

The Public and Private Dimensions of Chinese Women's Bodies— From Reproductive Policies to Bodily

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of China's evolving reproductive policies and the recently implemented "cooling-off period" for divorce, underscoring how these shifts implicitly discipline women's reproductive and marital autonomy. Despite the transition from the "One-Child Policy" to the "Three-Child Policy" appearing to offer increased reproductive choice, women's decisions are still heavily influenced by family expectations, including pressure to bear male children, the demands of multiple births, and constraints on birthing choices. Such interventions not only intensify psychological pressures but also contribute to social issues like postpartum depression, suicide, and marital instability. By analyzing policies and relevant data, this paper reveals the combined influence of state and family on women's reproductive behaviors and explores approaches to balance competing interests among the state, family, and individuals. Key recommendations include strengthening legal protections, expanding social support systems, and promoting cultural change to respect women's autonomy over their reproductive choices. The broader implications of these policy adjustments emphasize the critical role of reproductive autonomy in achieving gender equality and sustaining social development. This issue transcends national borders, positioning it within the broader global movement for gender autonomy.

Keywords: Chinese Women, Equality, Fertility Rate, Three-Child Policy, Motherhood Penalty

1. Introduction

1.1 Introducing the Problem

Since the implementation of the One-Child Policy in 1979, China's reproductive policies have undergone significant shifts, moving from the initial One-Child Policy to the later Two-Child and Three-Child Policies, gradually relaxing reproductive restrictions to address population aging and labor shortages. However, despite the outward relaxation of these policies, women's reproductive autonomy has increasingly been supplanted by state and societal control. Through laws, propaganda, and social norms, the government has integrated women's bodies into the population management framework, while families, particularly in-laws, impose additional restrictions on women's reproductive choices based on traditional beliefs. This dual control by both the state and family not only deprives women of their reproductive autonomy but also exacerbates the conflicts they face between family and workplace demands.

Recently, the Chinese government has intensified its efforts to address declining birth rates through targeted messaging. The National Health Commission's official social media account published an article portraying childbearing as a "challenging yet glamorous journey" for women, advocating a focus on the positive aspects of childbirth while downplaying its challenges. The article claims that pregnancy does not lead to cognitive decline—colloquially known as "pregnancy brain"—but instead, through hormonal changes, subtly alters the brain's structure, enhancing maternal instincts and even increasing intelligence. This explanation attempts to refute the widespread belief that pregnancy causes cognitive decline, asserting that the so-called "pregnancy brain" is more of a psychological effect than an actual reduction in cognitive function. Nevertheless, this narrative reflects a broader social trend, where, under the guise of celebrating the "beauty of motherhood," women are subjected to increasing pressure to conform to reproductive roles. By idealizing motherhood as a natural and inevitable transformation, this discourse overlooks the scientifically recognized physical and psychological burdens associated with pregnancy and childbirth.

Despite the outward relaxation of reproductive restrictions under the Two-Child and Three-Child Policies, women continue to face severe inequalities in the workplace and intense familial pressures. Society's heightened

expectations require women to bear the dual burden of family responsibilities and meet the government's population growth objectives, further marginalizing them socially and diminishing their opportunities for career advancement and economic independence. The pervasive phenomenon of the "motherhood penalty" in workplaces results in reproductive-aged women losing promotion opportunities or even facing unemployment, thereby limiting their participation in society and career development.

1.2 Importance of the Problem

Against this backdrop, Chinese government policies and promotional strategies reflect the increasing pressure contemporary Chinese society places on women to assume reproductive roles. Although these policies ostensibly relax reproductive restrictions, by idealizing motherhood and encouraging women to prioritize family and childbearing, they effectively reinforce gender inequality, restricting women's autonomy and career prospects. The government's narrative in these policies, which seemingly portrays childbearing as empowerment, in reality, exacerbates discrimination against reproductive-aged women in the workforce.

Understanding this issue is essential as it highlights the complex interplay between state policy, social attitudes, and systemic constraints on women's reproductive choices. This study aims to examine how these evolving policies and narratives shape women's social roles and autonomy, advocating for a reassessment of China's reproductive policies. Rather than promoting motherhood through idealized narratives, policies should focus on providing substantive support in social security, childcare, and workplace accommodations to foster a more female-friendly environment for both reproduction and employment. Additionally, there needs to be a shift in social attitudes to empower women as individuals with independent rights, rather than tools serving the state and family. Only when the state genuinely respects women's choices can true gender equality and sustainable social development be realized.

2. Pressures on Women Driven by Policy

2.1 Analysis of the Evolution of China's Policies and Family Interventions

China officially implemented the "One-Child Policy (Family Planning)" in 1979, which strictly limited the number of children families could have through administrative means to control population growth. Although the policy effectively curtailed population expansion, its enforcement seriously infringed upon women's bodily rights. The government not only reinforced the policy's execution through legislation and propaganda slogans but also employed measures like the "one-vote veto system for family planning," linking policy enforcement to official evaluations and family interests. This institutional arrangement treated women's bodies as tools for state-controlled population management rather than as personal rights.

