



Review

From One to Three: China's Motherhood Dilemma and Obstacle to Gender Equality

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Abstract: The implementation of China's three-child policy has prompted considerable attention and discussion. From "one child" to "two-child" to "three-child," the Chinese government has considered the macro population structure in previous reproductive policy adjustments while ignoring the difficulties and necessities of parenting. The child-rearing costs that should have been shared by the family and the state are left to be shouldered by the family alone. Gender equality and women's development have lagged, while the traditional role of women and the sharing of family responsibilities between men and women have stagnated. The easing of the fertility policy will increase the frequency of childbirth and result in greater difficulties faced by women in the workplace. Childbirth negatively impacts women's wages, and as its intensity continues to increase, so does the problem of maternal punishment. This study presents situations that illuminate the plight of Chinese mothers. Solving the motherhood dilemma cannot be achieved by making a mother choose between prioritizing herself or her child. Only by detaching privatization from motherhood, returning to public politicization, treating gender equality promotion as only the starting point, and strengthening social support and public service can the motherhood dilemma truly be resolved.



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1. Introduction

The ongoing debate on motherhood and gender equality in China has become an important source for researchers to understand the prevalent ideology of motherhood and the current situation of women, and to examine the social and cultural pressures they face. Specifically, feminists emphasize that the concepts of gender and motherhood are constructed through historical and societal processes [1]. Policies and regulations, cultural practices, demographic status, science and technology, and various other factors may be involved in shaping motherhood and gender roles [2]. In popular discourse, the subject of motherhood is closely related to the topic of gender.

Influenced by feminism, research on motherhood in China mostly centers on the critique of the perfect motherhood discourse and the analysis of motherhood-related dilemmas in urban middle-class women [3,4]. Motherhood experiences based on the different perspectives of genders, generations, and classes present issues and practical strategies that are unique to China [5–7]. "Motherhood" as a concept and theme gained attention in the 1970s and 1980s, following the investigation of feminism in the West. It served as an important starting point for showcasing the situation of women in white, middle-class families and challenging the classic "male breadwinner model" [5]. Motherhood studies and movements have promoted the idea that women have the right to enter the workplace as individuals beyond their roles as mothers, and that mothers and motherhood should be given greater respect in society [8]. Motherhood studies and related discussions first appeared in China in approximately 2010. Considering the transition of Chinese society from a planned to a market economy, the discussion on motherhood has become an enduring

topic in both old and new media in China [3,9–11]. This change is based on globalization, the separation of the public and private affairs between the state and family, the return of the gendered division of labor in the labor market and family, and the entry of the new urban middle class and one-child generation.

China's research on motherhood issues stems mostly from the experience of motherhood itself. The analysis and criticism of perfect mothers (i.e., "ideal mom," or "supermom") is an important aspect of such research [2,12]. Coupled with the disintegration of the public nursery system and the privatization of childcare, the modern definition of a "perfect mother" is one who can perfectly handle her own work and manages the care and education of her children [5]. Mothers must not only take responsibility for the care of their children, but also become omniscient and omnipotent "educator mothers" [13]. This idea reveals the dilemma of integrating women's subjectivity as individuals with their motherhood-related identities. The motherhood dilemma is more often characterized by forcing mothers to prioritize either the family or the individual, or either the children or herself [5]. For example, the concept of "intensive motherhood" has been widely disseminated and cited in both media and academia in China. Research emphasizes that the highly market-oriented labor stratification that occurred during China's socioeconomic transition, which led to the rejection of working mothers. Moreover, the cultural transformation made possible by consumerism has swung the concept of motherhood back to traditionally held beliefs. The result is that mothers need to complete their work in the market while also managing the care and education of their children in the family. Other research on motherhood in China pertains to the practice of nurturing and parenting or social motherhood. Discussions on childbirth and child rearing, including natural childbirth, breastfeeding, and a mother's companionship [14–16], depict motherhood as an idea where the "mother is very important" and the "mother's role is irreplaceable" [17]. Many articles decry the negative effects of the father's absence on children's physical and mental development in cases of "widowed parenting" [2,18], as well as the "motherhood penalty" and the "double taxation of gender and motherhood" experienced by women in the labor market who are married and have children [6,19]. As mothers are also players in the labor market, their motherhood-related practices integrate the triple burden of "being an employee," "being a wife," and "being a mother," as well as multilevel and multisystem dilemmas [20].

