

Factors influencing women's fertility intentions in the context of low fertility: a review of domestic literature and research prospects

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Abstract. To help improve China's current low fertility situation and mitigate the accelerated pace of population aging, this paper investigates the factors influencing women's fertility intentions in the context of low fertility. Drawing on existing domestic empirical studies and data, it systematically analyzes—through a sociological lens—how social, familial, individual, and policy factors affect women's fertility intentions and shape their fertility decision-making, thereby providing a scientific basis for the formulation and adjustment of governmental fertility policies. From the perspectives of policy, economy, and socioculture, the paper puts forward countermeasures and recommendations with potential for further development, aiming to promote proactive childbearing among women, boost China's fertility rate, and offer reference points for addressing severe population aging and related issues.

Keywords: Low fertility, women's fertility intentions, influencing factors, policy recommendations

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and significance

With China's fertility rate declining year by year and population aging accelerating, domestic research on women's fertility intentions has been ongoing. According to the latest data released by the National Health Commission in February 2025, the national total fertility rate in 2024 was only 1.07. At present, fields such as demography, sociology, and psychology are actively exploring ways to boost the fertility rate to address increasingly serious issues brought about by sustained fertility decline, including population aging, imbalanced demographic structure, and reduced economic vitality. Meanwhile, the government has been continuously introducing fertility-friendly policies to alleviate the childbearing pressure faced by women of childbearing age in modern society, though the actual implementation results have been limited. Based on the statistical findings of Xing Chaoguo and colleagues, it can be preliminarily estimated that the implementation of fertility-friendly policies and the establishment of a fertility-friendly environment can increase the fertility intentions of approximately 15.1% of women [1]. Policies introduced thus far have mostly focused on the economic factors contributing to low fertility, typically centering on the concept of "reducing childrearing costs" as the core principle, following the assumption of the "economically rational actor" to boost fertility confidence by lowering the costs of childbearing [2]. However, with the awakening and growing independence of women's consciousness in the new era, economic subsidies alone are no longer sufficient to meet the demand for raising the overall fertility rate. Particularly in light of recent shifts in the thinking of younger generations, research on factors influencing women's fertility intentions can no longer be confined to a single dimension. It is therefore clear that studying women's fertility intentions is a long-term task that must evolve alongside societal changes. Although there is some deviation between fertility intentions and actual fertility behavior, fertility intentions serve as an important predictor of subsequent reproductive behavior and can, to some extent, influence fertility trends.

1.2. Research objectives

This paper aims to explore the factors influencing women's fertility intentions in the context of low fertility in modern society, clarify the roles of different factors in women's reproductive choices, summarize the current state and limitations of domestic research to date, and propose countermeasures and future research directions to enhance women's fertility intentions.

1.3. Research methods and data sources

This study adopts a literature review approach, providing a sociological perspective on the factors influencing women's fertility intentions based on existing domestic studies. All data used in this paper are drawn from prior empirical research and the National Bureau of Statistics, ensuring both scientific validity and rigor.

2. Review of relevant domestic literature

2.1. Research perspectives

China's overall low-fertility state has persisted for an extended period, and research on women's fertility intentions has been continuously refined. Most domestic studies adopt mixed methods—combining quantitative and qualitative approaches—and, from demographic, psychological, and sociological perspectives, examine the influencing factors and underlying mechanisms of women's fertility intentions within the prevailing social context.

2.2. Major research findings and perspectives

A review of previous domestic studies shows that the factors influencing women's fertility intentions can generally be divided into three main categories: social factors, family factors, and individual factors [3]. Social factors mainly include policy and economic elements. However, the latest research distinguishes policy factors as a separate, fourth category on par with social, family, and individual factors. For example, Liang Siyu and colleagues, using grounded theory, constructed a model of factors influencing the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age and their families. Their findings indicate that policy factors affect social, family, and individual domains, thereby indirectly influencing fertility intentions [4]. In addition, earlier studies also emphasize that fertility policy is a decisive factor in shaping fertility intentions [5]. Thus, policy factors are indispensable in exploring the determinants of women's fertility intentions.

