

Comparative Family Policies in Nordic World and China: Learning from Nordic Model to Help Chinese Women in Corporations

Yanran Liang^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of International Social and Public Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, United Kingdom*

a. y.liang29@lse.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The Nordic countries, which have the least gender inequality, have introduced parental leave for fathers and mothers since the 1970s. China started to introduce parental leave for both parents in 2021. This essay will explain the two regions' parental leave policies and how their parental leave systems help with gender inequality problems and reduce women's disadvantages in the corporations. Then, the essay will analyse whether China can 'import' the Nordic policy system to reduce the inequality gap and the disadvantages of women in corporations. This essay finds that China could import the longer duration of parental leave policies from the Nordic world so that more time is available for the parents to take care of their children. Also, China could import the reserved fathers' leave system to increase the rate of fathers' participation in child-caring. Nevertheless, there might be barriers from the company level that the companies might not expect the male workers to spend more time at home-caring. Another barrier might be from Confucian culture that there are deep-rooted beliefs of women being the primary career home, which could stop or slow down the development of family policies shifting into a less male-breadwinner model.

Keywords: Social policy, family policy, gender inequality, feminism

1. Introduction

The birth of a child affects women's career life most significantly due to childbearing and the stereotype of a 'women-specific' ideology [1]. Zhang, Hannum and Wang's study in urban China agrees that women in the Chinese labour market are disadvantaged regarding human capital [2]. The gap is concentrated among married women and women who have children. They also suggest that this group of women spend the most time on housework even if they have the same level of human capital as men. From 2002 to 2018, the gender pay gap in urban China increases from 8.5%-17.4% to 13.9%-21.0% [3]. In the same study, Ma indicates that the parenthood wage penalty is the main source of inequality which therefore implies that there might be discrimination against women who are married or become mothers.

While a trade-off exists between fertility and gender inequality, Javornik and Kurowska suggest that parental leave can be seen as opportunity structure with opportunities for equal parental

involvement and income [1]. Parental leave is generally paid leave for both parents to have equal opportunities to take care of their children. In Nordic countries like Sweden, they promote the idea of gender-neutral for this opportunity, and it is considered that parental leave is one of the most effective tools for relieving women from family burden while reducing the gender gap [4,5]. Huang also suggests that getting fathers involved in parental leave could ease the disadvantage of women's employment due to childbearing. In 2021, according to World Economics Forum, 4 of the top 5 gender equality countries are Nordic countries [6]. This might suggest that their weak male breadwinner family policy model, especially the parental leave model might be something that less equal countries like China could learn and import from.

The goal of this study is to explore the following research questions:

What is the current situation of parental leave in the Nordic system and Chinese systems? How effective are they in terms of reducing disadvantages for women in corporations?

What could the Chinese parental leave model learn from the Nordic system?

This essay will firstly analyse how the Nordic world's parental leave deals with gender inequality. Secondly, it will analyse the current parental leave policy system in China. Lastly, the essay will discuss how China could 'import' and 'adopt' the Nordic schemes to improve women's situation in the corporations.

2. Methods

This essay uses a literature-based approach to explore and answer the research questions. Search engines like Google Scholar and ZhiWang are used to find the literature, and keyword searching is the primary method to find the literature that helps answer the research questions above. For example, keywords like "Nordic family policies", "male-breadwinner in China", and "Sweden parental leave" are searched. This essay uses Chinese and English literature to present the arguments to enrich the resources. Apart from academic literature, this essay also draws on government documents and publications to present the policies in each region.

2.1. Framework

The following analysis mainly uses Lorber's concept about gender inequality and feminism to analyse the effectiveness of the parental leave policy system in Nordic and China. This concept is also used for making policy advice in section 4.3.