However, research on motherhood in China rarely addresses political issues. Moreover, the discussion on experiences of motherhood and practiced strategies from multiple perspectives mainly consider motherhood as a dilemma around personal choice in a private framework, which inevitably leads to a dead end [21]. As women are caught in a dilemma between full-time motherhood and professional womanhood, if research neglects the structural constraints of society and ways to break from these constraints, women will eventually fail to escape the "supermom" ideal. Hence, it is necessary to treat motherhood as a public rather than a private issue. We must connect the private sphere of the family to larger social issues, instead of seeking outlets only for digesting social problems through the family perspective. Our discussion on fertility-related policies, motherhood, and existing real-world obstacles to gender equality will touch on the classic questions in motherhood studies about fertility inequality, the autonomy and instrumentalization of the body, and the intersectional reconfiguration of the family, based on class and gender. By delving into fertility-related policies, the number of children mandated by the state and social realities, this study will deepen and expand our present understanding of the concepts of motherhood and family. Thus, we establish a fresh and detailed review of womanhood, motherhood, and the state and society in contemporary China.

By analyzing the impact of the one-, two-, and three-child policies of China on women, families, and the economy, we not only help women, but also the state and the country by guiding them toward understanding the fallout of such regulations and leading them toward further action. We review the latest policy decisions made by the government on fertility and reproduction, and the condition of mothers in a recently opened economy.

2. Fertility Policies in China and the Private Dilemma of Motherhood

In ancient China, pronatalism was passed down as customary law. At the founding of the People's Republic of China, the policy of encouraging childbirth continued to be adopted. China's population exploded from 540 million in 1949, to 960 million in 1978 [22]. This explosive population growth imposed great pressure on society at that time and was reflected in many aspects, such as food, clothing, housing, transportation, education, health, and employment. In the late 1970s to 1980s, China began to formally implement the one-child policy and effectively controlled the rapid population growth and eased the pressure of the population on resources and the environment.

Nonetheless, the one-child policy was also associated with extensive social problems, particularly for women. Gender imbalance was exacerbated by the one child policy in China [23]. Many pregnant women abort female fetuses because Chinese parents traditionally prefer boys. The ratio of male to female babies was skewed and rose from 107.4:100 in 1980 to 121.1:100 in 2004 [24]. Women were forced to have contraceptive devices, tubal ligations, and abortions. (Women were the main subjects of contraception and birth control at that time. More than 85% of contraceptive operations are performed on women. According to the "China Health Statistics Yearbook 2010," from 1980 to 2009, there were 286 million intrauterine implants, 99 million tubal ligations, and 275 million abortions for women). However, many Chinese women were indirectly granted the right to work and participate in social activities under the premise that their birth right was restricted. Furthermore, with only one child, they saved large amounts of time and devotion bearing, raising, and educating their children. (Chinese women spend 44.6% of their working time performing unpaid labor, such as caring for their families, compared with 18.9% for men. (China Labor Force Dynamics Survey: 2017 report).

China's working-age population experienced an unprecedented, absolute decline in 2012 [25]. At present, the adverse impact of the low birth rate on the economy and society is becoming apparent. The aging of society, rising labor costs, increasing social security pressure, and other issues have emerged. The government's immediate solution to these problems is to increase the population, and experts believe that population policies that encourage childbearing will help ease the social pressure caused by China's aging population [26]. In 2010, the number of one-child families in China reached 150 million. The sixth census revealed that the total fertility rate in China was only 1.18%, and the situation was more dire in large cities such as Beijing (0.71%) and Shanghai (0.74%) [27]. In November 2011, a policy allowing couples to have a second child if both parents were the only child in their family was fully implemented across China. In 2013, the policy allowed couples to have a second child if either member of the couple was the only child. In 2016, China implemented the two-child policy. However, with rising incomes and urbanization, fertility continued to decline after China fully implemented the two-child policy. The statistics showed that 17.23 million Chinese infants were born in 2017, representing 630,000 fewer than in 2016. The birth rate was 12.43 per thousand, less than 0.52 per thousand, since 2016 [28].

In a meeting held on 31 May 2021, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China declared that it should further optimize policies on fertility, implement a policy enabling couples to have three children, and design corresponding support measures [29]. The head of the National Health and Welfare Commission explained that with the implementation of the three-child policy, citizens can actively respond to the risk of continuously lowering fertility rates. In the long term, it will help improve the population's age structure, expand the supply of new labor, reduce the dependency ratio of the elderly population, resolve intergenerational conflicts, increase the overall vitality of society, and reduce peak levels of population aging [30]. However, the number of childbirths continued to decline after the implementation of the two-child policy in 2016. (According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, 18.83 million, 17.65 million, 15.23 million, 14.65 million, and 12 million people were born in China in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020, respectively). In addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the

main causes of the declining birth rate include the decrease in the number of women of childbearing age, the postponement of the age of marriage and childbirth, and the reluctance of the public to have children. (According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of women of childbearing age aged 15–49 years in China in 2019 decreased by more than 5 million compared with 2018. Among them, the number of women of childbearing age aged 20–29 years in the booming childbearing period decreased by more than 6 million. From 1990 to 2017, the average age of first marriage for women of childbearing age in China was delayed by more than 4 years, from 21.4 years old to 25.7 years old, and shows a continuously rising tendency. The average age at first childbirth also increased from 23.4 years old to 26.8 years old. In 2020, the total fertility rate of women of childbearing age in China was 1.3, which is relatively low). In this context, how effective can the three-child policy be? How does the implementation of the three-child policy reflect the basic state policy of gender equality? Does it prevent women from attending to both the family and the workplace?