During the policy's enforcement, forced termination of pregnancies became commonplace. Many women were compelled to undergo abortion procedures after violating family planning regulations, and some even faced forced labor induction in late pregnancy, resulting in significant harm to their physical and mental health. Meanwhile, slogans such as "Having only one is good" and "Having more is a crime" spread across urban and rural areas, further stigmatizing families with multiple children and forcing women to bear familial pressure regarding not having a second child. The emphasis on the concept of "carrying on the family line" by elders intensified women's reproductive dilemmas. Even within the constraints of the one-child policy, some families insisted on having boys, leading to severe social issues related to infant gender selection and high female abortion rates. This gender preference resulted in many women facing familial neglect, discrimination, or even divorce for failing to give birth to boys, further undermining their status within the family (Wu, Y., Zhang, Q., Zeng, J., et al. 2024).

The policy also imposed long-term control over women's bodies by mandating the installation of intrauterine devices (IUDs) after childbirth. While the widespread use of IUDs reduced the risk of unintended pregnancies to some extent, this coercive measure also imposed significant physical burdens and health risks on women. Many women developed gynecological inflammation and chronic diseases in later years due to long-term use of IUDs, and they often faced difficulties in removal, perpetuating the discipline of the policy on their bodies as they aged. With the implementation of the Two-Child and Three-Child Policies in China, the reproductive pressures on women have significantly increased, and family interference in reproductive choices has become more pronounced (Zhang, B. 2024). The policies encouraging larger families have not alleviated women's social burdens; rather, they have intensified the pressures women face between family and workplace. In-laws frequently intervene in women's choices regarding childbirth methods and timing, often justifying their interference with statements like "Hurry to have a second child, we want a grandson," disregarding women's physical conditions and psychological needs, leading to a deprivation of their autonomy in the reproductive process (Zhang, S., Diao, C., Hu, D., et al. 2024).

A typical case, the tragic incident involving Ma Rongrong, profoundly illustrates the dangers of family and institutional interference in women's reproductive choices. Ma Rongrong, a pregnant woman in Yulin, Shaanxi Province, repeatedly requested a cesarean section during labor due to severe pain. However, her requests were denied by both her family and hospital staff, who insisted on a natural birth. On August 31, 2017, Ma, unable to bear the pain any longer, jumped from the fifth floor of the hospital, resulting in her death and the death of her full-term baby. This case drew nationwide attention as hospital staff and her family disputed who was responsible for refusing her request for a cesarean section, leading to public debate over whether her requests had been ignored due to family or institutional control. The details of Ma's case reveal the complex interplay of pressures that can inhibit women's agency over their own reproductive choices. Ma's family was present outside the delivery room, and through WeChat exchanges, Ma expressed her escalating pain and desperation. She was seen on surveillance cameras twice kneeling in pain, asking her family for permission to undergo a cesarean section. While her husband and family members initially agreed verbally to her request, the hospital's procedures required formal consent, which was allegedly delayed. Hospital records indicate that Ma entered and exited the delivery room multiple times, her pain visible as she attempted to walk but ultimately collapsed to the floor in agony. Despite her visible distress, hospital staff reportedly continued to advocate for natural birth, claiming it would be safer. In response to this incident, public outcry led to the introduction of new legislation in China intended to guarantee women's rights to choose their delivery methods. However, despite this legislative progress, familial and societal interference persists in reality. Ma's case starkly demonstrates that women's reproductive choices are often overridden by familial opinions and institutional protocols, limiting their autonomy even when their health and lives are at risk. This tragic incident underscores the urgent need for policies that ensure women's reproductive decisions are respected without undue interference from family or institutions, particularly in circumstances where their well-being is jeopardized.

Additionally, in-laws' interference in postpartum recovery and breastfeeding methods significantly impacts women's mental health. The traditional practice of "sitting the month" is strictly enforced by in-laws, forcing many women to live according to outdated beliefs and endure unnecessary pain under unscientific regulations. This interference often triggers anxiety and depression in women, making them feel pressured during their recovery period (Zhang, B. 2024). The promotion of reproductive policies not only intensifies family demands on women but also exacerbates the conflicts they face between the workplace and family. The expectations for women in the workplace do not diminish due to childbirth; many companies exhibit implicit discrimination against pregnant and postpartum women, such as obstacles to promotions, unfair performance evaluations, and even job losses. More severely, following the introduction of the Three-Child Policy, some women have been dismissed or lost promotion opportunities due to subsequent pregnancies, forcing them to make compromises between family and workplace and often leading them to become full-time housewives. Recent survey data indicate that approximately 53% of women face significant career challenges when returning to the workforce after childbirth, with nearly half of the respondents reporting demotion or dismissal due to childbirth. Even when opportunities to return to work arise, they must exert double the effort to compensate for career gaps caused by pregnancy and maternity leave. This structural inequality positions women as reproductive machines in society, sacrificing their careers and increasing familial and societal dependency on them, further entrenching gender inequality (Wang, C., Gu, L., & Yu, Y. 2024).

