

# Exploring the Optimization Path of China's Fertility Support Policies in the Context of Three-child Policy: The Reference and Inspiration based on the Experience of Developed Countries

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**Abstract:** At present, China is facing the dual challenges of aging and childlessness, and improving the existing fertility support policy has become a key task to enhance the national fertility intention and fertility rate, and to promote the optimization of the demographic structure. This paper analyzes the problems and deficiencies of China's fertility support policy by systematically combing the fertility support policies of China with those of developed countries such as Japan, South Korea, Germany, and Sweden in terms of economic support, time guarantee, in-kind assistance, service provision, and employment promotion. Based on the full consideration of China's national conditions, this paper draws on and summarizes the advanced experiences of developed countries and suggests that in the future, China should further expand the rights and benefits of parental maternity leave, establish a sound system of early childhood childcare services, increase the strength of the support for family childbearing, and effectively safeguard women's equal rights and benefits in employment, with a view to further perfecting and optimizing the system of maternity support policies.

**Keywords:** Fertility Support; Fertility Support Policies; Developed Country Experience.

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## 1. Background to China's Fertility Support Policy

Since 2000, China's birth rate has shown a declining trend, decreasing from 14.03 per thousand in 2000 to 6.77 per thousand in 2022, with an average annual decrease of 0.32 thousand points. At the same time, the natural population growth rate also continued to decline from 7.58 per thousand in 2000 to -0.60 per thousand in 2022, marking China's official entry into the era of negative population growth. On the other hand, since 2000, when China entered an aging society, the aging process has been accelerating, and by 2022, the proportion of the elderly population aged 65 and above in China's total population has climbed to 14.9%, indicating that China has stepped into the stage of deep aging. At present, China's demographic development and economic and social development are faced with multiple challenges, such as the aggravation of childlessness and aging, as well as negative population growth, etc. The continued low fertility rate and the increasingly severe aging problem will have a far-reaching impact on the high-quality development of China's population as well as the sustainable development of the economy and society. Therefore, actively responding to the challenges posed by these demographic changes has become a key issue for China's future development.

In order to raise the level of fertility and improve the current situation of fertility in China, in recent years China has gradually liberalized its fertility policy, promoted the transformation of its services and established a system of fertility support policies, showing a progressive development of "policy - active measures - support system" [1].

On November 15, 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee considered and passed the "two children alone" policy, which stipulates that couples can have

two children as long as one of the spouses is an only child, marking the beginning of China's fertility policy towards relaxation. On October 29, 2015, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee put forward the "comprehensive two-child" policy; in January 2016, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued the "Decision on the Implementation of the Comprehensive Two-Child Policy and Reform and Improvement of the Management of Family Planning Services", which solemnly pointed out that, for families with two or fewer children, the arrangement of births would be decided by the families themselves, and the approval procedure would no longer be implemented. At the same time, the Chinese government has for the first time put forward the concept of "fertility support", aiming to build a comprehensive maternity support system that encompasses maternity support, early childhood care, adolescent development, elderly support, and care for the sick and disabled. This policy framework introduced the concept of "maternity support" for the first time in a centralized document. On May 31, 2021, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee adopted the Decision on Optimizing Reproductive Policies to Promote Long-term Balanced Development of the Population, officially launching China's "comprehensive three-child" policy, which aims to effectively address population-related issues and promote balanced development of the population, and explicitly proposes the implementation of proactive maternity support initiatives, which will build a comprehensive fertility support policy system. The construction of an active fertility support policy system was established as a core task and incorporated into national top-level planning.

Since the implementation of the three-child birth policy and accompanying support measures, and especially since the report of the Twentieth Party Congress proposed the establishment of a system of maternity support policies, a

number of measures have been introduced throughout the country in the areas of policy safeguards, economic incentives, time support, high-quality services and environmental friendliness, with the initial establishment of a system of maternity support policies. However, the family planning policy that China has implemented over the past three decades has achieved remarkable results and is deeply rooted in people's hearts, and the construction of a fertility support policy is still in its infancy, and there is still a relative lack of experience in fertility support policies. At the same time, some developed countries, in order to raise the fertility rate and ensure normal population replacement, have introduced and continuously improved a series of policies aimed at reducing the burden of family rearing and encouraging childbearing, which have provided valuable reference and inspiration for China in improving its fertility support policy.