Chinese families have undergone significant changes in sizes, structures, and functions due to the declining fertility rate, increasing population mobility, rising divorce rates, weakening family values, and other factors. For example, the family size has decreased, and the family structure has become more diversified. The average household size declined from 4.43 persons in 1982 to 2.62 persons in 2020 [31]. The number of single individuals, DINK families (double income no kids family), empty nesters, and other types of households has increased, while the number of families with three or more generations has decreased [31]. The rural male population has migrated to cities, leaving women, children, and elderly persons behind, and family duty—regarding old-age care—has significantly weakened [32]. The miniaturization of modern families has weakened the family's function of raising children. Establishing a family translates to two young people having to bear the burden of supporting four elderly people and the pressure of parenting at least one child. Because infants under three years of age are more dependent and vulnerable, families at this stage experience greater pressure regarding childcare [33].

Childbirth involves not only the explicit cost of raising and educating a family, but also hidden costs, such as time and affection. As people's lifestyles change and families' desires for well-bred children continue to grow, each child poses additional costs to the family. Families often share the cost of childbirth with family members through intergenerational support [6]. A research report found that nearly 80% of infants and young children in cities are cared for by their grandparents [34]. However, because of factors such as the postponement of the retirement policy, the increase in the age of grandparents when their children give birth to their second child, and declining health of the elderly [35], family support networks have weakened. Thus, the traditional methods of elderly family members providing childcare will be unsustainable. Studies have shown that when the family attempts to have a second child, the support of the grandparents is significantly reduced, and the pressure of raising the child is borne mostly by the mother [36].

The implementation of the three-child policy will exacerbate the abovementioned contradictions and pose several challenges to women's development. Young women are forced to choose between the optimal age for conceiving and the golden age for personal and professional development. In recent times, the proportion of women enrolled in universities and institutes of higher education in China has surpassed that of men. (In 2019, the number of female graduate students in higher education was 1.448 million, accounting for 50.6% of all graduate students). The desire of young women to pursue self-development has become even more pressing. Against the background of increasingly fierce competition in the labor market, where young women are faced with the choice of "childbirth" or "promotion," the latter may often be their first choice. Recently, delayed marriage and conception of the first child have only been the "tip of the iceberg" in terms of challenges. For middle-aged women, the conflict between family and work is even more intense. The participation rate of the female labor force in China is high, at 61.1% in 2018, exceeding the international average of 47.4% [37]. However, the division of labor between genders within the family

still follows the traditional pattern of female dominance. While social acceptance of unpaid family work is gradually decreasing, expectations on women to simultaneously raise offspring and perform household chores remain high [38]. The generally high demands of families for child-rearing and the lack of a supportive environment present a dilemma for women who are managing family and work. Interruption in women's careers can lead to a significant underutilization of human capital. Some women combat the trade-off by remaining single, delaying marriage and childbearing, and having fewer children, among other approaches. However, this has created other problems, such as rising infertility rates, and higher rates of non-marriage and divorce. (According to data released by the National Health Commission and the Civil Affairs Bureau of China, the average incidence of infertility in China remains at 12.5–15%. From 2013 to 2020, the number of marriage registrations in China continued to decline from 13.47 million to 8.13 million. From 1987 to 2020, the number of divorce registrations in China rose from 580,000 to 3.73 million).

As women's childbearing years overlap with those of their employment, many women choose to leave the labor market or choose modes of employment with flexible working hours that allow them to care for children [39]. The overall manifestation of this phenomenon is a decline in women's participation rate in the labor force and a lower quality of employment [40]. From the perspective of labor demand, childbirth increases the hiring costs of female workers, and many women face "motherhood penalties," such as hiring discrimination, lower wages, and reduced employment stability [19]. Although regulations against employment discrimination have been implemented in recent years, (Article 10 of the "Regulations on the Implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests in Liaoning Province" stipulates that employers shall not discriminate or exclude female employees for any reason when hiring employees. Article 19 of the "Regulations on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests of Hebei Province" stipulates: "For units that discriminate against women in the process of employee recruitment and hiring, the local women's federation can interview their managers and urge the employer to correct the discrimination within the agreed time limit.") "invisible discrimination" still exists in recruitment and promotion [41]. To solve this problem, China is implementing policies such as maternity leave extension, paternity leave, and the merging of maternity and medical insurance. However, laws and policies are still unable to address actual social needs, which makes further improvement imperative.

The challenges posed by the three-child policy to women's development cannot be ignored. However, women alone cannot solve the problem. There is a need for stronger policies that integrate childbirth into the design of social mechanisms, policies, and environment, create an atmosphere of respect for childbirth, and encourage men to be more active in sharing the responsibility of parenting and cost of childbirth. Meanwhile, the conversation should move beyond the motherhood dilemma between putting family or oneself first, or prioritizing children over oneself. To solve the dilemma, motherhood must not be treated as a private issue, but rather a matter to be solved in the public sphere.