2.2 Cooling-off Period for Divorce: Conflicts between Institutional Design and Realities

The establishment of the cooling-off period for divorce was intended to reduce impulsive divorces and maintain family stability and social harmony. According to the Civil Code, the design of the cooling-off period provides couples applying for divorce with a 30-day reflection period to avoid making irreversible decisions based on temporary emotions. However, in reality, this system has exposed serious issues in handling domestic violence and marital crises, leaving many victimized women trapped in abusive marriages and losing opportunities for timely relief. Domestic violence is viewed as a "family matter" in some places, and the insufficient legal penalties mean that victims face greater safety threats during the cooling-off period, potentially resulting in irreversible tragedies. The cooling-off period is designed to balance the freedom to divorce with family stability, hoping to provide both parties with time for calm reflection. However, this policy overlooks the complexities of domestic violence in practice. For victims of domestic abuse, the "cooling-off period" becomes a chain that prolongs their suffering. Many victimized women find it difficult to seek legal protection during the cooling-off period, often facing more severe violence while waiting for a ruling. The case of Xu Mouqin in Shantou, Guangdong, is a typical example. After filing for divorce, Xu Mouqin was forced to enter the cooling-off period due to legal procedures, a time that not only failed to bring reconciliation but also led to increased violence against her.

Xu Mouqin's case reveals the shortcomings of the cooling-off period in situations of domestic violence. Xu Mouqin endured long-term torment from her husband's gambling and alcohol abuse, suffering multiple injuries. In a moment of desperation, she filed for divorce in 2019, but the court mandated the cooling-off period based on procedural requirements. However, this cooling-off period did not improve their marriage; instead, her husband, Zheng Mingsong, intensified the psychological and physical abuse. In June 2020, after another episode of violence, Xu Mouqin stabbed her husband in self-defense. This case sparked widespread public controversy, with many commentators arguing that the establishment of the cooling-off period contributed to this tragedy. The cooling-off period inadvertently reinforced patriarchal control over marriage, rendering women as "private property" within it. Even when facing domestic violence, victimized women cannot immediately escape their marriages; the cooling-off period forces them to struggle for survival in abusive environments. The case of Wang Nuannuan reflects similar issues. During the cooling-off period, Wang Nuannuan found herself unable to escape the constraints of her marriage, even facing life threats. The cooling-off period system neglects the particularities of domestic violence, failing to provide effective legal protection for victims and instead giving abusers more time to retaliate, leading to countless women losing their lives within marriage. While attempting to reduce impulsive divorces, the cooling-off period also creates additional barriers for victims of domestic violence. The policy is implemented in an overly "one-size-fits-all" manner, failing to consider the unique needs in different situations. For victims of domestic violence, the cooling-off period is not only meaningless but can also extend the duration of their violent marriages, exacerbating their suffering. To prevent similar tragedies from recurring, the legal system needs to be revised accordingly:

Domestic Violence Exception Clause: It is recommended to exempt divorce cases involving domestic violence from the cooling-off period requirement. If the victim provides evidence such as police reports, emergency responses, or assistance from women's federations, the court should rule for divorce directly.

Temporary Protection Orders and Assistance Mechanisms: During the cooling-off period, provide temporary protection orders and shelter for victimized women to prevent them from continuing to face violence while awaiting divorce.

Strengthening Legal Relief Channels: Enhance the role of women's federations and communities in domestic violence assistance, providing victims with psychological counseling, legal aid, and other support to ensure they can receive timely help.

2.3. New Policies and the Privatization of Women's Bodies

In late October 2024, the National Health Commission of China published an article titled *The Four Benefits of Childbearing for Women* on its official "Healthy China" WeChat account. Although the article ostensibly promotes the "positive value" of childbearing, its language and content further exploit and objectify women by treating them as tools for national population targets, disregarding their individual rights and choices. The article describes childbearing as a "challenging yet glamorous journey" and suggests that "women and their families should focus more on the positive aspects of reproduction." However, it exclusively lists purported benefits without addressing the substantial health risks and potential physiological trauma associated with pregnancy, instead downplaying and even glorifying the discomforts and hardships of childbearing.