Feminism is a social movement promoting the idea of equality between men and women. The first wave of feminism aimed to promote and gain equal legal rights for women. This wave of feminism in European countries is more towards getting political rights for women, such as voting rights. In countries that are less liberal like China, this wave is more towards "bourgeois feminism"[7]. This means that women are getting the rights of both being in the roles of mothers and workers. In China, women gain these equal rights after the Chinese communist revolution in 1948 [7].

According to Lorber, gender inequality can take many forms depending on the context. In general terms, gender inequality means one gender, typically women, who are disadvantaged compared to another gender, men, who are in similar situations. For instance, in the context of family and women in the corporations, lower pay in the same workplace, fewer career advancement opportunities and an imbalance amount of housework can be classified as gender inequality. Housework includes taking care of children. As long as the amount of housework time is an imbalance between the wife and the husband, this can be considered as gender inequality even if they spend the same amount of time at work [7]. Lorber also terms one part of feminism as a

reformist, focusing on the unequal division of labour at home and the workplace between men and women.

3. Analysis

3.1. Parental Leave in Nordic Countries

The Nordic world is the pioneer in supporting ‘mothers as earners’ and weakening the male-breadwinner ideology in their family policy systems [4]. Since the end of the 20th century, Nordic countries like Sweden have taken a leading position in encouraging gender balance in family burden [5].

Sweden, one of the Nordic countries, has been recognised as the most gender-equal country on parental leave [5]. In Sweden, parents can have 480 days of paid parental leave for one child. In other words, the total parental leave for one child the parents is 480 days, and so each parent should be entitled to 240 days for one child. In these 240 days, each parent has 90 days reserved for them and cannot be transferred to their partners. For each parent, the first 195 days are based on their salary, and the rest of the 45 days is 180 SEK per day [8]. From these figures, we can see that Sweden has a long duration of parental leave and generous financial support from the government. In Huang’s study, she suggests that nowadays, there are 90% of Swedish fathers taking parental leave [5]. This shows that Swedish parental leave effectively encourages most fathers be involved in child care and closes their gender gap in employment.

In Norway, the parental benefit period is 49 weeks, with 15 weeks reserved for each parent and 100% coverage. Alternatively, parents can take 59 weeks of parental benefit with 80% coverage [9]. In Denmark, parents get 52 weeks of paid parental leave, and the father is entitled to take two weeks’ leave during the first 14 weeks after the child is born. After these 14 weeks, the parents can freely divide the parental leave for the next 32 weeks. They are also allowed to extend their parental leave but with lower allowances [10]. Both countries have a set period of reserved parental leave for fathers, which results in a very high uptake rate of fathers’ parental leave, and this is because of this “use it or lose it” quota system. This leads to close gender inequality as the differences in time spent on child caring between the parents should be smaller after the introduction of mandatory father’s leave according to Lorber’s definition.

However, even though they have a weak male-breadwinner policy system and the least gender inequality gap in the world, the sharable parts of parental leave in these countries are believed to assign to the mothers in most cases [11]. Kleven, Landais and Sogaard’s paper agrees about Danish gender inequality that gender inequality in Denmark nowadays is all about children, and they have evidenced the current existence of the female child penalty in Denmark, which leads to the existence of gender inequality [12].

3.2. Parental Leave in China

Before 2021, there was no official parental leave for fathers in China. Starting from 2021, some provinces in China introduced paid parental leave that both parents are allowed to have 5-10 days each per year when the child is under three years old [13]. This parental leave is not compulsory and mandatory for both parents, which is more of a means of encouraging [14]. The right of child care leave for both parents could encourage the ideology of equal involvement in taking care of children. In particular, increasing the involvement of fatherhood in a family which might reduce the level of gender inequality due to the contrasted time spend in child-caring.

However, according to statistics, only 29% of men take their leave among the 17 countries that provide paid parental leave for fathers [15]. This shows the gap between policy and practice. This means only a few fathers may be taking their leaves in the Chinese context, but there is a lack of

statistics on the actual rate of Chinese men taking leave because the policy on paid leave is relatively recent.