3. Cultural Factors: Persistent Patriarchy and the "Motherhood" Myth

On a cultural-political level, patriarchal hierarchy has a long history in China. "Familism and the concept of class have always been the basic spirit and main feature of ancient Chinese law, and they represent the social institutions and values that are jointly upheld by law and morality and ethics" [42]. In essence, regarding the division of labor between genders, patriarchy in the Zhou dynasty (11th century BC) ensured a strict division between the public and private, and internal and external. Specifically, "public/private" represents the divide between the state and family, while "internal/external" is within the scope of the family. "Public" refers to national affairs, which are mainly dealt with by men, while "private" refers to family affairs, which are shared between men and women. Accordingly, in the division of labor, affairs outside the home are "external" and are mainly performed by men, while affairs inside the home are "internal" and are mainly performed by women. In summary, the most important feature of the patriarchal gender system established by

the Zhou dynasty is the division of the gender hierarchy. The hierarchy between men and women is manifested as male superiority and female inferiority, while the hierarchy of the division of labor is also evident in the assertion that “public” and “external” aspects are more important than “private” and “internal” ones [43].

Although this division of labor has been greatly transformed since the founding of New China, it still exists in the culture, customs, and concepts [44], and has become a normative system parallel to the law that is effective in certain regions [45]. Internalized in people’s consciousness and actions, it has become a congealed and invisible cultural force. (The Third Wave Survey on The Social Status of Women in China (2011) shows that 72.7% of the married feel that wives do more housework than husbands. Among care providers, 63.2% are mothers who serve as primary daytime caregivers). With China’s market-oriented reforms, the concept has evolved into a cultural rule that propagates the notion that women are “ideal caregivers,” and men are “ideal workers” [12]. The policy of supporting the employment of mothers should respond to the various issues arising from this cultural rule of gender. Within the patriarchal framework, women have the primary responsibilities of “birthing,” “raising,” and “educating” the children [46,47]. Despite being subjected to feminist criticism, this deep-rooted patriarchal system continues to exist.

According to the “3rd Survey on Social Status of Women in China,” organized by the All-China Women’s Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics in 2011, the percentages of men and women who agreed that “men should be socially oriented, and women should be family oriented,” were 61.6% and 54.8%, respectively. Presently in China, families are basically responsible for the care of children under the age of three years, while the proportion of mothers who attend to the main care-related tasks during the daytime is 63.2% [48]. The discussion on widowed parenting has expanded from its initial focus on the parent–child relationship to a gender relationship and has become a comprehensive topic that integrates the motherhood dilemma with a reflection on the gender relationship [2]. The feminization of childcare has worsened the anxiety of new mothers in child-rearing, reduced their sense of happiness about marriage and family, and increased the fear of marriage and parenthood among unmarried women [18,20]. It has prompted the gender effect of childcare to transition from the private sphere to the public sphere and has become one of the direct causes of the cold responses toward the two-child policy [36,49]. The sharing of childcare responsibilities within the family, especially the performance of “fatherhood,” also depends largely on equal gender relations. In a family where patriarchal norms still prevail, relying solely on paternity leave ranging from seven to ten days will not solve the lack of paternity or the “performance of fatherhood.”

In a patriarchal culture, it is immensely challenging to dispel the myth that “mother” is equal to “motherhood.” Women must continually adjust their strategies to find a balance between motherhood and the female subject under the premise of affirmed motherhood. The recognition of motherhood by Chinese women is like that of Western women, in that they hold a highly positive attitude toward women “becoming a mother” [4,11,21]. They also believe that the “mother” plays an indispensable role in the process of motherhood practices, and that whether a mother can meet the needs of her children is highly relevant to their future development. However, due to the influence of Chinese familism, Chinese women fundamentally ignore the collective responsibilities of the “government” and “society” in the process of motherhood and habitually regard it as a woman’s personal responsibility. Thus, the family structure and family support system become the main factors affecting women’s choice of motherhood strategies [50]. Even if biological mothers can escape the responsibilities and constraints of social motherhood, they transfer the responsibilities and burdens of social motherhood to the “mother of the mother” or “mother of the father” [6,42,51]. This is done without deconstructing the division of roles between the two genders in motherhood practices, nor the division of responsibilities between the family, society, and government.