In this article, the National Health Commission highlights the supposed "positive" impacts of childbearing on women, claiming that hormonal changes during pregnancy cause "subtle changes" in brain structure, enhancing maternal characteristics and even making women "smarter." This narrative distorts scientific facts, attempting to romanticize childbearing as a positive psychological and physiological transformation while completely overlooking the real burdens of pregnancy and childbirth, including risks like amniotic fluid embolism, severe hemorrhaging, postpartum urinary incontinence, and pelvic floor muscle relaxation. Through this selective narrative, policy makers use a narrow, distorted discourse to impose an idealized, false conception of motherhood on women, aiming to integrate their bodies and reproductive functions into state planning, further controlling and privatizing their bodies. The article lacks scientific rigor and further insults women culturally by reiterating the notion that "women's childbearing is a contribution to the country." This approach resembles the slogans of the family planning era, such as "Only one child is good; the state will take care of the elderly," which, in different historical contexts, objectified and exploited women's reproductive capacity. When population growth was the priority, women were encouraged to have more children; when population control took precedence, they were subjected to mandatory contraception. This trend views women's reproductive capacity as a resource to be regulated at will by the state, rather than as an individual right.

Ironically, the article also proposes to "create a fertility-friendly social environment" and to "integrate related content into elementary, secondary, and tertiary education," aiming to instill new perspectives on marriage, family,

and reproduction in the next generation. This approach seeks to impose reproductive obligations on young people as part of societal and familial expectations and even extends the indoctrination of reproductive values into foundational education, making minors the targets of pro-natalist propaganda. This not only ignores the primary task of education to provide knowledge and personal development but also reinforces the objectification of women by binding their reproductive role to national interests through biased value indoctrination. Through such distorted policy propaganda, the state attempts to gradually shift the issue of female reproduction from the realm of individual rights to that of national interests under the guise of caring language, privatizing women's bodies as reproductive machines. This approach is not merely an infringement on women's individual rights; it is also an act of violation and insult, one that continuously reinforces gender inequality in policy and cultural narratives, further suppressing women's independence and freedom of choice.

2.4 Comparative Analysis and Insights from Nordic Policies

Nordic countries have maintained high birth rates in recent years, often surpassing the European average. For instance, in 2021, Iceland's birth rate rose by 16.5% above normal levels, while Finland and Norway saw increases of 7% and 5%, respectively. This surge in births even led to shortages in maternity ward capacity, with some pregnant women needing to deliver in emergency rooms, and midwives from Poland and Germany called in to assist. This increase is no coincidence but the result of various factors, most notably the comprehensive social welfare systems that have been implemented. Nordic countries are renowned for their robust welfare policies, which provide substantial support for family planning and child-rearing. For example, in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, the daycare enrollment rate for children aged 0-3 exceeds 50%, far above the average of other OECD countries. The governments in these countries help families reduce the financial burden of child-rearing through direct subsidies, tax benefits, paid parental leave, and broad social care support. Norwegian mothers, for example, receive a postpartum allowance of approximately 38,750 NOK, and Swedish parents can share 480 days of paid parental leave. In Norway, childcare spending accounts for 2% of GDP, with each child benefiting from welfare support valued at around \$18,500.

In addition to economic support, Nordic countries prioritize work-life balance, encouraging women's workforce participation through comprehensive childcare support. In Denmark, for instance, the childcare enrollment rate for children aged 1-5 is 90%, with most of the costs covered by the government. The gender-neutral cultural views prevalent in the Nordics further eliminate the stigma around childbearing and foster positive attitudes toward parenting. In recent years, a family-centered culture has re-emerged, with the impact of environmentalism on birth decisions diminishing. Parenthood is no longer seen as a burden on the environment but rather as a source of fulfillment and achievement within society. In Sweden, the "Care Act" even legally ensures children's right to play, fostering a cultural environment that has significantly contributed to increased birth rates. This success contrasts with China's reproductive policies, which face challenges due to limited systemic support, workplace penalties for women after childbirth, and high living and educational costs. Policies like the "Three-Child Policy" and the cooling-off period for divorce have yet to effectively address these issues and have instead intensified individual and family burdens on a societal level.

The Nordic approach, by offering extensive, universally accessible coverage regardless of employment status or sector, reduces social inequality and provides stable growth in birth rates. This universal support system extends parental leave to both parents, who share childcare responsibilities, reducing gender-role constraints and increasing women's workforce participation. Nordic countries also alleviate family financial burdens by providing generous childcare subsidies and extensive nursery and kindergarten services, which encourage women to remain in the workforce and promote gender equality. Comparing Nordic countries' policies with direct cash subsidies shows that the key to sustainable birth rates lies in establishing a comprehensive social support system rather than commodifying childbirth. Essential measures include reducing financial pressure on women through free prenatal care and maternity insurance and ensuring equal access to medical services for natural births and cesarean sections. In addition, improving education by reducing academic pressures, as demonstrated by European educational models, can alleviate family anxieties about child-rearing. Similarly, reintroducing public housing allocation systems to reduce housing costs for young families is essential for boosting birth rates.

