



A Study on the Willingness of Women of Childbearing Age to Have Additional Children Under the Three-Child Policy

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Abstract: This paper explores the current situation of low willingness among women of childbearing age in China to have additional children under the Three-Child Policy and its underlying driving factors. The study points out that high child-rearing costs, conflicts with career development, shortages of inclusive public services, and pressure from traditional family roles are the key factors inhibiting this willingness.

Keywords: Three-Child Policy; women of childbearing age; willingness to have additional children

1. Introduction

Population development is a crucial issue related to the development of the Chinese nation. To proactively address population aging and promote the long-term balanced development of the population, China officially implemented the "Three-Child Fertility Policy and Supporting Measures" in 2021, following the "Universal Two-Child Policy" launched in 2015. However, in sharp contrast to the policy expectations, China's population birth rate remains extremely low, and the willingness to have children has not been fully unleashed[1]. As the direct bearers of childbirth, the fertility willingness and choices of women of childbearing age are pivotal to the success of the Three-Child Policy.

2. Analysis of the Current Situation and Problems

According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2023, China had 9.02 million newborns, with a birth rate of 6.39‰—the lowest on record since 1949. Compared with 2002, the natural population growth rate stood at -1.48‰. A latest survey by the China Population and Development Research Center shows that among families with eligible children, the proportion of those explicitly willing to have a third child is less than 5%. This trend directly confirms that the public, especially families who have already had children, hold a cautious attitude towards having additional children. Although most people of childbearing age agree with the Three-Child Policy in principle, the proportion of translating this agreement into actual fertility behavior is extremely low.

At the same time, there are structural differences in the willingness to have additional children. From the perspective of the urban-rural divide, women in rural areas tend to adhere to the traditional fertility concept of "more children bring more blessings" and face relatively lower direct child-rearing costs, so their willingness to have additional children is higher than that of women in urban areas[2]. From a group perspective, professional women with high education and high income have the weakest willingness to have a third child, as they confront higher risks of career interruption, more severe "motherhood penalty," and greater opportunity costs. In contrast, families that already have two children are the most prudent and rational when making decisions about having a third child, having experienced the hardships of raising the first two children[3].

Currently, decisions regarding having additional children are tightly constrained by multiple practical factors. First and foremost is economic pressure: direct costs such as children's education, medical care, and housing remain persistently high. In particular, competitive expenditures like "school district housing" (housing located within the enrollment zone of high-quality schools) and extracurricular tutoring have become heavy burdens on families of childbearing age. Secondly, under the context of elite-oriented education, families have high expectations for their children's growth. Raising one child already exhausts most parents, let alone three. With nuclear families becoming the dominant family structure, the mode of childcare provided by grandparents has gradually reached saturation, and they are unable to take care of multiple young children. In this case, having a third child will not only take a toll on women's physical health but also force them to rush between work and family, trapped in dual role conflicts. Additionally, the shortage of public services is exacerbating parenting anxiety. According to the report on the progress of promoting childcare services by the State Council, China's actual enrollment rate of infants aged 0-3 in childcare institutions in 2024 was 7.86%, a significant gap compared with the average enrollment rate of 35% in OECD countries. Especially in large cities, the phenomenon of "difficulty in securing a spot" in public childcare institutions is widespread. Meanwhile, fathers still play a limited role in parenting. Although many regions have introduced

paternity leave policies for men, restricted by the traditional notion that "men work outside the home while women manage household affairs," the responsibility of family parenting still mainly falls on women.

3. Factors Influencing the Willingness of Women of Childbearing Age to Have Additional Children

3.1 Economic Factors

Women of childbearing age will face high costs when having additional children. The continuous rise in educational expenditure has become a heavy financial burden for families. From basic education to extracurricular development, and from skill training to quality improvement, substantial investment is required in every aspect. Besides, housing pressure is particularly prominent. The demand for living space of multi-child families stands in stark contrast to the current high housing prices in cities, making housing pressure one of the inhibiting factors for women's decision to have additional children. At the same time, implicit costs are particularly critical: professional women face a significant "motherhood penalty" (negative impacts on career development due to motherhood, such as wage gaps and promotion barriers) due to childbirth, and their high opportunity costs directly discourage them from deciding to have additional children.