Another aspect of the myth of motherhood is manifested in China’s increasingly prevalent “intensive motherhood.” Alongside economic reforms and the opening of the

market, the government began to focus on family education for children. In the same period, Western scientific parenting concepts were being introduced in China [12]. After the 1990s, the association between mothers' and children's quality of health began to be emphasized, and the importance of the mother's role was gradually reinforced—good mothers should promote rationality, follow experts, and use parenting-related goods and services to raise happy children [1]. The “adult-centered” childcare model changed to a “child-centered” model, and the “extensive” childcare method switched to a “refined” model [52]. The marketization of education in China led to the expansion of maternal duties, making mothers responsible for the success or failure of their children's education [11]. Motherhood practices in urban families have broken away from the traditional connotation of childcare in the private sphere. Mothers have witnessed a steep increase in their duties toward their children's education, and taken on the role of an “agent,” having to understand products in the education market, the needs of target schools, customizing individualized learning routes, planning schedules for shadow education and learning, and personally integrating educational resources [13]. The expansion of the scope of motherhood exists not only in the arena of education, but also in the sphere of raising the child. A high level of emotional commitment and scientific and intelligent parenting is expected to raise physically and mentally healthy and academically successful children [4]. Although the employment rate of women has declined significantly since 1990, it is still high when compared to that of other countries. Amid the dual pressures and dilemmas of work and caregiving, mothers are becoming “supermoms” and are using various strategies to cope with this social risk [51]. Although the micro-mechanisms of being a “supermom” supports the family in filling the social welfare deficit in childcare, the “supermom” phenomenon is problematic regarding sustainability and generates social inequality [3]. This concept reinforces the cultural norm of women as the “ideal caregiver” in contrast to men, who are positioned as the “ideal worker” [12].

The cultural definitions of “good mother” and “ideal worker” conflict, and the prejudice caused by motherhood may be more discriminatory than that caused by gender alone [52,53]. Such distinctions in gendered roles between men and women, and the superimposed motherhood discrimination by employers or the labor market, generate dilemmas for mothers regarding employment, promotions, and career development [9]. The impact of cultural rules related to gender and maternal positions on labor market outcomes for mothers is becoming increasingly prominent and has become a key issue in social policy to support the participation of mothers in the labor force [45].

4. State Factors: Women's Emancipation from and Return to the Family

In China, policies related to family and childcare, as well as the many regulations supporting mothers' employment, implicitly represent a progression in the understanding of the mothers' employment issues, from the sole emancipation of the female labor force to gender equality in the labor market, to work–family balance, and even economic and social integration [7,11,12].

The equality granted by law may not help women who are relatively incapable of independence because their adult lives are already encumbered by too many dependents and caregiving duties, such as pregnancy, childbirth, nursing infants, raising children, caring for aging parents, and caring for aging spouses [54–56]. Women with caregiving responsibilities are unlikely to be equal to men, even though they are treated equally by the state [12]. Women are unlikely to benefit from a brand of feminism that focuses on legal or formal equality. Furthermore, since childbirth is the starting point for most of these issues, the state's fertility-related policies become critical to the specific family and professional life experiences of women.

With the introduction of the “one-child” policy in China in the 1980s, many Chinese women were indirectly liberated to work and participate in social activities, while their reproductive rights were greatly restricted [57]. According to the law and family planning regulations, the only child in the family is the ex-officio successor, thereby dispersing the

Chinese law of clan inheritance within a generation [58]. The implementation of family planning policies resulted in a general tendency for Chinese families to be smaller, with fewer children and a higher concentration of family resources [59]. Daughters born when the “one-child” policy was in place were the family’s only target of investment and hope for providing care after aged family members’ retirements. With no brothers competing for family resources, they could often receive strong parental care and support in matters such as education, employment, and marriage, and even use their unprecedented power to rebel against unfavorable gender norms [18].

Unlike their own mothers, this new generation of mothers followed a trend of being born to families with few children, having high levels of education and incomes, and pursuing economic independence and success through careers [20]. They actively learn and implement the concept of “scientific parenting” and advocate a modern democratic and fair family culture based on equality regarding family and marriage [60]. These mothers no longer subscribe to the traditional concept of a “good” wife and mother, and even under the pressure of intensive motherhood, they aim to balance family and career [5]. These characteristics, which are different to those of earlier generations of women, have led them to explicitly express their dislike of and opposition to the concept of “widowed parenting” to which parents were accustomed, instead challenging and questioning the feminization of childcare [32]. Moreover, this change in attitudes has gradually shifted the issue of the feminization of childcare-related responsibilities from the private sphere to the public [1,11,17], thereby drawing the attention of the public and government and initiating social discussion on childcare and gender equality.

In the 1980s, as Chinese society transitioned from a planned economy to a socialist market, and the government gradually withdrew from childcare responsibilities [11,36]. The government and workplaces no longer provided public goods such as medical care, education, and childcare in a public capacity, while the private nature of childcare-related labor became widespread, and child-rearing started to become the responsibility of the family unit. As a result, ordinary urban families needed to adopt market-based or family resources to solve childcare-related problems, which, consequently, increased the cost and pressure of childcare [36]. Outside the family, institutions dedicated to childcare are few and expensive. The average family can hardly manage under the pressure of mortgages and car loans, let alone pay for childcare. (Research shows that for more than half of the households, monthly childcare costs have exceeded half of the current average disposable income of Chinese households). Furthermore, frequent incidents of childcare abuse by nannies [61] and child sexual abuse by kindergarten teachers [62] have shocked the new generation of parents. Childcare has become a major task that must be performed personally, which increases the family’s childcare deficit.