3. Policy Impacts and the Discipline of Women's Bodies: Data Analysis and Theoretical Application

China's reproductive policies are not only tools for addressing population aging and labor shortages but also mechanisms for disciplining women's bodies. Through policy guidance, social norms, and family interventions, the state not only determines women's reproductive behaviors but also incorporates their bodies into a control system, making them instruments for achieving national population goals. The changes in these policies have not

only failed to resolve reproductive dilemmas but have also exacerbated the conflicts women face between family and workplace, reinforcing their marginalization in society (Chen, S. 2024).

In recent years, studies have highlighted significant challenges facing women in the workforce, particularly regarding the impact of childbirth on employment opportunities. China's efforts to boost birth rates through the Two-Child and Three-Child Policies have yielded limited success, as women continue to encounter substantial structural barriers that hinder their workforce participation. According to the 2024 Report on the Development of Women in the Workplace in China, the female labor participation rate has dropped from 79.39% in 1990 to 63.73% in 2023. Similarly, the International Labour Organization reports that China's global ranking for female labor participation has declined from 11th in 2000 to 51st in 2022. This decrease reflects the conflict between reproductive responsibilities and career advancement, exacerbated by a lack of comprehensive childcare services, flexible work arrangements, and persistent traditional societal norms. Research published in *Population and Economics*, a core journal by Peking University, reveals a negative correlation between the number of children and women's employment probability. In middle-income families, compared to childless women, those with one child experience a 6.6% decrease in employment probability, while women with two children face an additional 9.3% drop. Additionally, the third Survey on the Social Status of Women in China shows that over a quarter (26.3%) of urban women from the "post-80s" generation with children under 30 have encountered career interruptions due to family obligations. These trends highlight the substantial "motherhood penalty" in the workplace, where women experience significant career setbacks related to childbirth, affecting 54% of female workers compared to only 6.6% of men. Gendered expectations and employer concerns over maternity leave and childcare responsibilities contribute to hiring biases that often favor men over women. These factors not only limit women's career advancement and financial independence but also perpetuate a wage gap: data from 2023 shows that men earn an average monthly salary of 9,942 yuan, while women earn only 8,689 yuan (Figure 1).

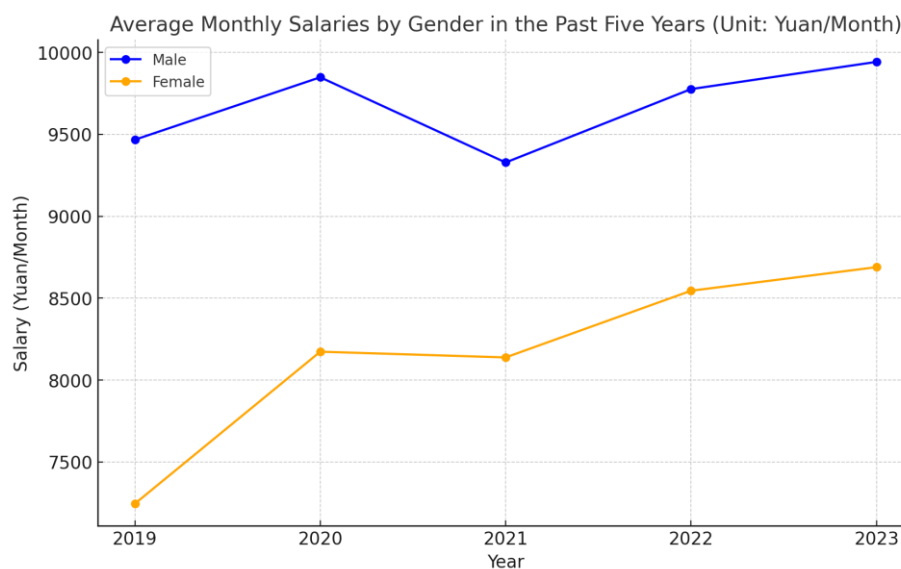


Figure 1. Average Monthly Salaries by Gender in the Past Five Years

At the same time, broader demographic shifts are affecting women's roles in society. One significant change is the decline in the number of first marriages among marriageable age groups. In 2023, the number of first marriages in China fell below 10.52 million for the first time, a cumulative 55.9% decrease since 2013. This decline aligns with a drop in birth intentions, with more individuals choosing to delay marriage, forego marriage, or remain childless. The phenomenon of "unwilling to have children, afraid to have children, or unable to have children" has become increasingly prominent.

