

# *Research on the Low Fertility Rate in China*

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**Abstract:** This paper recognizes the gradual seriousness of China's low fertility problem and its entry into the low fertility trap through the report "2022 World Population Outlook" released by the United Nations and data from the National Bureau of Statistics. This work analyzes the reasons for China's low fertility problem from three aspects: government policies, economic development, and women's rights. And it is believed that government population policies encourage fertility, alleviate people's economic pressure, and help women balance family and work, which are feasible methods to alleviate China's low fertility rate. This article aims to provide a scientific basis for formulating population policies that are in line with China's national conditions, and to provide ideas and methods for solving the problem of low fertility in China.

**Keywords:** Fertility rate, Fertility policy, Economic development, Women's rights

## 1. Introduction

Currently, the issues of slowing population growth, low fertility rate, and aging population in China are becoming increasingly prominent. Various issues are intertwined, and compared to developed countries with smaller populations, the issue of low fertility is more challenging. Although China has fallen into the "low fertility trap", its understanding of low fertility is still insufficient. At present, many studies in China focus on analyzing the impact of China's family planning policy on low fertility rates, while also paying attention to the impact of economic factors, educational factors, and social attitudes on low fertility rates. However, there are still some issues that have not been fully studied and resolved, such as the impact of government policies, the balance between women's rights and childbirth, and imbalanced socio-economic development. So the main purpose of this work is to explore the reasons for the low fertility problem in China and corresponding solutions, in order to alleviate the current low fertility situation in China.

In the work, we searched for data related to China's fertility rate, government policies in China, and government policies in other low fertility countries, and discussed them. This article mainly studies the issue of low fertility in China from three aspects: government policies, economic development, and women's rights and interests.

## 2. Analysis of the Causes of Low Fertility Rate in China

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, as of the end of 2022, the national population was 1411.75 million, of which 9.56 million were born in 2022, with a birth rate of 6.77 ‰; The dead population is 10.41 million, with a mortality rate of 7.37 ‰; The natural growth rate is -

0.60 ‰, which is the first time China has experienced negative population growth since 1961 [1]. According to the **World Population Outlook 2022** released by the United Nations, China's fertility rate has dropped to about 1.2 in 2022, ranking fifth from the bottom in the world. Among the ten countries with the lowest fertility rates in 2022, there are only two developing countries: Ukraine and China [2]. As is well known, low fertility rates often occur in developed countries, while China, as a developing country, has actually encountered serious fertility problems, which requires us to ponder. Due to the unique situation in China, the factors leading to low fertility are also diverse. Government policies, economic development and women's rights have all had a huge impact on the emergence of China's low fertility rate.

## 2.1. Government Policies

The first is the government policies that have the most direct impact on China's population changes. The family planning policy was established as China's basic national policy in 1982 and was written into the Chinese Constitution in the same year, which has been preserved to this day. The main content is to promote late marriage, late childbirth, fewer births, and eugenics. With the slowing population growth, low fertility rate, and aging population in China, there have been some slight changes and relaxation in the family planning policy. In 2001, China promulgated the **Population and Family Planning Law of the China** to allow the implementation of the policy of "two only two children". In 2013, it issued the **Resolution on Adjusting and Improving the Fertility Policy** to open the policy of "two only children". In 2015, the **CPC Central Committee's Proposal on Formulating the 13th Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development** announced the implementation of the "comprehensive two child" policy. On May 31, 2021, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee held a meeting to review the **Decision on Optimizing Fertility Policies to Promote Long term Balanced Population Development**. It was pointed out that in order to further optimize fertility policies, a policy of one couple having three children and supporting measures should be implemented. But so far, family planning has remained China's basic national policy. Due to the long-term implementation of the family planning policy, the fertility rate has been reduced by limiting the number and time interval of childbearing between husband and wife, thus making the overall fertility level low, leading to the aging of the population structure and Sub-replacement fertility. Due to the serious imbalance in the age structure of the population, China is facing problems such as an increased burden on elderly care and a decrease in labor force. Moreover, under the dual influence of the family planning policy and the traditional preference for boys, many families are more inclined to have boys and make Sex selection, resulting in serious gender imbalance. The imbalance in gender ratio not only has a negative impact on social stability, but also brings pressure to the future marriage market and social relationships.