The implementations of the one-child and two-child policies have led to a reduction in the number of children in urban families, and the anxiety over “not losing at the start” has shrouded urban family units, which has been directly transferred to young mothers. The intensive practice of motherhood places high pressure and a heavy mental burden on young mothers [60]. As Adrienne Rich stated, the ideal mother in modern society must completely abandon her own goals to give her children the “unconditional” love and attention that society expects of a “good mother” [63]. The three-child policy has certainly exacerbated this high-pressure situation, forcing young mothers to “return to the family,” and spend more time and energy on childcare and other household chores. The formulation and adjustment of fertility policies from “one-child” to “three-children” has created a more depressing experience of motherhood among Chinese women. Studies have shown that the parenting pressure in two-child families is significantly higher than in one-child families in every aspect, including children’s education, external environment, life adjustment, interpersonal interaction, and parent–child interactions [36]. For two-child families, more children are raised, and the financial, time, and emotional investment of both parents will also be higher.

Young mothers report that they devote far more time to childcare than their husbands do, and even with plenty of spare time, their partners are reluctant to commit to a field in which women are seen as naturally advantaged [2,9]. (Research data shows that more than half of mothers interact with their children for more than two hours a day, and the proportion of fathers is only 17%). The considerable amount of a mother's time consumed by childcare leads to a "motherhood penalty" in terms of stunted career development. This in turn engenders a vicious circle involving new mothers whose time is less valuable and who are expected by family members to take on unpaid childcare-related work based on the principle of the family's economic rationality. Such a contradiction between the shortage of resources of family care and the refinement of childcare has forced some new mothers to choose to be full-time housewives when their children are 0–3 years old (Studies have found that among all women who are at home full-time, only about one-third became full-time housewives after marriage, while two-thirds of women return to their families under pressure following childbirth). However, due to the fierce competition in today's labor market, even the brief period for which women may be housewives can aggravate their anxiety as well as their parents' anxiety. Many parents prefer to retire early to support their children with childcare rather than see the new generation of mothers put their careers on hold [10,64].

When a young mother becomes pregnant and gives birth, one parent may join her temporarily to care for the family. Assistance from grandparents activates the family's micro-support system, reducing the burden of childcare on young mothers and easing the role of new mothers who face the twin pressures of work and family [38]. Research-based data show that nationwide, 80% of children aged 0–2 years are primarily cared for by grandparents, among whom 30% are completely cared for by grandparents [53]. Intergenerational parenting, which mobilizes human resources within the family, is a decision that ordinary families are forced to make due to social structural constraints. However, the substitution of grandparents also contributes to the maintenance of the traditional gender order of "men as breadwinners and women as homemakers," in the division of labor within the family for young parents, reducing the frequency of fathers' involvement in child-rearing and emotional interaction [2]. The shift in responsibilities of childcare to grandparents continues to result in substitution by grandmothers in childcare-related tasks that ideally should have been shared by fathers [38].

5. Market Factors: "Rational Choice" of Enterprise and "Double Taxation of Gender and Motherhood"

With the development of the market economy in China in the late 1970s, the "modern corporate system" replaced the old unit, wherein the transformation of production relations was achieved through the exclusion of enterprises running society and the optimal combination of labor (e.g., reduction of staff and increase in efficiency) [10]. The former led to the reversion of child-rearing to individuals, while the latter meant that companies spared no efforts in pursuing performance legitimacy. Employing women, when the future cost of employing them is higher under the same conditions, is an irrational choice. Therefore, from the family perspective, men as breadwinners and women as homemakers is a rational choice to maximize the economic benefits of the family. Such rationality notwithstanding, from outside the family, it appears more to be a choice helplessly driven by the hand of the market. In particular, the family-oriented and feminized nature of childcare, low availability of childcare-related resources for mothers' support, children's age, number of children, and other factors negatively affect women's employment rates in various ways such as causing career interruptions, preventing re-entry into the labor market, and reducing labor income [17,51,64].

Employment is increasingly significant for women today in terms of both income and personal values. The process of modernization has seen women become more educated and enter the labor market in rising numbers. At present, employed women not only support the family's consumption expenditure, but also satisfy the inevitable need for self-fulfillment [7].

