

Historical Review and Future Prospects of Family Planning Policy: Impact, Challenges and Responses

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Keywords: Total Population, Fertility Rate, Population Growth Rate.

Abstract: This article reviews and analyzes the historical evolution, implementation background, and main challenges in policy transformation of China's family planning policy, and explores its far-reaching impact on population structure, economic development, and social culture. With economic and social development, China's population is facing new challenges: on the one hand, the reduction of the working-age population is weakening economic vitality; on the other hand, the aging problem has caused increased pressure on social security and medical systems. In addition, the increase in one-child families has increased the support burden of the younger generation. In recent years, the country has gradually adjusted its fertility policy and successively introduced independent two-child, comprehensive two-child and three-child policies. However, the policy relaxation has not significantly increased the fertility rate, reflecting deep-seated problems such as high childcare costs, employment discrimination, and shortage of educational resources. Still exists. To deal with this complex problem, this article combines literature and data analysis to put forward various policy suggestions, including abolishing birth restrictions, improving childcare and social security systems, promoting equal employment for women, reducing education and medical costs, etc., to establish a supportive fertility system. social environment. This article believes that comprehensive reforms will help optimize the population structure, promote sustainable economic and social development, and provide a reference for other countries to deal with similar challenges.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a far-reaching national policy from the late 20th century to the early 21st century, China's family planning policy was designed to deal with the resource, environmental, and economic challenges brought about by excessive population growth. In the 1970s, China's total population exceeded 900 million. The rapidly growing population puts tremendous pressure on natural resources such as land, energy, and water resources. For this reason, the country officially implemented the one-child policy in 1979 to reduce the fertility rate through coercive means to control population growth.

In the early stages of implementation, the one-child policy successfully alleviated resource constraints and economic development pressure to a large extent. The demographic dividend provides labor force support for the take-off of the manufacturing industry and the acceleration of urbanization. At the same time, the quality of life and per capita education level of residents have

significantly improved. However, the negative effects of this policy gradually emerged over time.

First, the problem of demographic imbalance is becoming increasingly serious. The decline in the birth rate and the increase in life expectancy have caused China to gradually enter an aging society. Data shows that by 2023, China's elderly population aged 65 and above will account for more than 14% of the total population (The State Council 2024). This shift has increased the burden on the social security and medical systems, while potentially inhibiting economic growth.

Secondly, the imbalance of gender ratio has become a prominent problem. Due to the abuse of traditional patriarchal concepts and technological means, the proportion of male births in some areas is much higher than that of females, resulting in an imbalance between supply and demand in the marriage market and even giving rise to a series of social problems, such as the trafficking of women and an increase in social instability.

Third, family structures have undergone profound changes. The shift from the traditional multi-generational family to the nuclear family model has caused young people to bear greater family responsibilities and financial pressure. The one-child generation not only needs to support their parents but may even support their grandparents at the same time, placing a heavy financial and psychological burden on this generation.

In order to solve these problems, China has gradually adjusted its family planning policy since 2013 and has successively launched an independent two-child policy, a comprehensive two-child policy, and a three-child policy in 2021. However, the actual effect of these policies is not as good as expected. The high cost of childcare, the unfair treatment of women in the workplace, and the shortage of educational resources make many families unwilling to increase the number of children.

Therefore, the current policy adjustments not only need to relax the fertility policy, but also focus on social and economic reforms. Optimizing medical, education and housing policies to reduce childcare costs; strengthening women's employment security to eliminate the negative impact of childbirth on career development; improving the pension security system and reducing the financial burden of the younger generation are the key paths to solving current problems. This article aims to analyze the history and current situation of China's family planning policy, put forward targeted policy suggestions, and provide directional thinking for the sustainable development of society in the future.

2 HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE POLICY

2.1 Origin and Implementation of the Policy

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, China faced severe challenges brought about by the rapid growth of its total population. Data from the third national census in 1982 showed that the national population had exceeded 1 billion, far exceeding the carrying capacity of the economy and society at that time. Public services such as education, medical care, and housing were seriously undersupplied, and the large number of new population brought tremendous pressure to the reform and opening up that was still in its infancy. (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2005)

Against this background, the Chinese government began to implement the one-child policy in the early 1980s, strictly controlling most urban families to have only one child through legislation and administrative means. Although there was a certain degree of flexibility in rural and ethnic minority areas, it still played a positive role in suppressing fertility rates overall. (Ze, 2023)