Regarding socioeconomic factors, Hou Jiawei and others propose that economic development level is significantly negatively correlated with women's fertility intentions [6]. Economic growth may bring intensified financial pressures, increased employment stress for women, and high work intensity, all of which limit the energy available for childbearing. Moreover, the imbalance between high work demands and relatively low income can reduce women's satisfaction with their current lives, leading to psychological resistance toward childbearing.

Within family factors, lagging progress in gender equality can result in decreased fertility levels, with the division of household labor being one of the most direct reflections of gender equality in the home. Some empirical studies suggest that husbands' active participation in housework and a higher level of gender equality within the family promote women's childbearing behaviors [7]. Furthermore, different family structures can lead to varying fertility intentions. The specific family composition and preferences for future family structure can influence reproductive decisions. For example, in the "4-2-1" family structure, heavy eldercare burdens tend to suppress fertility intentions [8]. Family relationships also play a role; greater marital stability in China has been associated with higher average numbers of children per family [9]. Family income also affects women's fertility intentions, with studies showing a U-shaped relationship between household income and fertility intentions [10].

At the individual level, factors such as age [11], educational attainment [12], age at first marriage and marital age gap [13], health status [14], and religious belief [15] have all been found to exert significant influence on fertility intentions.

3. Current status of women's fertility intentions in the context of low fertility

3.1. Trends and causes of fertility decline

With the advancement of social modernization, transformation of socioeconomic structures, and overall economic development in China, population aging and declining fertility have become inevitable trends in social development. Since the strict implementation of the "family planning" policy in 1982, China's fertility rate has rapidly decreased. Policy measures that strictly controlled the number of births effectively curbed the negative impacts of rapid population growth.

Following the introduction of family planning, China entered two distinct phases of fertility decline: 1. Policy-driven low fertility phase (1982–2000) 2. Endogenous low fertility phase (2000–present) [16] The main reasons for the continuous fertility decline and the transition from the policy-driven to the endogenous low fertility phase include adjustments and regulations across economic, social, family, institutional, and cultural dimensions. These encompass the rising economic costs of childbearing, large-scale and normalized population mobility and urbanization, changes in intergenerational family support, improvements in the social security system, and shifts in fertility culture and value norms. Faced with the established reality of fertility decline,

efforts to slow down this trend, maintain population stability, and reduce eldercare burdens have become among the most critical directions for development in Chinese population sociology today.

3.2. Diversity in women's fertility intentions

Before examining the factors influencing women's fertility intentions, it is useful to categorize fertility intentions into two main types: swing-type fertility intentions and stable-type fertility intentions.

In existing survey-based studies, respondents' fertility intentions are usually assumed to be clear. However, in real life, many women's attitudes toward childbearing cannot be simply judged by the static options of "to have children" or "not to have children." Therefore, in their recent research, Zhang Rui and Li Yi introduced the concept of swing-type fertility intentions, referring to the contradictory and fluctuating psychological state individuals exhibit during the fertility decision-making process. This concept emphasizes that fertility intentions are neither linear nor fixed but dynamic and context-dependent [2].

In contrast, stable-type fertility intentions refer to clear and consistent attitudes toward childbearing, including firmly intending to have children or firmly intending not to have children. Empirical studies on the fertility intentions of young women indicate that approximately one-fifth of unmarried and childless young women exhibit ambivalent feelings about whether to have children [1], while the majority of women hold clear attitudes toward childbearing.