## **2. The Basic Connotation of Fertility Support Policy and the Current Development of Fertility Support Policy in China**

### **2.1. The Basic Meaning of Fertility Support Policy**

Fertility support policies are fundamentally a combination of policies designed and implemented by the country and government to address the challenges of childbearing and to create a maternity-friendly environment, encompassing a wide range of maternity support and service measures. In a narrow sense, these policies include maternity leave, childcare services, and tax incentives; in a broader sense, they include labor protection, employment support services, flexible work systems, and infrastructure for mothers, infants, and children. Fertility support policies are not the same as policies that simply encourage childbearing. In terms of scope, the connotation of fertility support policy goes beyond encouraging childbirth and includes, but is not limited to, this; in terms of goal-setting, it focuses more on reducing the burden of childbearing and contributing to the formation of a birth-friendly society, rather than focusing solely on raising the fertility rate. Its core value is to alleviate the pressure and anxiety caused by childbearing and to create a birth-friendly social environment and atmosphere. In addition, the fertility support policy is not only limited to support during pregnancy, labor and child rearing, but is also a comprehensive protection policy for women's rights and interests[2]. Its fundamental starting point is to ensure women's rights in the process of childbearing and nurturing, with the aim of realizing the equal status of men and women in the family and society, and thus avoiding the unfair treatment or "motherhood punishment" suffered by women as a result of taking on the role of a mother.

### **2.2. Analysis of the Current Situation and Problems in the Development of China's Fertility Support Policy**

According to different forms of supply, China's fertility support policies can be divided into five main categories: economic support policies, in-kind support policies, time support policies, service supply policies, and employment support policies.

#### **2.2.1. Economic Support Policies**

As a financial incentive for families with multiple births in response to the national family planning policy, childcare

subsidies are additional to the basic maternity allowance for eligible women or families of childbearing age. Currently, more than half of China's provinces have implemented childcare subsidy programs, which include both one-time financial assistance and monthly cash subsidies, with the specific amount of the subsidy adjusted according to the number of children born and geographical differences. In terms of tax relief, financial support mainly consists of tax-exempt income, child tax credits and child support credits. China's government work report for fiscal year 2022 explicitly proposes to include childcare expenses for infants and young children under the age of 3 in the special additional deduction for individual income tax, with a standard deduction of RMB 1,000 per month per infant or young child, which will benefit all families with infants and young children between the ages of 0 and 3 years old. In addition, some local governments have also provided tax incentives to support families in having children. For example, the Jilin provincial government has implemented VAT and enterprise income tax reductions and exemptions for small micro-enterprises set up by families with multiple births[3]. Housing incentives are mainly reflected in policies introduced by local governments. For example, Ningbo City in Zhejiang Province has increased the amount of housing fund loans for families with multiple births and prioritized the processing of their loan applications, while Linze County in Gansu Province has provided housing subsidies to families with multiple births whose household registration is in Linze. Together, these measures constitute a system of economic support for childbearing families.

Economic support is the direct route to guaranteeing a woman's basic income during childbearing and sharing the costs of raising a family. However, it is difficult to accurately assess the effectiveness of the current economic support measures, such as maternity allowances, childcare subsidies, tax breaks, and home-buying incentives, in easing the financial pressure of childcare and incentivizing childbearing behavior in the short term. This is mainly because the decision to have children is a complex process, and families need to weigh not only economic costs but also personal career development, children's education, and the pursuit of quality of life when making such a decision. In view of this, although relying solely on the Government's financial support measures can alleviate the financial burden of families to a certain extent, it is difficult to accurately meet the diversity and differences in the material needs of different families. More importantly, such a single form of financial support can hardly improve women's reproductive environment fundamentally and promote an increase in the fertility rate. Therefore, in order to effectively deal with the problem of low fertility, it is necessary to take a broader multi-dimensional approach, including social, cultural and policy aspects, and to implement comprehensive measures to form a more comprehensive and effective fertility support system.