Establish family planning offices at the grassroots level, implement a birth approval system, collect social maintenance fees from families with more than one child, provide additional benefits to single-child families (such as education and medical subsidies brought by the single-child certificate), etc. (Zeping, 2024). Strengthen publicity and education, policy mobilization and administrative supervision, encourage social groups, enterprises, institutions, and individuals to provide donations for population and family planning work, and strengthen legal regulatory, and social moral pressure. The one-child policy effectively reduced the national birth rate in the short term. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the national total fertility rate (TFR) gradually dropped to around 2.0 in the mid-to-late 1980s. However, it also led to a certain degree of simplification of family structure, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent demographic dividend and sustainable social development, but also laid the groundwork for potential problems such as aging and gender imbalance.

2.2 Policy Adjustment and Development

With time, the problems of low fertility rate and imbalanced population structure are becoming increasingly apparent. The aging trend is accelerating, and the proportion of the working-age population will drop from 70.1% in 2010 to 61.3% in 2023. The sex ratio is seriously skewed in some areas. To address these challenges, the country piloted the "two-child policy for couples with only one child" in 2013, implemented the universal two-child policy in 2016, and further relaxed it to three children in 2021. (National Bureau of Statistics, 2001)

The intensified aging population and the declining fertility rate (the total fertility rate in some areas has fallen below 1.3) have forced the government to relax birth restrictions to ensure a moderate birth population size and labor supply. In 2016, the year when the "universal two-child policy" was implemented, the national new birth population rebounded briefly (17.86 million, an increase of about 1.3 million from the previous year), but then fell year

by year. The introduction of the three-child policy further shows that the government hopes to hedge against future labor shortages and social security pressures through further relaxation. However, factors such as high childcare costs, employment discrimination against women, and a shortage of educational resources have resulted in low actual fertility intentions, and the effect of policy adjustments is limited.

2.3 Society's Response to Policy Changes

Facing the current two-child and three-child policies, social reactions are divided. Some urban middle-class families have certain economic and child-rearing resources and welcome the relaxation of birth restrictions. Echoing this is the response motivation of some rural families. Although the rural economic foundation is weaker than that of cities and education and medical resources are relatively scarce, the traditional culture of "more children, more blessings" and the demand for family labor still have a strong influence in some areas. For such families, policy relaxation means that while maintaining or expanding the size of the family, they can expect to share the burden of elderly care in the future, thereby alleviating the impact of population loss and aging on rural development.

Most young couples are affected by economic and workplace pressures, high housing prices, and rising child-rearing costs, and their willingness to have children continues to decline. Many surveys show that the dual pressure of caring for parents and raising children in the future, as well as concerns about the lack of childcare and child-rearing support policies, are important reasons for suppressing fertility.

Overall, although policy relaxation has made an attempt to adjust the population structure, it is not enough to reverse the trend of long-term low fertility rates. Without more comprehensive social welfare and public service support, society's substantive response to policy changes will be very limited.

3 MAIN IMPACT OF FAMILY PLANNING POLICY

3.1 Positive Impact

The family planning policy reduces the population growth rate and relieves pressure on resources and the environment. The one-child policy significantly

reduced the natural growth rate of the population in the early stages of its implementation. According to official statistics, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, China's birth rate and total fertility rate both declined significantly. The slowdown in population growth has alleviated the tension between resources and the environment to a certain extent, providing a valuable time window for economic structural transformation and ecological and environmental governance. The growth rate of per capita consumption of cultivated land and freshwater resources has tended to slow down during this period, urban environmental pressure has been reduced, and some areas have achieved good ecological restoration results.

The family planning policy provided a demographic dividend and promoted rapid economic development in the early stages of reform and opening up (National Letters and Calls Bureau, 2001). Under strict birth control, the labor force of young adults born in the 1980s and 1990s is still large and their education level is gradually improving, providing sufficient labor supply for China's reform and opening up. The surplus rural labor force has transferred to coastal cities, and high-quality and relatively low-cost human resources have attracted a large number of foreign-funded enterprises and manufacturing industries to settle in China. The rapid development of import and export trade and infrastructure construction contributed an important demographic dividend to the average annual GDP growth rate which maintained a high level of 8%-10% during this period (Yingshun, 2019). At the same time, as the average number of children in a family decreases, the government and families can invest more resources in the education and health of each child, improving the quality of the new generation, which further promotes industrial upgrading and technological innovation.

