment, and wage disparities. These disparities can create a pervasive sense of discrimination among female

employees, significantly dampening their motivation to seek employment opportunities. The "Universal Two-Child" policy in China has led to a reduced likelihood of mothers being employed, as evidenced by research such as Song Jian's analysis of the "Chinese Women's Status Survey 2010," which highlights how having infants and young children at home significantly diminishes employment prospects[12]. The added pressure of raising two children under this policy further deters women from seeking employment, exacerbating the challenges they face. Moreover, many women in China find themselves compelled to accept informal employment arrangements due to the difficulties associated with securing formal jobs offering maternity benefits and flexibility. Unfortunately, informal employment often lacks job security, social protections, and access to benefits, rendering it a less appealing option for women seeking stable and equitable employment opportunities.

4. SOLUTIONS

4.1 Improvement of the Legal System

As China's economy continues to advance, the legal system undergoes ongoing enhancements. However, there is a notable gap in the existing legislation concerning the protection of women's employment rights in our country. While overt discrimination against women in employment has largely been eradicated, covert discrimination remains prevalent, and the implementation of the comprehensive two-child policy has exacerbated this subtle bias.

To address the issue of gender discrimination in the labor market, it is imperative for the government to establish dedicated anti-employment discrimination legislation. This legislation should provide a clear definition of gender discrimination in employment and outline its various manifestations. Moreover, it should impose more substantial penalties and delineate the consequences for companies engaging in discriminatory practices. Drawing inspiration from the practices of nations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Sweden, people should consider the establishment of specialized agencies dedicated to combating gender-based employment discrimination[13]. These agencies can serve as accessible channels for women to register complaints, submit petitions, engage in mediation and arbitration, and even represent them in legal proceedings should the need arise. By implementing such comprehensive measures, we can make substantial strides toward achieving gender equality in the workforce and fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

4.2 Enhancements to Support Childbearing Policies

Women's reproductive choices extend beyond personal decisions, holding profound social implications. Although laws such as the "Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law" serve as a fundamental framework, they often lack the necessary depth and specificity to fully safeguard women's rights and interests. To genuinely protect women's rights, complementary policies should be formulated alongside these foundational laws[2]. These policies should be comprehensive, well-targeted, and administered by specialized agencies tasked with monitoring and ensuring their implementation. The objective is to cultivate an atmosphere that fosters encouragement and confidence among individuals to build families, ensuring they have the capacity to offer optimal care for their children. According to a survey, a staggering 99% of respondents believe that after the implementation of the "universal two-child" policy, corresponding laws, regulations, and policies should be introduced to protect women's rights and interests.

Scholars have also conducted in-depth research to propose specific enhancements to support childbearing policies. Firstly, there should be a continued focus on improving medical service facilities and insurance systems. This includes optimizing the allocation of maternal and child medical resources, enhancing service quality, and promoting equitable access to reproductive healthcare. Secondly, there's a need to invest in infant and early childhood education, including the establishment of public, inclusive childcare centers and kindergartens. Exploring the integration of preschool education into compulsory education can further support parents. Thirdly, measures such as paternity leave and extended parental leave should be implemented to augment maternity protection[14].

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that childbirth by female employees may have an impact on the revenue and profits of enterprises. In response, the government should intervene and establish mechanisms to share these costs. This can be accomplished by bolstering the maternity insurance system through expanded coverage and prolonged periods of benefit. Moreover, advocating for flexible employment models can distribute the responsibilities and expenses tied to childbirth more equitably among employers and society at large.

4.3 Changes in Women's Employment Awareness

Women who have given birth must confront the realities of employment, challenge ingrained social norms that confine women to specific roles, and reshape their attitudes towards work. This transformation begins with redefining societal expectations through a reevaluation of one's roles and effective communication. By doing so, external expectations can be altered, and the pressure stemming from societal influences can be alleviated[13].

In addition to reshaping societal roles, women should also invest in their theoretical knowledge and professional skills. Continuous self-improvement is essential; women should actively develop career plans, engage in relevant vocational training, and harness their initiative. A thorough self-assessment and clear self-positioning are vital in this process. Empowering women to enhance their competitiveness in the job market through proactive measures not only benefits individual employment prospects but also fosters personal growth and the realization of one's potential.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article offers a comprehensive analysis of the repercussions of China's "universal two-child" policy on women's employment. While the policy is designed to address population challenges, it also introduces noteworthy issues that warrant attention. The analysis reveals that women's employment prospects have seen improvements after childbirth, yet significant challenges persist across economic, social, psychological, and occupational dimensions. These impacts underscore the intricate balancing act women must perform between family and career responsibilities. The article presents recommendations from both governmental and individual perspectives to address these challenges. However, given China's vast and diverse landscape, policy impacts can vary regionally. While this analysis provides a broad overview, a more nuanced examination should consider conducting region-specific studies to capture local variations.

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