#### **2.2.2. In-kind Support Policy**

In-kind assistance covers mother and child facilities and child-related facilities in the form of the provision of necessities for mothers and infants and daily necessities by the State in order to ease the financial and mental stress of childbearing families. Government agencies, enterprises and institutions have actively built rest rooms for mothers and babies, children's play facilities, and maternity and child healthcare centers focusing on maternal and child health, with the aim of creating suitable environments for women and children to take care of themselves and enjoy leisure time. In

August 2021, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) amended the Population and Family Planning Law, emphasizing that facilities for mothers and babies should be built in public places and workplaces with a high percentage of female employees, and advocating for the establishment of mother and baby waiting areas in localities based on actual circumstances. In the same year, the National Development and Reform Commission, together with 22 departments, issued the Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Child-Friendly Cities, which explicitly requires that the concept of child-friendliness should be comprehensively integrated into social policies, public services, protection of rights and interests, and the growing space and environment for growth, accelerating the transformation of urban public spaces into child-friendliness and the construction of off-campus activity venues, and promoting the installation of additional mother-and-baby rooms, child-specific toilets and hand-washing facilities, and children's resting and recreational facilities in public places. At the same time, we should promote the installation of mother-and-baby rooms, child-friendly toilets and hand-washing facilities, and children's rest and activity areas in public places.

China is gradually integrating mother-and-baby and child-care facilities into its infrastructure system, and the increasingly complete system of facilities not only provides women with many conveniences for caring for infants and young children, but also builds a solid barrier for the healthy growth of children. However, the number of mother and baby rooms in China is still insufficient, and many employers, tourist attractions and communities have not yet begun to plan for the establishment of mother and baby rooms; in addition, the pace of growth of postnatal mother and baby healthcare services has been slow, and postnatal recovery mainly relies on families and moonlight centers, and there are differences between existing postnatal healthcare facilities in terms of hardware facilities and quality of service, making it difficult to effectively improve women's childbirth experience.

### **2.2.3. Time Support Policy**

Time support covers various aspects of maternity, paternity and parental leave. In China, provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government) generally implement a leave system that combines "maternity leave with family planning incentive leave". According to the Special Provisions on Labor Protection for Female Workers and Employees, female workers are entitled to 98 days of maternity leave, including 15 days of prenatal leave; in the case of multiple births, the maternity leave is increased by an additional 15 days for each additional child. Paternity leave for spouses, on the other hand, is reflected in local Population and Family Planning Regulations, with 29 provinces explicitly setting the length of paternity leave, which ranges from seven days to one month, with most regions setting it at 10 to 15 days. In addition, some regions have begun experimenting with a policy of shared parental leave for both spouses. For example, the Regulations on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests in Jiangsu Province, which have been implemented since June 1, 2018, encourage that during a woman's maternity leave, the male employee's employer should arrange for no less than five days of shared childcare leave.

China's maternity leave policy has evolved over time, from a maternity leave that was initially intended only for women in labor, to the current system of leave that is shared by both

parents and takes into account both childbirth and child care, and has made great strides in that regard. However, China's current paternity leave policy gives men the right to decide whether or not to take leave, which has led to some men not being fully aware of the importance of sharing the responsibility for childbearing in the family, and employers being unwilling to bear the costs of men taking leave, which has made it difficult to implement parental leave and paternity leave effectively in practice. In addition, the short duration of parental leave makes it difficult to fully meet the needs of families to care for their children. In the absence of external support and intergenerational assistance, couples are still forced to balance their family responsibilities with their professional lives.