3.2 Negative Impacts

First, the working-age population is decreasing and the pressure on social security is increasing. In recent years, China has gradually entered a deeply aging society. Data from the seventh national census in 2020 show that people aged 65 and above account for 13.5% of the total population, much higher than 7% in 2000. During the same period, the proportion of the working-age population dropped from more than 70% to 63.4%. This change means that the burden of social support has increased significantly, and the pension and medical security systems are facing increasing pressure from the huge elderly population.

Economic development is also facing new challenges due to shrinking labor supply and limited R&D and innovation vitality.

Secondly, the gender ratio is imbalanced. Due to the existence of the traditional concept of "preferring boys over girls" and the long-term one-child restriction, some families prefer to have boys through abnormal means. As a result, the newborn sex ratio continued to be higher than the warning level of 110:100 from the late 1990s to the early 21st century, and was once close to 120:100 (National Bureau of Statistics data, 2000). This imbalance not only affects supply and demand in the marriage market but may also lead to problems with social stability and women's rights. At present, the "sequelae" of imbalanced gender ratios are gradually becoming apparent, such as the expansion of the group of "leftover men" and the intensification of marriage squeeze and population migration problems.

Third, family structure changes. The one-child policy has changed China's traditional multi-child family structure. From the "multi-generational household" or extended family model where brothers and sisters help each other, it gradually evolved into the "family of three" or "4-2-1" model (that is, four grandparents, two parents, and one child). Although small families can concentrate resources on raising children, once parents or grandparents grow old and need support and care, there is often a lack of sharing of responsibilities among brothers and sisters, causing huge financial and mental pressure on the younger generation. In the context of increasing aging, the elderly care function of small families continues to weaken, and the problem of insufficient supply of social elderly care and childcare services has become increasingly prominent.

4 CURRENT STATUS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE THREE-CHILD POLICY

4.1 The Underlying Causes of Low Fertility Rate

China officially announced the implementation of the three-child policy in 2021, aiming to reverse the trend of continued low birth rates, shrinking labor force, and accelerated aging. However, the loosening of policies has not brought about a large-scale increase in newborns, and the deep-seated contradictions behind the low fertility rate remain prominent.

First, the high cost of childcare prohibits many families. The cost of living in cities continues to rise, and competition for education, medical care, and childcare resources is fierce. Families invest heavily in raising their children in terms of food, clothing, housing, transportation, early education, and extracurricular training. Especially in first- and second-tier cities, the average monthly education or training expenses a parent spends on their children often exceeds 20%-30% of their income. With the supply of childcare subsidies, kindergartens, and childcare public services relatively weak, some couples of working ages have shelved or given up their childbearing plans due to financial pressure.

Secondly, housing pressure also has a significant impact on fertility intentions. According to relevant statistics, most young urban families need to bear high mortgage loans, and the proportion of house prices in annual household income continues to rise. If you want to accommodate two or three children in a limited living area, you need extra space and financial support. This puts a heavy burden on young people who have insufficient financial accumulation and insufficient job stability.

Finally, barriers to career development and workplace discrimination are also important concerns for young parents. Although the law emphasizes labor protection for women during pregnancy and childbirth, in actual recruitment and promotion processes, some companies still have biases or set implicit thresholds against women who have given birth to multiple children. Women's choice between childcare and the workplace often leads to a further reduction in the desire to have children. In addition, the frequent overtime culture and insufficient implementation of the flexible employment system make it difficult to meet the needs of working parents for childcare time and energy.

4.2 International Comparison

Japan has gradually improved its childcare welfare system since the 1990s, including providing childcare subsidies, extending maternity and childcare leave, and encouraging companies to provide flexible work arrangements for women. (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021) However, Japan's fertility rate has still hovered around 1.3 for many years, indicating that financial subsidies and maternity leave alone are difficult to significantly increase the desire to have children. South Korea has also invested a large amount of budget in the past decade to expand its public childcare system, but it

still faces the dilemma of a total fertility rate falling below 1.0. (National Letters and Calls Bureau, 2001)

Judging from the experience of these countries, increasing fertility rates requires multi-level and comprehensive measures. On the one hand, must promote reforms in the housing, education, and medical systems at the economic level to reduce childcare costs. On the other hand, must strengthen conceptual guidance at the social level and advocate a more balanced lifestyle between work and family. For China, blindly relaxing fertility restrictions is not enough to promote a rebound in low fertility rates. Only by cooperating with policies such as comprehensive childcare services, employment protection, housing security, and tax exemptions can the burden of childbearing on families be reduced on a practical level, and can it be possible to truly stimulate young people's desire to have children. It can be seen that the implementation of the three-child policy should be coordinated with broader social and economic reforms to maintain the sustainability of population structure and social development in an increasingly competitive global environment.