## 2.2. Economic Development

With the rapid development of China's economy, people's reproductive needs are constantly decreasing, their living standards and education levels have improved, child mortality and poverty rates have decreased, and people's requirements for the quantity and quality of children have also increased. At the same time, the use of contraceptives and women's employment participation have increased, and people's attitudes towards marriage and family have also changed. These factors have led to a decrease in the demand for children, thereby reducing the birth rate. This phenomenon is known as the "demographic transition", which refers to the transition from high mortality and high birth rates to low mortality and low birth rates. The economic development and urbanization process have also increased people's reproductive costs. With the development of the economy, the cost and pressure of raising children have increased, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, education,

and other aspects. At the same time, people's consumption concepts and values have also changed, with a greater pursuit of personal freedom, enjoyment, and happiness. These factors all lead to a decrease in people's willingness and ability to have children, thereby reducing the birth rate. This phenomenon is known as the "low fertility trap", where when the birth rate falls below the replacement level (approximately 2.1), the population size will begin to shrink and it will be difficult to recover [3]. On March 25, 2023, at a sub forum of the Boao Forum for Asia on population policy, Yi Fuxian, a professor at the University of Wisconsin System in the United States, reminded that aging is an economic obstacle, and China has fallen into the "low fertility trap" [4].

### 2.3. Women's Rights

According to the statistical monitoring report of the National Bureau of Statistics of China, there will be 72.852 million female students in the nine-year compulsory Educational stage in 2020, an increase of 1.975 million over 2010, or 2.8%, accounting for 46.6% of the students in school. It can be seen that the educational level of Women in China is rising. The increase in education level often accompanies women delaying the age of marriage. Women with higher levels of education pay more attention to personal development and career planning, and only consider marriage and childbirth after pursuing education and career. Therefore, they are more likely to delay childbirth until the age of 30 or even later. Moreover, women with higher levels of education often have better employment opportunities and economic independence, which makes them more capable of bearing the financial burden of raising children and providing better educational resources. At the same time, the improvement of education level enables women to have more knowledge and information, better understand the impact and responsibility of childbirth, and make rational decisions. So they are more willing to wait until their career is stable and they have a sufficient economic foundation before considering childbirth. So the education level of women has a promoting effect on late marriage and childbirth. At the same time, with the continuous development of society, women's awareness is also awakening. Women yearn for recognition from society and their families, pay more attention to the improvement of their own identity and status, and have a strong sense of self-identity. Therefore, they may delay their decision to have children and pursue more personal freedom and independence. However, gender discrimination in the workplace also has a significant impact on women's willingness to have children. According to the **2022 Survey Report on the Status of Women in China's Workplace** released by *Zhaopin Limited*, 61.2% of women were asked about marriage and childbearing in their job search, up from 55.8% the previous year; 38.3% of women stated that marriage and childbirth affect their career prospects; 11.9% of women have difficulty receiving salary increases due to gender promotion [5]. From this, it can be seen that the excessive attention to the status of marriage and childbirth and the suggestion of women's promotion difficulties reflects the issue of gender discrimination in the workplace, and marriage and childbirth are important reasons for workplace discrimination. In some cases, employers may hold biases against women on maternity leave, believing that they may not be able to fully devote themselves or perform poorly when they return to work, or that maternity leave may add work pressure to the company and other employees. Moreover, some women may face a decrease in wages or economic income during maternity leave. This may lead to economic instability and affect fertility decisions. So workplace discrimination may cause women to worry and fear about childbirth, suppressing their willingness to have children. If women are concerned that having children will have a negative impact on their career development, or are concerned about facing criticism, discrimination, or losing job opportunities, they may delay or choose not to have children.