### **2.2.4. Service Supply Policy**

The main areas of service provision are reproductive health services and inclusive childcare services. Among these, reproductive medical services are basic health-care services centered on the entire process of childbearing, which run through the five key periods of pre-marriage, pre-pregnancy, pregnancy and childbirth, post-partum, and child-rearing. Specifically, it includes services directly related to the reproductive process, such as pre-pregnancy checkups, pregnancy health care, hospitalized deliveries, and post-partum health checkups, as well as medical protection services for children. The key objective of reproductive health services is to ensure the health and safety of mothers and children. Universal childcare services are an effective way and means to assist families in relieving the pressure and burden of caregiving. In 2021, the central government made an important decision to set the construction of a universal childcare service system as a key task in the 14th Five-Year Plan, and explicitly proposed that efforts be made to develop a universal childcare service system, incorporate infant and childcare services into overall economic and social development planning, and improve and perfect the policy system structure that can strongly support infant and childcare services as well as their early development. Following this, all parts of the country have responded positively, introducing specific implementation programs to match. Both at the national macro level and at the local micro level, a great deal of resources have been invested in promoting the rapid development of inclusive childcare services, with the aim of providing families with more high-quality, convenient and affordable childcare options, and promoting the standardization and systematization of infant and toddler care services.

Generally speaking, China's policies to support childbirth in terms of service provision started late, and the scope of the services provided is relatively small; for example, China's pre-school education is mainly based on socially-run kindergartens, which provide basic childcare and education services for pre-school-age children between the ages of 3 and 6, and rarely provide care services for infants and toddlers under the age of 3 to the childbearing families; therefore, the relevant policies still need to be further improved.

### **2.2.5. Employment Support Policies**

The employment support policy focuses mainly on the female group. China's Constitution, Labor Law, Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, and Law on the Promotion of Employment all clearly stipulate that, in the recruitment process, unless the law stipulates that occupations or positions are unsuitable for women, women may not be refused employment on the basis of gender or the threshold

for hiring women may not be raised, and that employers may not terminate the employment contracts of female workers who are in the stages of pregnancy, maternity, or breastfeeding. It can be seen that the State has eliminated, as far as possible, discrimination against women of childbearing age in the area of employment through legal means, and has effectively safeguarded women's rights and interests in employment.

China's Special Provisions on the Labor Protection of Female Workers and Employees provide stronger protection for female workers during the "three periods": employers are explicitly required to appropriately reduce the workload and working hours of female workers during pregnancy when necessary, and for those who have reached the seventh month of pregnancy, to make proper arrangements for rest and prenatal check-ups during working hours; for breastfeeding women, one hour per day should be allocated for breastfeeding, and if each additional baby is breastfed, the daily breastfeeding time should be increased by one hour accordingly. Government departments and social organizations have also made use of online and offline recruitment platforms to actively provide all-round support and assistance to parents taking care of children full-time when they return to the workplace, as well as providing public employment services, vocational guidance and organizing skills training activities.

Although the State and the Government have always made every effort to protect women's maternity benefits and employment rights, women still face many difficulties in the labor market, such as gender discrimination, unemployment due to childbirth, and being forced to leave their jobs, and the degree of protection of women's employment rights and interests is still inadequate. In addition, the relevant support facilities have not kept pace with the process of adjusting the maternity policy, resulting in women bearing a double burden between work and family, which is likely to further aggravate the phenomenon of employment discrimination and gender bias.

### **3. A Compendium of Maternity Support Policies in Selected Developed Countries**

#### **3.1. Japan**

Since 1974, Japan's total fertility rate has consistently fallen below the population replacement threshold and has been in a "low fertility dilemma" for nearly four decades, posing a serious challenge to the country's demographic structure and socio-economic development. In response to this crisis, the Government of Japan has made raising the fertility rate an important part of its national strategy, and has introduced a series of fertility support policies aimed at easing the pressure of childbirth and parenthood on families, especially on women in the workplace.

At the level of economic support, the Government of Japan revised the Child Allowance Law in April 2004 to ensure that first-born children also enjoy the benefits of the allowance, and extended the period of the allowance until the end of the third grade of elementary school. In addition, the Government has established a child allowance system to provide stable financial support to eligible families. Also, in order to encourage companies to participate in childcare support, the government recognizes companies that establish childcare facilities and provides subsidies of no less than 36.9 million