Both "Employment Barriers for Women (Figure 2)" and "Main Reasons for Women's Unemployment (Figure 3)" highlight childbirth and caregiving responsibilities as significant challenges women face in the workforce. Childbirth alone accounts for 30.2% of employment barriers for women, while caregiving responsibilities — including caring for children (26%) and elderly family members (16.7%) — are leading causes of female unemployment. This data underscores the difficult balance women must navigate between family obligations and professional aspirations, a balance that is made even more challenging by societal expectations and limited

structural support. The implementation of the Three-Child Policy in China further intensifies these challenges, as it places an implicit expectation on women to take on additional reproductive responsibilities, often without corresponding support in the form of childcare services or workplace accommodations. For many women, the decision to have children, particularly multiple children, translates into career sacrifices, limited promotion opportunities, and, in some cases, complete withdrawal from the workforce. This creates a “motherhood penalty” effect, where women face disproportionate disadvantages in hiring, wages, and job security due to their roles as mothers and caregivers. Despite policies encouraging higher birth rates, the absence of robust social support systems — such as affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements, and protections against employment discrimination — means that women continue to bear the burden of balancing family and career. As a result, the very policies intended to increase birth rates inadvertently risk marginalizing women from the workforce, reinforcing gender inequality and limiting women’s economic and professional development.

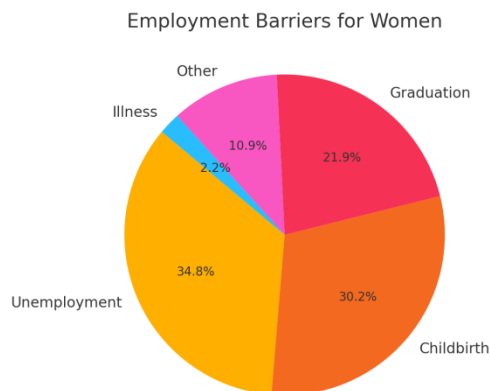


Figure 2. Employment Barriers for Women

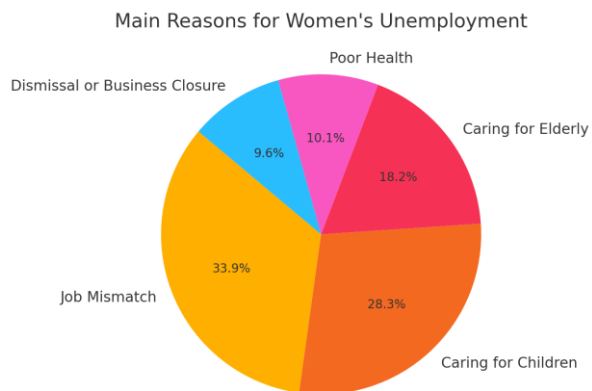


Figure 3. Main Reasons for Women's Unemployment

Note: The data above is sourced from Maigoo.com

Foucault's theory of discipline and punishment suggests that modern power does not rely on violence or law but exerts invisible control over individuals through everyday norms and social culture. In China's reproductive policy system, the state disciplines women's bodies as tools for reproduction through policy propaganda and social incentives and penalties, extending this control further through familial relationships. In some regions of China, such as Chaoshan and Fujian, traditional culture assigns specific reproductive responsibilities to women, objectifying them as tools for family lineage continuation. In these areas, a particular custom has emerged—newlywed women wear gold pig pendants, symbolizing that they should bear many children like pigs to ensure the family's continuation. This cultural tradition emphasizes not only the quantity of births but also carries the implicit expectation of "carrying on the family line," directly linking women's value to their reproductive capabilities. Such beliefs are deeply rooted in these regions, shaping familial expectations of women and permeating societal perceptions of women. These cultural notions overlook women's personal needs and social value, confining their lives and life goals to reproductive responsibilities. Married women are not only expected to fulfill the family's hope for "more children, more blessings" but also face ongoing pressure from in-laws to bear more children. Whether it involves having sons or multiple births, women are compelled to compromise according to family needs, with their autonomy often relegated to a secondary position. In this cultural context, women's bodies are no longer seen as independent entities but as vital tools for family lineage continuation. The traditional notion of "carrying on the family line" reinforces the discipline's effects, subjecting women's reproductive choices and lifestyles to intense family intervention, particularly under the pressure from in-laws, further undermining women's reproductive autonomy.

The case of Xu Zhou's "Eight-Child" woman, Xiaohuamei, vividly illustrates the extreme control exerted by family and society over women's bodies. Xiaohuamei was not only trafficked and illegally imprisoned but also forced to bear eight children. In her life, there was no reproductive choice; her body was entirely reduced to a tool for satisfying family and state population goals. The initial official response sought to downplay the nature of the incident, dismissing her plight as a "marriage issue caused by mental illness," until public opinion intensified, prompting a more in-depth investigation. This incident reflects the state's dereliction in regulating the discipline of women's bodies and highlights the disregard of family and society for women's individual rights. Xiaohuamei's