Since the introduction of the two-child policy, the state has put forward and revised a series of laws and policies to protect women's employment rights, including the Employment Promotion Law, the Special Provisions on Labor Protection for Female Employees, the Interim Measures for Women's Federation Organizations to Promote Fair Employment Interviews for Women, and the Notice on Further Regulating Recruitment to Promote Equal Employment of Women. However, due to the higher cost of labor of hiring female employees, preference for men in recruitment is still the "implicit consensus" among some employers [39,41]. After the implementation of the two-child policy, research by the All-China Women's Federation revealed that the liberalization of the fertility-related policy will exacerbate gender discrimination in employment to a certain extent [65]. From the employers' perspective, women of childbearing age can be regarded as potential bearers of multiple children, which affects their chances of being hired [48]. Notably, objective hiring costs and gender stereotypes are the main causes of employment discrimination, although authoritative reports on women's development have confirmed that women contribute no less than men in businesses and organizations. (The McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) released a report stating that the contribution rate of Chinese women to the GDP reached 41%, the highest among all regions globally. By 2025, China has the potential to promote a GDP growth of 16 trillion yuan, with an average annual GDP growth rate of more than 1%. If the gender gap in the workplace can be completely eliminated, then China will create a potential economic thrust of 27 trillion yuan, or a 20% GDP growth under normal economic operating conditions). Nevertheless, if companies believe the inclusion of women will lower their efficiency from the perspective of increased burdens, their thinking is imbued with a preconceived bias [55]. Hence, shaping the cultural perception around gender equality is urgently needed.

In theory, men and women with equal human capital should have equal opportunities in the workplace. However, in reality, gender differences are more pronounced, as the two genders are significantly constructed and treated differently, especially when there are gender overlaps with childbearing [10]. Women tend to experience unequal treatment and systematic deprivation in the labor market, with fewer opportunities for human capital accumulation, higher barriers to employment, fewer opportunities for advancement, narrower bottlenecks pertaining to development, lower pay packages, and greater uncertainty about future prospects [66]. In both developed Western countries and in China, there is near consensus in macro data reports and micro empirical studies that women, especially mothers, are significantly disadvantaged in all aspects of workplace-related opportunities, processes, and outcomes in the labor market [9,66]. In the context of the stubborn traditional concept and the cramped structural environment, the adjustment of the fertility-related policy from the "two-child" policy to the "three-child" policy will, to a certain extent, increase the number of births in the case of some women, but also subject them and other women to greater workplace-related dilemmas [19].

According to some studies, the salary of a mother of one child is only 73% of the father's salary, the salary of a mother of two children is only 66% of the father's salary, while the salary of a mother of three children is only 60% of the father's salary, all compared to a father of one child. The difference between the number of children is significant: the difference between the salary of the mother of one child and that of the father of one child is only 1%, but it rises to 19% in the case of two children and 34% in the case of three children [19]. There is a significant difference in loss at the workplace in terms of motherhood and fatherhood, with women's loss being much higher than that of men. Meanwhile, a survey also highlights that married and unmarried males from all age groups have a higher probability of being employed than unmarried females, while all married females have a significantly lower probability of being employed than single females. Additionally, the higher the number of children a woman has, the greater the difference in employability [19]. In this regard, differences exist between genders, within genders, and between motherhood and fatherhood, both regarding employment opportunities and processes and rewards at the workplace. Childbirth has always yielded a punishment effect

on the mother's income, the intensity of which has been increasing over time. Statistics show that in 1989, every additional child born would reduce the wage rate of women by 9.41%. In 2015, every additional child born resulted in a 17.47% drop in women's wages [9].

Women are significantly disadvantaged compared to men in all these areas, except in terms of pay. Mothers are more vulnerable in the labor market, which increases proportionally with the number of births.

The "double taxation of gender and motherhood" is a general description of the abovementioned situation, consisting of two parts that are embedded in and overlap with each other [19]. Specifically, even with similar resource endowments, women do not have the same opportunities as men and face difficulties in advancing in the workplace as compared to men. Women then face a "motherhood tax" because of childbirth. This is defined as the relative deprivation of the opportunity to work from the time of conception to that of nurturing. The former is the basis of, and may trigger, the latter, while the latter further exacerbates the former [19]. According to the Third Survey on the Status of Women in China, the employment rate of women in urban areas reached 60.9% in 2010. Mothers are no longer the dependents of men as they were in traditional society; rather, they are joint breadwinners with men in the face of high mortgages and costs of childcare [48]. However, in reality, the growth of the economic base has not significantly reduced the physical and mental burden of mothers involved in childcare-related work. Additionally, despite already being a breadwinner, the mother still must work a "second shift" to fulfill her traditional gender role as the homemaker [17]. When mothers enter the labor market on a large scale, there is no fundamental change in the pattern of sharing familial responsibilities between men and women [7].