yen per year[4]. In addition, the Japanese government has proposed the "100 Million Total Active Plan," which aims to promote the comprehensive development of women in the economy and society through measures such as increasing the employment rate of women and strengthening vocational training. In terms of time protection, Japanese women are entitled to maternity leave of up to 14 weeks, with their wages paid during the period of maternity leave. At the same time, the Government encourages fathers to take leave within eight weeks after the birth of a child in order to share the mother's childcare responsibilities, and this leave is not counted as parental leave. In addition, the Government of Japan has implemented a flexible working system that allows employees to adjust their working hours and locations according to their personal circumstances in order to better balance work and family life. In the area of childcare services, the Japanese Government introduced the Angel Program in 1994 and the New Angel Program in 1999. These programs aim to improve the employment environment, enhance childcare facilities, and reduce the burden of childcare[5]. By increasing the number of childcare centers, improving the quality of childcare workers, and improving childcare facilities, the Japanese government has continuously improved the quality and coverage of childcare services. In addition, the government encourages communities and enterprises to carry out diversified childcare support activities, such as the establishment of baby-sitting rooms, mother and child life support facilities, and child foster care centers, in order to meet the childcare needs of different families. With regard to support for women's employment, the Government launched the "Women's Employment Promotion Activity" in 1991, and established "Employment Promotion Centers" and "Women's Employment Assistance Facilities" to provide women with vocational counseling, skills training, and other services. The Employment Promotion Center and the Women's Employment Assistance Facility have been set up to provide women with services such as career counseling, skills training, and employment guidance. At the same time, the Government has organized a number of re-employment training courses for women to help them enhance their competitiveness in employment. In addition, the Government has implemented the "Female Leader Development Program", which aims to develop more female leaders and senior managers, and to increase women's voice and influence in enterprises and governmental organizations. In recent years, the Government has also established the Children and Family Bureau and the Work-Life Balance Promotion Office in the Cabinet to address women's difficulties in maintaining a balance between family and work. At the same time, various child protection agencies have been established in national and local public institutions to provide comprehensive protection and support for children. These measures have not only helped to raise the fertility rate, but have also contributed to social harmony and stability.

#### **3.2. Korea**

From the 1950s to the early 2000s, Korea pursued population control policies that led to a general downward trend in fertility. In order to address and reverse this decline, the Korean government adopted a strategy called the "New Population Policy" in 1996.

At the financial support level, the Korean government provides up to 200,000 won in subsidized childcare costs or family rearing allowance for children between 0 and 5 years

of age, as well as additional care allowances for low-income families and special subsidies for intergenerational families. In terms of scheduling support, not only are women entitled to 90 days of paid maternity leave followed by 12 months of childcare leave, but men are also entitled to five days of paternity leave. In terms of infant and toddler care services, the Infant and Toddler Care Act, enacted in 1991, has transformed and upgraded the function of childcare from a single "childcare" model to one that combines "childcare and education," formally incorporating the education of children between the ages of 0 and 3 into the pre-school education system. In order to actively support intergenerational family care, the Korean government has also implemented a special program called the "Grandchild Care Program", which aims to alleviate the pressure on young parents who are unable to adequately take care of their children due to their busy work schedules by providing financial subsidies to grandmothers or grandmothers responsible for caring for their grandchildren. This policy not only reflects the Government's emphasis on the sharing of family responsibilities, but also effectively promotes mutual support and collaboration among family members, providing a strong guarantee for building more harmonious family relations and social environment. In addition, the Government has established the Committee on Aging and Future Society and the Specialized Committee on Women's Family Affairs, and has introduced a number of services, including in-work childcare services, family foster care centers, and 24/7 and temporary childcare programs. With regard to the promotion of women's employment, the Act on Promotion of Re-employment of Women with Interrupted Careers was enacted in 2010 to incentivize companies to carry out training programs and internships to support women's return to their careers[6].

### 3.3. Germany

Since the 1870s, Germany's fertility rate has been declining steadily, making it the first country in the developed world to have a total fertility rate below 1.5. In response to this challenge, the German Government has adopted a comprehensive set of measures aimed at increasing fertility and promoting family well-being.