tragedy shows that under the dual pressures of policy and social expectations, women's bodies become mediums of control and exploitation, objectifying them as reproductive machines solely to fulfill family responsibilities of "carrying on the family line." A similar control pattern is evident in the case of Wang Lian. Wang Lian, a promising graduate student, was trafficked to a remote rural area due to her lack of social experience. During her 71 days of captivity, Wang Lian not only lost her freedom but was also coerced into accepting a forced marriage. Her body was completely privatized, becoming the "property" of the family and local community to meet local reproductive demands. These cases reveal that in certain social structures, once women lose social support, they completely forfeit bodily autonomy and dignity in life. The Ma Rongrong incident further illustrates how family and medical systems' interventions in women's bodily choices can lead to tragedy. In this case, Ma Rongrong was forced to undergo a natural birth instead of having a cesarean section, ultimately resulting in her jumping from a building to escape unbearable pain. This event reflects not only excessive family intervention in women's bodies but also exposes serious shortcomings in the medical system's ability to safeguard women's rights to choose. Ma Rongrong's tragedy indicates that women must contend not only with pressures from families regarding reproduction and childbirth methods but also with the reality of having their choices overlooked within the medical system (Yu, Y., Chan, T. F., & Huang, Q. 2024).

Under China's reproductive policy system, the state and society collaboratively shape the discipline model of women's bodies. Even though policies ostensibly emphasize reproductive freedom, in practice, women's bodies remain subject to policy directives and social expectations. For example, through propaganda slogans, the state guides women to assume reproductive responsibilities and glorifies the image of having multiple children, while in-laws exert constant pressure to compel women to give birth to boys and have multiple children according to family expectations. Reproductive policies not only control women's reproductive behaviors but also reinforce gender roles through social images of being a "good mother." After childbirth, women are expected to bear primary responsibility for childcare, fulfilling societal expectations through actions such as breastfeeding. Furthermore, societal pressure on women to regain their pre-pregnancy bodies reflects the ongoing control over women's bodies through cultural symbols and aesthetic standards. Foucault argues that in modern society, bodies are disciplined as mediums that can be controlled and exploited. In China's patriarchal society, women's bodies are shaped into controlled objects to fulfill the needs of both family and state. The cases of Ma Rongrong, Xu Zhou's "Eight-Child" woman Xiaohuamei, and Wang Lian all demonstrate how women are objectified as reproductive machines under the dual control of family and society, losing their rights to choose and individual value. These cases reveal that the combined control of family and society not only harms women's physical health but also leads to severe psychological pressure and emotional disorders, binding their lives to the disciplines imposed by society and family.

With the continued implementation of China's new reproductive policies and its associated propaganda measures, women's social status may further deteriorate, reducing them to little more than reproductive tools. These policies not only push "positive values" of reproduction through official media channels but also seek to embed reproductive duties in educational materials for primary and secondary school students, aiming to instill the notion of childbearing as a duty rather than a personal right from a young age. This approach is likely to marginalize women further in both society and the workplace. Increasingly, women may face unemployment or barriers to finding work due to the burdens associated with childbearing, with the "motherhood penalty" becoming even more pronounced and the obstacles to career advancement nearly insurmountable. Unlike reasonable policy initiatives, these measures reflect an extreme tendency that appears focused solely on population goals while ignoring basic values of individual rights and social equity. Such actions are far from what a rational and healthy government should pursue, suggesting a disregard for women's rights and social fairness. At the same time, these policies threaten to erode women's access to education, restricting them to domestic roles early on and diminishing opportunities for career and personal growth. Ultimately, women's economic independence and social agency will be undermined to an unprecedented degree, intensifying gender inequality across all aspects of life.

China's reproductive policies and social culture conspire to create strict control over women's bodies. Under the dual oppression of state policies and family expectations, women's reproductive choices and lifestyles are severely restricted. Whether it is Xiaohuamei's tragedy, Ma Rongrong's death, or Wang Lian's painful experience of losing her freedom, all reflect the objectification and control of women's bodies within the patriarchal system. To break this disciplinary model, efforts must be made on both institutional and social levels: legally ensuring women's reproductive autonomy and establishing a comprehensive social support system; culturally rejecting patriarchal concepts and fostering a societal atmosphere that respects women's choices. Only by doing so can women be liberated from the constraints of reproductive and social roles, truly becoming equal individuals with independent rights.

4. Discussion

With the continuous advancement of China's reproductive policies, state control over family reproductive behaviors has slightly diminished; however, reproductive autonomy still faces numerous challenges. Interactions between spouses and the traditional beliefs of elders profoundly influence reproductive intentions. While younger generations may place less importance on the notion of "carrying on the family line," traditional expectations from parents and elders continue to exert significant pressure on women's reproductive choices. Modern women are further constrained by the dual burden of balancing career and family responsibilities. Most women juggle market work and family care, and unequal household labor divisions increase their stress. The lack of a robust social support system exacerbates these pressures, significantly lowering women's willingness to have children. Despite policies attempting to encourage childbirth through short-term incentives, issues such as the "motherhood penalty" and reemployment challenges continue to undermine women's long-term reproductive intentions. Additionally, the modern acceptance of delayed marriage and fewer children further complicates the possibility of larger family sizes.