The Sex ratio at birth (the ratio of live born boys to girls) has been one of the major problems in China's population development in the past 40 years. In **China's Sex ratio at Birth in the Past Twenty Years**, it is stated that the Sex ratio at birth is the ratio of live born boys to live born girls at

birth. It is usually expressed in the number of boys per 100 live born girls. The normal value is between 102-107. It is generally believed that the normal value of China's Sex ratio at birth is 106. Since the early 1980s, the Sex ratio at birth in China has been on the high side [6]. Fu Linghui, spokesman of the National Bureau of Statistics, said at the press conference held by the Information Office of the State Council on May 17, 2021 that with the implementation of the "comprehensive two child" birth policy and the change of fertility concept brought about by economic and social development, China's Sex ratio at birth is gradually declining [7]. However, China's high Sex ratio at birth shows that many families have conducted Sex selection in childbirth, which has led to gender imbalance. Gender imbalance has also led to an imbalance in the absolute number of genders in the marriage and love market, resulting in a shortage of women of marriageable age and a decrease in the potential fertility population. This is also one of the important reasons for the decline in China's fertility rate.

### **3. Improvement Methods for China's Low Fertility Rate Problem**

The solutions to China's low fertility problem also need to be found from these aspects. Countries that experienced low fertility issues earlier than China have taken a series of measures to address this issue, some of which have significant reference significance for China to address the issue of low fertility.

#### **3.1. Population Policy**

Due to the particularity of China's family planning policy and its significant impact on the Chinese population, changes in population policy are necessary. In order to encourage national fertility, Ulyanovsk Oblast Prefecture of Russia set September 12 every year as the "pregnancy day", on which all married couples can be granted a day off. On June 1, 2021, the responsible person of the National Health Commission of China said that at present, the average number of children planned by the post-90s generation in China is only 1.66, 10% lower than that of the post-80s generation. So it is also necessary to encourage childbearing in China. China should follow the most basic natural laws of population development, prioritize guidance, reduce birth restrictions, and normalize population development.

#### **3.2. Financial subsidies**

In 1939, the French government enacted the Family Law, which implemented material incentives for families with multiple children, and subsidies were progressive according to the number of children. Currently, France has one of the highest birth rates in Europe, with a total fertility rate of 2.02 in 2010. Starting from January 1, 2010, the monthly child allowance in Germany has been increased by 20 euros. For families with less than 2 children, the monthly allowance is 184 euros. For families with more than 2 children, the third child can receive 190 euros per month, and the fourth child can receive 215 euros. Starting from 2010, each couple can receive a total of 7008 euros in child tax-free subsidies, while single parent families receive 3504 euros. According to the birth rate data released by the German National Bureau of Statistics since 1973, the implementation of these policies has led to a slow increase in Germany's birth rate. And Germany's birth rate in 2016 reached its highest level since 1973 at 1.59. The government's economic subsidies to families can alleviate the economic pressure during the process of giving birth and raising children, provide additional financial support for families, and regulate the cost of giving birth and raising children. This can give couples more confidence and ability to have children and raise more children. The education system in Malta offers 16 years of free public education and 16 years of compulsory education. These policies have attracted many families from other countries to immigrate. Free compulsory education can reduce the cost of

children's education for families, solve the worries of couples having children, and also improve the quality of the population. So, from an economic perspective, China needs to address the reproductive pressure on people. The government can encourage childbirth and increase people's willingness to have children by increasing subsidies for childbirth, reducing prenatal examination costs, and formulating housing policies.