With regard to financial assistance, the German Government has implemented a number of policies to reduce the financial burden of childcare on families. According to the German Federal Statistical Office, for families with young children up to the age of 14 months, parents can apply for a care allowance provided by the Government, which is intended to compensate for the reduction in family income that may result from caring for a newborn child. In addition, for families with children under the age of 18, the German government also grants a child allowance to support the children's education, living and other expenses. In terms of time protection, according to the German Federal Labor Law, female employees are entitled to maternity leave from six weeks before to eight weeks after the birth, and both parents can share up to three years of childcare leave, of which the length of paid leave is about one year. This policy not only helps female employees to have sufficient rest and recovery after childbirth, but also promotes the sharing of childcare responsibilities between both parents. In terms of infant and child care services, the German government actively supports child care services for children under the age of 3 through legislative measures such as the Day Care Expansion Act[7], the German government has built a large number of new child

care centers nationwide, and provides financial assistance to public child care institutions operated by local governments to cover daily operating and personnel costs. In addition, the German government encourages private families to provide qualified infant and child care services, and these caregivers need to be professionally trained and certified by children's service centers. In terms of employment support for women, Germany's Working Mothers Protection Act provides comprehensive legal protection for female employees. Under the Act, all women working in Germany, whether full-time contract employees, temporary employees, domestic workers or interns, may not be dismissed during pregnancy. In addition, in order to safeguard women's health, working women who are pregnant or breastfeeding have the right to stay away from hazardous working environments[8]. The Government also provides post-natal women with job training information and guidance services, including training course arrangements, psychological counseling, etc., to ensure their smooth return to the workplace.

### 3.4. Sweden

Since the 1970s, Sweden's fertility rate has experienced significant fluctuations, in response to which the government has adopted a series of family policies centered on high welfare, aimed at actively raising and maintaining a relatively high level of fertility.

At the level of economic assistance, Sweden provides universal cash subsidies to families with children under the age of 16, the amount of which varies dynamically according to the number of children; at the same time, there is a system of various allowances for childcare, children and caregivers to alleviate the financial pressure on families to raise children; for orphans, children with disabilities and children in single-parent families, the government provides special subsidies for adoption, single-parent living, and care for children with disabilities in order to ensure that special families receive adequate support. In terms of time protection, the Government grants paid maternity leave of up to 16 months to couples of childbearing age, and fathers are required to take at least 60 days of maternity leave under the Welfare Act in order to promote their participation in childcare. If a child (under 12 years of age) is ill and needs care, parents can apply for up to 60 days of care leave per child per year. In terms of care services, the Swedish government offers a wide range of childcare services for children over the age of one, and most public childcare services are free of charge[9]. At the same time, the Government encourages the development of private childcare services and supports community open kindergartens to provide free services, childcare exchanges and integrated services to meet the diversified care needs of children. In addition, the government also promotes cooperation between childcare institutions and schools to jointly provide pre-school training, after-school supplementation and childcare services. With regard to support for women's employment, the Government has formulated a series of policies to safeguard women's rights and interests during pregnancy and childcare. As early as 1939, Sweden passed a law prohibiting the dismissal of women due to marriage, pregnancy or childbirth, and was the first country to implement job-protected maternity leave[10]. According to the regulations, pregnant women can also ask their employers to transfer them to another job if they are engaged in work that is heavy or harmful to the fetus, and if the employer is unable to provide a new job, the pregnant

woman receives a pregnancy allowance for a period of up to 150 days[11]. In addition, government-led public services provide a large number of jobs for women and offer the possibility of flexible work.

## **4. Lessons and Implications of Fertility Support Policies of Selected Countries for China's Fertility Support Policies**

### **4.1. Expansion of Parents' Maternity Leave Entitlements**

In the above-mentioned countries, a clear system of maternity leave has been established, and a system of paternity leave for fathers has also been generally established. Maternity and paternity leave, as the basic rights and interests of citizens, have been practiced in China since the early days, with the length of maternity leave increasing from 90 days to 98 days since 2012, and the maternity leave for women has been extended by 60 days in many parts of China, with the number of days of maternity leave in a number of provinces having already reached 158 days. However, compared with other countries, China's maternity and paternity leave system is still at an intermediate level and has certain limitations.