The recently implemented reproductive policies and their promotion on social media attempt to influence women to take on more reproductive responsibilities by emphasizing the "positive value" of childbearing. However, these efforts have sparked widespread criticism online, as many question the effectiveness of such policies in the absence of adequate support systems. Under intense public scrutiny, the controversial posts were taken down, but this "overly hasty" action only intensified gender tensions, prompting a heightened awareness among women. Modern women possess independent thinking and rights awareness, and such policies not only underestimate their capacity for reasoning but also objectify them as instruments for national reproductive goals. This approach has sparked greater societal focus on women's rights, prompting many to recognize that reproductive responsibilities should be based on personal choice rather than state imposition.

Although the government seeks to increase birth rates through short-term measures, the absence of a systematic reproductive support framework limits the effectiveness of these policies. Young families face economic pressures, workplace discrimination, and insufficient childcare resources, which further undermine their confidence in having children. Thus, policies should not only provide economic incentives but also address "motherhood penalties" and gender discrimination in the workplace to secure women's career development and social participation. Additionally, the introduction of the divorce "cooling-off" period has exacerbated challenges for women within marriages, further stripping them of autonomy. While the policy aims to reduce impulsive divorces and promote family stability, in practice, it often traps victims of domestic violence in perilous situations, sometimes with life-threatening consequences. Cases like Wang Nuannuan and Xu Mouqin demonstrate that women endure greater harm due to their inability to escape abusive marriages promptly during the cooling-off period. This policy design neglects real issues within marriages and reinforces patriarchal control over women, entrapping them in marital constraints.

China's reproductive policies and social traditions jointly control and objectify women's bodies and reproductive rights (Gao, Q., Zhao, M., & Chen, H. 2024). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in areas like Chaoshan and Fujian, where newlywed women are encouraged to wear gold pig pendants as symbols of their obligation to bear children for the family. Such customs directly link a woman's value to her reproductive capability, disregarding her autonomy and binding her life to family expectations. Additionally, cases like Xiaohuamei, the "Eight-Child Mother" from Xuzhou, and Wang Lian reveal the severe reproductive culture and human trafficking issues prevalent in certain regions, underscoring how women lose personal freedom and reproductive autonomy within family and societal contexts. Despite the recent pro-birth policies, these measures are not driven by a genuine population demand. In fact, China could address population needs by easing immigration policies to meet labor requirements. However, China's immigration policies remain among the strictest globally, with one of the hardest processes for obtaining green cards or citizenship. This contradictory approach raises questions about the real motives behind promoting birth.

Furthermore, recent headlines about college graduates struggling to find employment highlight China's surplus labor market. The challenges facing many young people reflect structural issues within the labor market. Thus, pro-birth policies are not aimed at alleviating "labor shortages" but rather serve as a tool to discipline women, binding them to traditional family roles and reinforcing a patriarchal structure. Educated women have developed greater independence and awareness, challenging outdated gender roles. Yet these policies seek to pull women back into traditional reproductive and domestic responsibilities, relegating them to roles as dependents of the state and family. The disciplining of women's reproductive rights and bodies is, in essence, an implicit control mechanism that binds women to inequitable family and reproductive responsibilities, ensuring that they remain constrained within patriarchal structures. Consequently, women are often relegated to childrearing and unpaid

domestic labor, impeding their ability to compete equally with men in the workplace. While these policies outwardly claim to address population needs, their underlying intent appears to preserve the vested interests of groups that benefit from gender hierarchies, steering women's lives and careers toward family-centered roles and limiting their opportunities for independent growth and social engagement. To genuinely address these issues and promote sustainable development for both the state and society, it is essential to protect women's reproductive autonomy. Although the state seeks to combat population aging with the Three-Child Policy, its limited effectiveness only generates further gender pressures and social conflict. It is thus crucial to abandon quantity-driven reproductive policies, liberate women from the confines of reproductive responsibilities, and place individual rights at the center of policy.

Future development should focus on strengthening legal frameworks and social security systems to create a supportive environment for women's reproductive and professional aspirations. Cultural change is also vital, requiring the rejection of traditional beliefs such as "the more children, the greater the blessings," and reducing familial and societal interference in women's reproductive decisions. Abolishing the impractical cooling-off period for divorce and implementing exceptions for domestic violence cases can provide legal support and protection for victims, safeguarding women's marital autonomy while promoting respect for women's rights in society. Ultimately, only when national policies genuinely respect women's choices can society gradually shift its views toward women, establishing a social system centered on individual choice and gender equality. This shift is not only key to addressing the low birth rate but also a necessary path toward social harmony and sustainable national development. By dismantling the policies and societal norms that discipline women's bodies and rights, women can truly become independent and equal members of society, progressing together with their families and the nation toward a more progressive and prosperous future.

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