4. Analysis of factors influencing women's fertility intentions

4.1. Social factors

According to the latest domestic research, social factors influencing women's fertility intentions include elements such as public opinion, social security systems, and emerging marriage and childbearing cultures [4]. For example, the spread of sentiments on social media—such as accusations of a "childbearing trap" or anxiety over the commodification of bride prices—has weakened young people's confidence in marriage and childbearing, leading to hesitation or outright rejection of fertility. In the process of building a fertility-friendly society, China has formulated social security measures from multiple dimensions: strengthening fertility service support, improving childcare systems, and enhancing support in education, housing, and employment, along with stronger public guidance to promote positive perceptions of childbearing. In terms of emerging marriage and fertility culture, younger generations increasingly follow a "happiness-driven" principle in their marital and reproductive choices, placing greater emphasis on personal well-being and the quality of children's growth experiences. This cultural rationality makes young people more cautious in reproductive decision-making, focusing on whether they can provide good educational and upbringing conditions for their children. Additionally, new cultural norms emphasize gender equality, encouraging men to take on more household and childcare responsibilities, which, to some extent, promotes gender equality and thereby positively influences women's fertility intentions.

Socioeconomic conditions also play a significant role in shaping women's fertility intentions, including factors such as average income levels and employment pressure. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2024, China's per capita disposable income was 41,300 yuan, with urban residents at 54,200 yuan and rural residents at 23,100 yuan. Meanwhile, the China Childbearing Cost Report 2024, based on National Bureau of Statistics data, estimated the average cost of raising a child from birth to age 17 at approximately 538,000 yuan per household. Although economic income is not the sole determinant of fertility behavior and low income alone does not directly lead to a rejection of childbearing, growing economic pressures have increased the weight of financial considerations in women's reproductive decisions. Consequently, the proportion of women holding swing-type fertility intentions has risen.

4.2. Family factors

In China's historical development, the "family" has been the core social institution, and family relationships remain among the most stable social bonds. Under the influence of traditional family-oriented thinking, the pursuit of family stability has long been regarded as a natural and expected life course. Although with urbanization modern youth place greater emphasis on personal development and spiritual freedom—and urban areas are generally more tolerant of such values than rural areas—traditional concepts such as "establishing a family and career" and "marriage and childbearing" continue to permeate family life in modern society. The impact of family factors on fertility intentions can be analyzed primarily through three aspects: family size, family economic conditions, and family relationships.

Expansion of family size can lead to increased financial pressure and greater demands on economic and resource allocation, especially in urban areas where the cost of raising children is relatively high. To maintain stability in their living standards, families may choose to limit births or forgo childbearing altogether to better balance household needs. Research by Yan Yueping

and colleagues indicates that larger family size tends to be associated with reduced fertility behavior among those of childbearing age [17].

The economic status of a family also affects women's fertility intentions and the number of children desired. Housing conditions, debt levels, and household income directly reflect the family's economic situation. Regarding housing, Zhou Jianjun and colleagues found that in China, people with higher fertility intentions are often those with considerable family wealth and ownership of multiple properties, while those with only one property or none often exhibit a "fear of childbearing." Thus, housing is considered one of the key determinants of fertility behavior [18]. In addition, studies have shown a U-shaped relationship between household income and fertility intentions [10]. High-income families, due to better economic capacity, have higher expectations for the quality of childrearing, whereas low-income families often prioritize the number of children rather than quality considerations and therefore tend to have a more open attitude toward childbearing.

Family relationships are another important factor affecting women's fertility intentions. Traditional reproductive concepts view childrearing as a natural extension of marriage, with marriage being the cornerstone of fertility. In traditional Chinese culture, the saying "a harmonious family leads to prosperity" reflects the belief that stable and harmonious marriages can ease the burden of childbearing. In contrast, modern fertility culture places greater emphasis on gender equality within marriage, encouraging men to take on more household duties during women's pregnancy and childbirth to alleviate their physical and psychological stress, thereby creating a supportive environment for smooth childbearing. Beyond marital relationships, intergenerational involvement by the woman's family of origin also influences fertility intentions [19]. Parenting models in the family of origin subtly shape attitudes toward marriage, intimacy, and attachment [20]. Because fertility intentions and behaviors are rooted in these intimate relationships, women's motivations for expressing fertility intentions and making reproductive decisions are significantly affected by their family of origin.