Specifically, the coverage of maternity leave rights and benefits is mainly limited to working women, and is concentrated in government agencies, state-owned enterprises, institutions and private enterprises with relatively sound social security systems. On the other hand, there are significant gaps and deficiencies in the maternity leave protection system for unemployed women, flexibly employed women and women working in enterprises with imperfect social security systems. In addition, as far as paternity leave for men is concerned, there are significant differences in the regulations between different regions of China, and the strength of implementation also varies. Many enterprises often induce or force male employees to give up their paternity leave rights and benefits for their own economic interests, which not only exacerbates the burden of childcare on women, but also further aggravates the phenomenon of employment discrimination against women in the workplace, raises the threshold for women's employment, and reduces their opportunities for career advancement.

In response to these problems, China should further broaden the scope of maternity leave and include more women in the scope of maternity leave protection. On the basis of extending the length of maternity leave, it is also necessary to improve the relevant supporting measures, regulate the labor market, and strengthen the inter-enterprise linkage mechanism, so as to ensure that women's labor rights and interests are effectively and efficiently protected, and to avoid the negative impacts on women's participation in the labor force before and after giving birth to children due to their reproductive behaviors. At the same time, uniform and clear normative standards should be set for male paternity leave, and a system of no less than two weeks' paternity leave for men should be established and implemented on the basis of full protection of women's rights and interests during normal maternity leave, so as to encourage both spouses to share the responsibility of childcare. This will not only help to expand the scope of coverage of maternity protection, but will also be conducive to promoting equality and harmony between men and women in the field of employment, laying

a solid foundation for the construction of more just and harmonious social relations.

### **4.2. Improve the Early Childhood Care Service System and Raise the Quality of Care Services**

The perfect system, diversified and humanized service modes demonstrated by the above countries in the field of early childhood care services provide useful reference examples for the optimization of China's early childhood care services. At present, China's child care services are mainly focused on pre-school education institutions for children between the ages of 3 and 6, the total number of infants and young children under the age of 3 in China is about 40 million, and the overall enrollment rate is only about 6%, which shows that China's infant and child care services for infants and young children between the ages of 0 and 3 years of age are seriously inadequate social supply [12]. In view of this, there is an urgent need to formulate and implement standards and service norms for infant and toddler care service organizations for infants and toddlers under the age of 3, and at the same time, clarify the main responsibility of the local government and the division of responsibilities of relevant departments, in order to build a set of strict supervision system for infant and toddler care service organizations, so as to effectively protect the safety and health of infants and toddlers. On this basis, efforts should also be made to build a multi-level and multi-form childcare service system. The government, employers and social forces should be encouraged to actively set up childcare services for infants and young children under the age of 3, and provide a variety of flexible service forms, such as full-day care, half-day care, hourly care and temporary care [13], to provide families with rich and diversified choices of infant and young child care, so as to satisfy the diversified needs and preferences of different families. In addition, it is crucial to strengthen the professional training and management of childcare service providers. To this end, it is necessary to establish a comprehensive and systematic training system for childcare service personnel, covering pre-service training, on-the-job skills upgrading, and continuing education to ensure that service personnel have solid professional knowledge and skillful operation. At the same time, should deepen the cooperation with colleges and universities, vocational training institutions, and jointly carry out the cultivation and delivery of child care service professionals, for the field of child care services to deliver more high-quality professionals. Through the implementation of the above initiatives, the quality and level of China's childcare service system will be significantly improved.

### **4.3. Improvement of Government Sector Support for Home Births**

In examining the trends in family welfare policies in the countries mentioned above, it is easy to see that all of them have set up specialized government departments responsible for the planning, implementation and supervision of fertility support and other family-friendly policies. These departments have played a crucial role in promoting family well-being, raising fertility intentions and optimizing the reproductive environment. In contrast, our country is still facing some real challenges in the area of family fertility support policies, despite the remarkable progress made in recent years. There is a certain degree of overlap in the delineation of functions