5 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT DIRECTION

Facing the current severe trend of low fertility rate and aging population in China, it is obviously not enough to rely solely on policy adjustments to relax birth restrictions. The optimization of population structure and sustainable development of social economy requires comprehensive reform and institutional innovation at a more macro level. Based on the analysis in the previous article, the future development direction can be carried out from two aspects: policy and comprehensive reform.

5.1 Policy Recommendations

5.1.1 Completely Lift Birth Restrictions

After the implementation of the two-child and three-child policies, more and more research and social survey results show that the low willingness to have children is not simply due to policy restrictions, but rather due to the comprehensive consideration of economic, time costs, and the child-rearing environment by families. Given this, completely lifting birth restrictions has become a feasible and necessary option. Handing over birth decisions completely to families will help eliminate the external pressure or hidden constraints brought about by

policy control. At the same time, it can also release the "potential demand" of some groups that already have the desire to have children, thereby reversing the downward trend in the birth rate to a certain extent.

However, lifting birth restrictions is only the first step. Without the corresponding social welfare, childcare services, and policy support, the freedom of childbearing itself is difficult to transform into actual childbearing behavior. Therefore, it is necessary to work together with a series of economic and social policies to effectively improve the overall fertility level.

5.1.2 Family Support Policies

(1) Childcare subsidies and tax incentives

Referring to the response measures of Japan, South Korea and other countries to the declining birthrate, promoting childcare subsidies, tax incentives or tax refund mechanisms in China is the key. On the one hand, direct or indirect financial support can significantly reduce the cost of raising children for families; on the other hand, if a gradient and differentiated subsidy can be implemented for families with multiple children, the living and education burden of families with multiple children can be effectively reduced (The State Council of the People's Republic of China., 2018). People should actively explore the design of subsidy standards that are tailored to local conditions based on the economic development level and fertility costs of different regions so that local governments can implement them and families can benefit.

(2) Improve childcare services and preschool education supply

High-quality kindergartens and childcare institutions are the core links to ensure the scientific cultivation of infants and young children and relieve the employment and care pressure on parents. The government can vigorously develop public and inclusive childcare institutions through financial subsidies and policy encouragement, and standardize the qualifications and quality supervision of private institutions. Community-based inclusive childcare centers and flexible and diverse preschool education models can enable dual-income families to find a balance between work and childcare, and further enhance their willingness to have children.

(3) Employment and welfare protection

To truly encourage childbirth, it is necessary to establish an institutional environment that is more friendly to women's workplace rights. Extending maternity leave, expanding the coverage of childcare leave, and formulating statutory systems for maternal protection and paternal participation, such as mandatory paternal childcare leave, are all conducive

to sharing childcare responsibilities and enhancing family confidence in childbearing. For enterprises that employ multiple female employees of childbearing age, tax reductions or social security subsidies can be provided to reduce the company's concerns about hiring women and prevent discriminatory employment (Index Mundi, 2018). In addition, a flexible work system or home office mechanism should be established to provide more diverse working methods for multi-child families.

5.1.3 Optimizing the Elderly Care System

(1) Developing a multi-level elderly care service industry

The intensification of aging is not only a problem of fertility policy but also related to the coordination of the social security system and the elderly care industry. The government can encourage social capital to invest in multi-level service systems such as community elderly care, family elderly care, and institutional elderly care to enrich market supply and improve quality. For example, through the public-private partnership (PPP) model, enterprises can be attracted to participate in the construction of elderly care institutions and rehabilitation centers to provide long-term care services for disabled and semi-disabled elderly people. At the same time, local governments can be encouraged to explore a new elderly care model of "home + community + institution" in the form of financial support or subsidies.

(2) Improve social security and medical support

A stable and sound social security system can reduce the pressure on the younger generation to support their elderly parents and give them more confidence to maintain a balance between their children's education and their elderly care. Pension, medical, and long-term care insurance must be fully covered and the level of protection must be continuously improved. For example, the long-term care insurance pilot should be promoted and the scope of beneficiaries should be expanded to reduce the economic burden on families. The tiered diagnosis and treatment system and community medical service network should be improved to provide more timely and convenient health management and rehabilitation care for the elderly.