### 3.3. Childcare security and male paternity leave

In 2004, the French government began implementing the "Nursery Care Plan", adding 20000 childcare "seats" and stipulating that enterprises operating 0-3 year old nurseries can receive tax exemptions and preferential policies. And the French government has created a flexible and diverse supply model of childcare services at a lower cost by incorporating nannies and other services into formal employment. Children aged 2 months can be sent to daycare centers, and those over 3 years old can enter kindergarten to facilitate their parents' return to work. On June 1, 2023, Prime Minister of France Borne announced that the government would launch a plan to improve childcare services and remove barriers to employment, including increasing 200000 childcare places by 2030. Borne said in an interview with *Ouest-France* the night before that "when a couple has children, many times it is women who withdraw from the labor market. [8]" The establishment and expansion of daycare centers provide care and support for working parents' children, enabling them to better balance work and family responsibilities. In the past decade, due to the increase in the birth rate and employment rate of women in France, the demand for childcare services for children under 3 years old has become increasingly strong. Therefore, the French government has continuously increased its support for childcare services for children under 3 years old, forming a complete childcare system. The childcare service system for children under 3 years old has also become a recognized parenting culture in French society. Diversified and reassuring childcare has made France the most fertile country in the European Union. With the support of daycare centers, couples can more freely participate in career development without the need to delay or reduce childbirth due to child care. The existence of daycare also provides more employment opportunities, especially for mothers who wish to return to the workplace. With reliable daycare facilities, mothers can more easily find jobs and participate in career development, which can enhance their economic independence and freedom in childbirth decision-making. Male paternity leave refers to a special leave system in which fathers can take leave to accompany their wives in taking care of newborns after their wives give birth. Iceland is the first country in the world to implement paternity leave for men. According to Icelandic policies, fathers can enjoy a total of 90 days of paternity leave, of which 3 months are specifically prepared for fathers and cannot be transferred to mothers. The father can choose to take leave at any time after the birth of the baby, and during the paternity leave period, the father will receive an 80% salary subsidy. The implementation of male paternity leave can promote women's access to the same rights and opportunities as men in the workplace. By providing paternity leave, fathers have the opportunity to participate in early childcare while maintaining a balanced career. This helps to reduce gender discrimination against women in the workplace, especially employment inequality caused by the need to take on family care responsibilities. Meanwhile, male paternity leave can promote equal division of labor and shared responsibility among family members. When fathers have the opportunity to participate in the early upbringing and care of their children, the burden of child rearing and household chores in the family is more equitably distributed. This can reduce the pressure on mothers and increase their desire to have another child.

Therefore, reasonable childcare protection and male paternity leave are beneficial for improving the fertility willingness of women in the workplace. However, the report of **China Education and Population Report 2022** pointed out that "the structural imbalance of preschool service system" is the main dilemma faced by China's preschool Educational stage. The main reason for the low

enrollment rate is the serious supply gap in 0–3-year-old child care services and insufficient financial investment. China's investment in childcare services at the age of 0-2 is far below the international level, about half of that of European countries [9]. Compared to other countries, China's paternity leave is also relatively short, and fathers do not receive salary subsidies during paternity leave. One of the ways to improve China's low fertility rate is to increase financial investment in childcare services between the ages of 0 and 3, extend men's paternity leave, and provide wage subsidies.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, this article mainly conducts research from three aspects: government policies, economic development, and women's rights, exploring scientific and effective fertility measures that are suitable for China's current population situation. It is believed that government population policies encourage fertility, alleviate people's economic pressure, and help women balance family and work, which are feasible methods to alleviate China's low fertility rate. Due to China's complex historical reasons and special political system, solving the problem of low fertility is relatively complex and is bound to be a difficult and long road. China should base itself on its national conditions, draw on the experience of developed countries, continuously improve supporting policies related to fertility, build a support system for family development, and actively create an environment and conditions that encourage fertility to address the deteriorating problem of low fertility rates.

Fertility plays an important role in population reproduction and human reproduction, and China is one of the most populous countries in the world. Changes in population structure have a significant impact on the country's economic development and social stability. The research on the issue of low fertility in China helps to understand the trends and impacts of changes in China's population structure, provide scientific basis for formulating population policies that are in line with China's national conditions, and provide ideas and methods for solving the problem of low fertility in China. Studying the issue of low fertility in China is of great significance for the sustainable development of the country, social stability, and people's happiness. It requires multifaceted participation and interdisciplinary cooperation to comprehensively understand the complexity of the problem and provide scientific suggestions and solutions for decision-makers.

Future research on the issue of low fertility in China can start with more detailed analysis from aspects such as technology and healthcare, lifestyle and cultural factors, as well as regional differences, in order to develop more unique plans to alleviate the current situation of low fertility in China.

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