3.2 Gender Role and Social Service Factors

With social progress, the concepts of "high-quality pregnancy and scientific child-rearing" and "self-realization" have replaced traditional fertility concepts, and women's value orientations have become diversified. However, the traditional role expectation that "men work outside the home while women manage household affairs" still makes women bear the main responsibility of parenting, which makes it difficult for them to decide to have a third child[4]. More importantly, there is a significant gap between the supply and demand of infant and toddler care services at present. The severe shortage of inclusive childcare institutions makes it difficult for families to transfer part of their parenting responsibilities to society. This shortage of care resources not only increases the parenting pressure on families but also indirectly strengthens the traditional gender division of labor. In the workplace, although society advocates gender equality, women of childbearing age still face various forms of employment discrimination, and the responsibility of parenting within the family still mainly lies with women. This unbalanced distribution of responsibilities forces professional women to confront the dual pressure of work and family. The existing policy system is still insufficient in promoting fathers' participation in parenting, resulting in the failure to achieve the true sharing of family parenting responsibilities.

3.3 Personal Demand Factors

With social development and the general improvement of educational levels, individuals' self-awareness has been constantly awakening, and childbirth has shifted from a traditional social responsibility to a personal independent choice. Compared with having a third child, modern women attach more importance to the realization of personal values and the improvement of quality of life. This diversification of value orientations inevitably leads to changes in fertility concepts. Under the premise of limited resources, family decisions tend to adopt a resource-concentration strategy, investing limited time, energy, and financial resources in the cultivation of existing children. Relevant studies point out that families with two children have lower fertility willingness. The main reason is that the economic and energy burdens brought by having a third child will affect their current quality of life, so they are more inclined to concentrate resources on existing family members[5].

4. Recommendations

4.1 Strengthen Economic Support and Effectively Reduce Fertility Costs

It is recommended to implement differentiated fertility subsidies and tax preference policies, adopting a progressive subsidy standard based on the number of children in a family to significantly alleviate the economic pressure on multi-child families. Secondly, it is necessary to improve housing support policies, providing preferential treatment and favorable conditions for multi-child families in the allocation of affordable housing and housing provident fund loans, so as to ease the housing pressure caused by the increase in the number of children. Thirdly, it is essential to deepen comprehensive reforms in the education sector, promote the equalization of public education services, and strictly regulate the extracurricular tutoring market, so as to fundamentally reduce families' expectations of educational expenditure and their anxiety.

4.2 Improve Service Supply and Solve the Problem of "No One to Care for Children"

The priority is to accelerate the development of an inclusive infant and toddler care service system. Through government

guidance and social participation, the supply of childcare services should be increased to meet the differentiated needs of different families. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the childcare support function at the community level, build child-friendly communities, and develop diversified services such as after-school care and vacation care to provide strong support for family childcare. In addition, it is necessary to improve the maternity leave system and promote a flexible working system to ensure that both parents can participate in childcare together and promote the reasonable sharing of responsibilities within the family.

4.3 Create a Friendly Environment and Promote Work-Family Balance

At the legislative level, it is necessary to severely crack down on gender discrimination in employment and protect the rights and interests of women's career development. On the other hand, employers should be encouraged to formulate family-friendly human resource policies, and corresponding incentives should be given to enterprises that implement fertility policies. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen policy coordination, promote supporting reforms of relevant social policies, and provide more support for elderly pregnant women, especially in terms of medical security and reproductive health services. At the cultural level, it is necessary to vigorously promote modern family concepts, break the traditional gender role stereotypes, and advocate a family culture where husbands and wives share childcare responsibilities together.

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