It is also important to consider that behind China's rapid economic development are ordinary workers laboring with high intensity and low benefits [67]. Such tiring labor makes it difficult for men to balance family and work. As German sociologist Ulrich Beck contended, "the market model of modernity implies a society without families and children, and the ultimate market society is a childless society" [68]. The "996" working hours (from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M., six days a week) in the internet industry, for example, make it difficult for men to participate in childcare and fulfill familial support obligations. Behind all these complications is the collusion between the power of market capital and the implicit gender order of "men as breadwinners and women as homemakers" [18]. Previous studies also suggest that men only see themselves as important contributors to household and care-related work when they consider their wives equally important economic contributors within the family [4]. The ensuing debate on equality again leads to an endless loop. Gender equality in the private sphere could enable women to have more freedom to explore and develop themselves, thus promoting gender equality in the public sphere. At present, however, equality in the private sphere must be guaranteed by regulations in the public policy sphere; thus, the formal equality in law that has been criticized has become the logical origin for the next round of disputes.

6. Conclusion: Reflections on Policy Support and the Issue of Motherhood

The United Nations (UN) held a development summit in September 2015 to assess the progress of the Millennium Development Goals set at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 and to adopt a post-2015 development agenda to guide cooperation in international development over the next 15 years. "A focus on unpaid care and domestic work, with governments investing in the provision of public services, infrastructure and related policies to promote the sharing of domestic work within the family" was included in this agenda [69]. Additionally, the Chinese government highlighted the importance attached to gender equality and women's development, reaffirming its commitment to achieving these goals [70].

Only with China's current demographic imbalance and low fertility rate can the plight of women regarding marriage, childbirth, and parenting become a "real social issue" that can attract widespread attention and thus be addressed. When the pressure of work and

family accumulates and childcare itself becomes a more refined and specialized investment, the popular slogan “no marriage, no childcare, and have peace” will no longer be said in jest. The politicization of childbearing and the privatization of parenting are two existing contradictions. Specifically, the state urgently needs to meet the overall requirements of population development rather than the individual requirements of women’s self-fulfillment, as a focus exclusively on the latter will result in the failed developmental aspirations of those who wish to move toward realizing women’s empowerment. The coexistence of old and new gender cultures in China’s transition toward modernization is likely to generate more complex cultural concepts and ways of social thinking. On the one hand, traditional gender-related concepts remain strongly rooted despite repeated criticism, and continue to function, albeit more implicitly than before. On the other hand, modern gender culture is often accompanied by the concepts of consumerism and scientism, which, while promoting the construction of female subjectivity and the development of autonomy, also burdens women with new pressures. Long-standing traditional gender ideologies have not automatically faded with rapid socioeconomic transitions, and women remain the undisputed and central nurturers in most families. Whether mothers are financially independent, families still tend to expect them to prioritize their children’s well-being. With the negative emphasis on the dilemma of work-life balance and different ways of defining “balance” among family members, the mothers’ behavioral decisions are constrained by multiple factors, making it difficult to achieve such a “balance.”

Policies do not operate in a vacuum. The influence of family policies, gender culture, and the labor market’s environment should be considered. The positive effects of supporting policies on mothers’ employment are related to the concepts and values behind them. In countries that have a concept of gender roles and gender equality that support women’s employment, the effect of supporting policies is more obvious [71,72]. Through the integration of education and care, Nordic countries have changed the view of care-related work in society, and it is regarded as unskilled, manual, and secondary work. The nature of care work has gradually made it a respected professional field, while institutional care has won the trust of parents. This strategy dispels the incomprehensible “intensive motherhood” or “ideal caregiver” cultural ideology of some European and American countries to a certain extent [73]. This phenomenon is notable as it can start with the educational content for children and adolescents at home and school, enhance their gender sensitivity, and gradually form a clear cultural environment of mainstream values of gender equality.

Furthermore, experiences of developed countries show that responses to low fertility include three broad categories: financial subsidies, paid maternity leave, and public services for childcare [74]. Financial subsidies impact fertility arrangements for low-income families in the short term, and impact middle- and high-income families in a more limited capacity. Paid childbirth and improved childcare services play a better role in improving fertility levels. However, fertility gains are suboptimal in countries that start with the traditional division of labor between genders and provide matching modes of support for women [75,76]. Policy makers should recognize that women have maternal, professional, and social roles and that relevant packages should allow women to balance different roles to be able to perform effectively. In Nordic countries, where gender equality is stronger, female labor force participation rates are higher and fertility is close to the replacement level [73]. In contrast, in some countries in East Asia and Southern Europe, where the traditional family model of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers prevails, women’s participation in the labor force and fertility rates are both relatively low. Such countries even become stranded in the “low fertility trap” for lengthy periods [77].

Employment discrimination, financial pressure, and anxiety related to childcare are important factors that influence young people’s decisions on marriage and childbearing. Only policies that help women balance career development and familial responsibilities can achieve the desired effect, while those that send women home may backfire. Therefore, to cope with the issue of population aging and fewer children, a support system for policies on fertility and family-friendly values must be established. Only by taking the promotion

of gender equality as the starting point, strengthening social support and public service supplies, supporting those who want to have children, while helping those who have children at a later stage, and accommodating those who do not desire to give birth, can a country truly promote familial harmony and women's development.

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