among government agencies, which not only leads to shirking of responsibilities and pulling of hats in the promotion of work, but also makes the implementation of policies more difficult. For example, in the process of formulating and implementing fertility support policies, several departments may be involved, but the lack of clarity in their responsibilities and the lack of clarity in their powers and duties often leads to inefficient implementation of the policies, and even to "fights" over the policies. Therefore, clearly defining the duties of each department and refining the responsibilities to specific units is the key to eliminating such shortcomings and enhancing the efficiency of policy implementation. In response to these problems, China carried out an important institutional reform in 2018, establishing the National Health Commission to replace the National Health and Family Planning Commission. This reform has integrated the functions of healthcare integration, development of the aging health industry, and management of traditional Chinese medicine, which were previously the responsibility of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Office of the Elderly Commission, and other ministries, into the new organization, initially constructing a unified management system of "big health and big health". This change not only means that the agencies responsible for childcare and family policy have been brought under the umbrella of the National Health Council, with a clearer delineation of powers and responsibilities and a significant increase in the resources at their disposal, but also provides strong support for the in-depth implementation of policies to support childbearing.

However, in order to further improve China's maternity support policy system, efforts need to be made in the following areas: on the one hand, the newly established organization needs to strengthen its communication and collaboration with the relevant departments in order to form a synergy of efforts. The implementation of the maternity support policy is a comprehensive task that involves a number of areas, such as health care, education and social security, and requires close cooperation and synergy among various departments. Therefore, it is important to establish an inter-departmental coordination mechanism and hold regular joint meetings to discuss major issues in policy formulation and implementation, so as to ensure that the policy is fully implemented and efficiently carried out. On the other hand, social resources should be actively integrated and fully utilized to build an extensive, coordinated and efficient management system for family and childbirth affairs. Cooperation with enterprises, public welfare organizations, research institutions and other social forces should be strengthened to jointly promote the implementation of fertility support policies. For example, public welfare organizations should be actively supported in carrying out public welfare activities such as family childcare guidance and psychological counselling, and cooperation with research institutions should be strengthened in order to carry out evaluation and feedback on the maternity support policy, so as to provide a scientific basis for the policy's continuous optimization.

#### **4.4. Guaranteeing Women's Equal Employment Rights and Interests**

The Chinese Government has always attached great importance to the implementation of the principle of gender equality, and from the fundamental laws of the Constitution to various policies and regulations, clear provisions have been

made on gender equality in the labor market, with the aim of building a non-sexist employment environment. However, despite the initial establishment of the legal and policy framework, the problem is that these provisions remain at the level of advocacy, and their implementation and effectiveness have yet to be strengthened. In view of this, it is necessary for the Government to deeply integrate the existing policies and regulations in order to form a set of systematic and coherent policy system. Specifically, detailed implementation rules for employment policies and regulations should be formulated, clearly defining the specific manifestations of gender discrimination and the corresponding legal responsibilities, so as to enhance the operability and enforceability of the law. At the same time, government departments should increase their supervision of the implementation of policies and regulations, and ensure the effective implementation of policies through regular inspections and random checks. The aim is to raise enterprises' awareness of the costs of violating gender equality regulations, and to create a favorable atmosphere for voluntary compliance.

While strengthening the implementation of the policy, we should also make full use of the unique advantages of social organizations such as women's federations and give full play to their role as a bridge and link. Through the organization of women-specific job fairs, vocational skills training sessions and other activities, we can provide more employment opportunities and a platform for career development for women whose careers have been temporarily interrupted by childbearing, so as to ensure that their re-employment channels are unimpeded. In addition, we should actively explore the establishment of a flexible employment system in response to the current conflict between working hours and family responsibilities of child-rearing mothers. Employers should be actively encouraged to provide more flexible and convenient forms of work for families with children by adopting such diversified methods as telecommuting and home-based work, so that employees can balance work and family. At the same time, flexible working hours of a certain length can be provided for child-rearing mothers in conjunction with the implementation of a flexible working hour system and the shortening of the workweek[13], in order to alleviate the burden on their families and safeguard their rights and interests in professional development. These flexible and diverse work arrangements not only help to enhance employees' job satisfaction and loyalty, but also promote the stable development of enterprises and social harmony to a certain extent. Protecting women's equal employment rights and interests is a systematic project that requires the joint efforts of the government, enterprises and all sectors of society. By consolidating policies and regulations, strengthening enforcement and supervision, and exploring flexible employment systems, we can create a fairer and more inclusive employment environment for women, and promote the implementation of the principle of gender equality.

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