4.3. Individual factors

Women's fertility behavior is ultimately determined by their fertility intentions, and personal factors such as age, educational attainment, income level, and health status all influence fertility intentions to varying degrees. According to surveys conducted by Jiao Ying and colleagues, 90% of women consider their physical condition as a primary factor before making decisions about childbearing [21]. With the high-quality development of society, women's attitudes toward fertility have shifted from focusing solely on the number of children to placing greater emphasis on the quality of childrearing. High-income women are more capable, from an economic perspective, of supporting the high-quality development of their children. However, income level alone does not directly determine fertility intentions; final fertility intentions are also related to factors such as the proportion of a woman's income within total household income.

Educational attainment influences women's fertility intentions by affecting individual labor income, family gender concepts, personal preferences, and age at first marriage [22]. Some domestic empirical studies indicate that higher educational levels significantly inhibit women's fertility intentions [23], while other research shows that higher education promotes the intention to have a second child [24]. Further studies suggest a U-shaped relationship between women's educational level and second-child fertility intentions [12]. Although the effect of education on fertility intentions is complex, it is undeniable that it influences women's reproductive choices to some extent. Moreover, with prolonged socioeconomic development and modernization, women's awakening and growing independence have gradually shifted reproductive decision-making from family-based collective choices to individual autonomous choices. Highly educated women often pursue personal value realization; their sense of "independence" and "selfhood" may lead them to delay marriage and childbearing while pursuing personal development, thereby affecting their fertility intentions.

4.4. Policy factors

Research and experience from European countries indicate that fertility support policies can largely alleviate conflicts between women's family and work responsibilities, reduce the family's childrearing burden, and promote long-term balanced population development. To better implement the fundamental national policy of family planning, China is committed to building a fertility-friendly society, continuously revising and introducing new family planning policies according to social development realities. To date, the policy "allowing a couple to have three children along with supporting measures" has been issued. However, with intensifying social and economic pressures, the practical effects of fertility-friendly policies remain limited. How to formulate scientifically favorable fertility support policies and how to use market regulation measures to promote women's fertility intentions, thereby boosting the fertility rate and improving the low-fertility situation, has long been a focus of academic research.

Dong Xiaoxiao, in her study on factors influencing fertility intentions and supportive policies, pointed out that policy exerts supportive effects at the individual, family, and social levels. Appropriate fertility-promoting policies can influence the effects of social, family, and individual factors on women's fertility intentions, thereby effectively addressing low fertility [25]. Relaxation

or tightening of fertility policies can affect the total number of newborns in society. Although these policies cannot immediately solve severe aging, from a long-term perspective, they help balance China's population structure and social resource allocation, indirectly enhancing women's fertility intentions. Furthermore, establishing comprehensive social security systems, strengthening public health and medical services, and promoting universal childcare services can reduce women's economic, psychological, and physical burdens related to childbearing, thereby improving their proactivity in fertility. Non-fertility-specific policies can also indirectly influence women's fertility intentions by affecting career development, childcare costs, and social security.

5. Policy recommendations

Based on the current state of research, fertility policy is a fundamental national strategy in China. From a sociological perspective, it influences the effects of social, family, and individual factors on women's fertility intentions through policy, economic, and cultural channels, thereby promoting proactive childbearing, boosting fertility rates, and addressing severe population aging. The following recommendations are proposed based on existing domestic research:

First, extend fertility subsidies to reduce the economic burden of childbearing. Rapid economic development in China has significantly increased the financial pressures on working individuals, making economic stress one of the main barriers to women's fertility. Policy subsidies for childbirth and childrearing should be extended to cover the child's growth period. Families under greater economic pressure should receive targeted additional subsidies and tax incentives.

Second, develop diversified and universal childcare services. Mothers with infants and young children are often in the peak period of their careers. Developing diversified and accessible childcare services can effectively address the childcare challenges faced by dual-income families. At the same time, relevant authorities should strengthen supervision of childcare institutions to alleviate families' concerns regarding professionalism and safety, thereby enhancing public confidence in such services.