5.2 Comprehensive Reform

The relaxation of the birth policy alone is not enough to fundamentally reverse the trend of declining fertility rates and unbalanced population structure. The key lies in the coordination and coordination among "population-economy-society".

(1) Education system reform

To break the dilemma of "excessive childcare expenses", it is necessary to continue to increase investment in high-quality education resources and balance their layout. Further, deepen education reform and narrow the urban-rural and regional education gaps. From preschool education, and compulsory education to higher education, all stages need to optimize investment plans and resource allocation. Only by reducing the economic and mental pressure on families to educate their children can young couples feel more secure and supported when making decisions about having children.

(2) Upgrading the medical and public health system

For maternal and child health care and prenatal and postnatal medical services, can increase investment in county and township primary medical institutions to ensure the quality and safety of medical care for pregnant women. Through comprehensive reproductive health education and free pregnancy test services, can help women of childbearing age reduce the risks of pregnancy and childbirth and increase their confidence in having children. In addition to maternal and child health care, need to continue to promote the reform of the medical insurance system to ensure that the heaviest medical expenses in the cost of raising children are reasonably shared.

(3) Linking economic and housing reforms

The willingness to have children is highly correlated with the family's economic situation and housing conditions. The government can explore diversified housing security mechanisms through land, financial, and rental market reforms, such as public rental housing, low-rent housing, or shared-ownership housing, to lower the housing threshold for families with multiple children. In first-tier and megacities, can moderately adjust the industrial layout and population relocation measures so that young people can enjoy high-quality public services and educational resources in areas with relatively low living costs, and balance job opportunities and living conditions.

(4) Household registration and talent mobility

The conditions for settling in cities should be gradually relaxed or relaxed to encourage the free flow of talent and reduce the uneven distribution of public resources caused by the household registration system. A smoother flow and reasonable distribution of the population will not only help eliminate the gap in education, medical care, and employment opportunities between regions but also allow families with multiple children to choose their place of residence and work more flexibly.

6 CONCLUSION

This article reviews and analyzes the historical evolution, implementation background, and main challenges in the policy transformation of China's family planning policy, exploring its far-reaching impacts on population structure, economic development, and social culture. In the late 1970s, China implemented the one-child policy to address the resource constraints, environmental damage, and economic pressure caused by rapid population growth. Initially, the policy alleviated these issues, but with economic and social development, new demographic challenges have emerged: a shrinking working-age population weakens economic vitality, and the aging population increases pressure on social security and medical systems. Furthermore, the rise of one-child families has increased the financial and caregiving burdens on the younger generation. In recent years, China has gradually relaxed its fertility policy, introducing the "two-child policy," the "comprehensive two-child policy," and the "three-child policy." However, these adjustments have not significantly increased the fertility rate, reflecting deeper issues such as high childcare costs, employment discrimination, and a shortage of educational resources. To address these complex problems, the article proposes several policy suggestions, including abolishing birth restrictions, improving childcare and social security systems, promoting gender equality in employment, and reducing education and medical costs to create a more supportive social environment for fertility. Comprehensive reforms would help optimize the population structure, promote sustainable economic and social development, and offer valuable insights for other countries facing similar challenges. China's family planning policy has played an important role in different historical stages. From the positive role of controlling population growth and promoting economic development in the early stage of policy implementation to the emergence of population aging, gender imbalance, and low fertility rate in the later stage, the complex role of family planning policy in social economy and population structure is visible. Although the policy adjustments in recent years have achieved some results, the deep-seated problems are still severe, indicating that simply relaxing birth restrictions is not enough to solve the systemic challenges of population and economic development.

In the future, the country needs more comprehensive and multi-field policy measures. On the one hand, the cost of raising children should be reduced by improving the social welfare and

childcare support system. On the other hand, the protection of women's rights and interests should be strengthened, and the socially supportive environment for childbirth should be optimized. In addition, the reform of social security, medical care, and pension systems should be further promoted to provide a solid foundation for the optimization of population structure and the sustainable development of economy and society. Through comprehensive reform, China may achieve a dual balance between population and economy, and provide experience for the world to deal with similar problems. While This article mainly focuses on the historical review and policy suggestions for China's family planning, but it does not delve deeply into the specific regional differences and the varying impacts on different socioeconomic groups. Additionally, while proposing policy adjustments, the article does not extensively explore the practical challenges and feasibility of implementing these reforms on a large scale.

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