Third, balance educational resources to ensure sufficient and equitable distribution. Under the influence of emerging marriage and fertility culture, young people today prioritize the quality of childrearing over the quantity of children. Many young couples base fertility decisions on whether they can provide high-quality educational environments for their children. Government policies that ensure equitable distribution of quality educational resources can reduce families' concerns about education and, to a certain extent, enhance women's fertility intentions.

Fourth, emphasize guidance on gender equality awareness. Traditional beliefs that men should work outside while women manage domestic affairs are increasingly incompatible with modern ideals of independent women. Policies promoting balanced household labor distribution and "de-gendered" family roles can equalize the value contributions of men and women within the family. Although gender discrimination persists in the labor market, improving gender concepts within emotionally driven family relationships and establishing equal family status for men and women can indirectly mitigate workplace gender bias. For working women, a social and familial environment that respects gender equality better satisfies emotional fairness needs, thereby increasing fertility intentions.

Strengthening the social support system through policy support, career development, economic security, and cultural guidance can effectively promote women's fertility intentions. For example, governments can enhance maternal and infant facilities alongside fertility subsidies and tax incentives to create a favorable childbearing environment. Enterprises should provide maternity and paternity leave, safeguard women's employment rights, and offer flexible work arrangements to reduce childbearing burdens. Additionally, society should advocate gender equality, encourage male participation in childcare, and cultivate a female-friendly environment to help individuals and families establish proper marriage and fertility values. Only through coordinated efforts across these domains can a fertility-friendly society be effectively constructed, thereby improving women's fertility intentions.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Research content and conclusions

Based on current domestic research on women's fertility intentions, it is evident that women's fertility intentions are influenced by multiple factors. This paper, grounded in the context of China's prolonged low fertility rate, combines existing empirical studies to analyze the composition and mechanisms of factors affecting women's fertility intentions. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of fertility intentions from four perspectives: social factors, family factors, individual factors, and policy factors. Through in-depth examination, it is found that policy factors can indirectly influence women's fertility intentions by affecting social, family, and individual factors. Accordingly, this paper proposes policy recommendations for building a fertility-friendly society and offers prospects for improving the social support system.

The factors influencing women's fertility intentions are multifaceted, interacting and jointly shaping women's reproductive choices. Therefore, when formulating relevant policies and measures, these factors should be fully considered in their combined

effect to more effectively promote long-term balanced population development.

6.2. Research limitations and prospects

This paper provides a detailed discussion of the factors influencing women's fertility intentions in the context of low fertility. Although it draws on verified domestic studies for further exploration, several limitations exist. The reference samples may not fully represent all women of childbearing age. Differences in region, cultural background, and age group may affect the generalizability and applicability of the findings. Moreover, women's fertility intentions are influenced by multiple factors; beyond the sociological factors discussed in this paper, cultural and emotional factors also play a role. Future research could explore these aspects more deeply through interdisciplinary collaboration.

Fertility intentions may differ significantly across cultural contexts. However, cross-cultural studies on fertility intentions are still limited. The lack of cross-cultural comparisons makes it difficult to fully understand the universality and specificity of fertility intentions, highlighting a need for expanded research in this area.

Most domestic studies focus on women's static fertility intentions—simply “to have children or not”—while neglecting the dynamic changes in fertility intentions that occur from the emergence of the idea of childbearing to the actual decision-making process. Although Zhang Rui and Li Yi recently proposed the concept of “swing-type fertility intentions” to explore women's contradictory and hesitant psychological states during fertility decision-making [2], relevant research is still in its early stages, and literature on this topic remains limited. Further in-depth studies on swing-type fertility intentions are needed.

Fertility intention is a complex issue involving demography, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines. Drawing on theories and methods from multiple fields to gain a deeper understanding of women's fertility intentions and their influencing factors is a key direction for future research. Future studies could examine the dynamic evolution of women's fertility intentions across different regional and cultural contexts, track changes in fertility behavior alongside societal development, and effectively address low fertility rates and severe population aging. Women's fertility intentions and decision-making logic remain crucial areas for long-term study in modern sociology.

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