Although the Chinese parental leave policy has the same duration for both fathers and mothers, the total duration in China is much shorter than all Nordic schemes, as discussed in 4.1. Then, could the less extended duration scheme in China make a significant impact on gender inequality that is defined in section 3? In China, grandparents are the primary childcare provider in many families due to the government's lack of formal childcare programmes [16]. This shows that without formal childcare services provided by the government, the parents cannot handle the caring work alone, even with 5-10 days per year per person. So, without the expansion of the formal childcare system, the current duration of parental leave might be far from enough for taking care of young children for working parents. This might lead to one of the parents sacrificing working time and career opportunities to increase home-caring time, especially when the grandparents cannot provide child care. Due to deep-rooted Confucian culture and the revival of folk religion, women always play the role of wives, mothers and the primary carers within a family [17]. So women might still be disadvantaged in corporations even if this parental leave policy is introduced. Therefore, there might be a need to import the more extended duration scheme from the Nordic.

4. Can the Nordic Model Transferred into China?

Due to differences in economic growth and culture, it is difficult to conclude whether the Chinese government could adopt the Nordic model. Therefore, this section will provide further analysis.

4.1. Duration of Parental Leave

A longer leave duration positively correlates with the female labour participation rate and income. In the Nordic world, there is no evidence showing that parental leave for both parents would negatively impact the labour force, unemployment and GDP [18]. However, to support a more prolonged duration of paid parental leave like in Nordic countries and encourage more fathers' involvement, there is a strong need for higher level of government spending on parental benefits. For instance, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration pays parental benefits for Norway's parental leave [19]. A higher level of financial provision with 0 labour input during the leave would increase the government's burden. According to Li and Liu, there is a significant excess of childbearing insurance received by the government, which should be enough funding to support longer paid parental leave in the short term [20]. However, the authors did not suggest for how many years the excess funding could support the longer duration of parental leave.

4.2. Parental Leave and Fathers' Participation Rate

Due to Confucian culture, men often play a breadwinner role in a family which keeps them away or involved less in child-caring as women are believed to have greater responsibility in the homemaker role [5,21]. Qian and Qian also indicate that in urban China, some women do not realise their disappropriate share of housework and female employment does not value as much as men. Therefore, if there is optional parental leave for fathers, it is hard to ensure that the fathers would take up some child-caring work, and so it is hard to improve the situation of female employment further. Halrynjo and Manget have a similar argument that in Norway, without a reserved period of fathers' parental leave, very few fathers take their time off even after a long time of introducing shared parental leave [11]. To encourage fathers to contribute more, Norway introduced reservation parental leave in 1993; the reserved period has increased to 15 weeks, as indicated in 4.1. Therefore in China, to ensure the effectiveness of parental leave, there should be mandatory and non-transferrable fathers' leave like in Sweden, rather than just a means of encouragement.

Nevertheless, research on increasing fathering has indicated that there are barriers to shift families into equality at the company level. Even with mandatory fathers' leave, a study about Sweden's working fathers suggests that the policy would not change much on a company's expectation [15]. In this study, they have evidenced that male workers and fathers are expected to live up to traditional standards of ideal workers meaning that they usually have heavier work and more substantial responsibilities in corporations compared to women. This means that it is actually hard for a father to take leave as the workplace might not encourage them, or their work flexibility does not support the fathers to take the leave. This working culture might also apply to Chinese workplaces. Zhao's study about gender division in Chinese families agrees that the inflexibility of men's work might lead to a higher burden of child care on their wives, which leads to greater gender inequality [22].

Although, this might not be a significant barrier in the long term as there is a successful example of a workplace supporting social policy. Brandth and Kvande's literature suggests that the Norwegian model has worked well in collaboration with workplace and social policy, which Norwegian workplaces can be organised structurally and culturally to promote and support family policies [23]. It is still hard to conclude whether the barrier is difficult to tackle in the Chinese context.

However, a parental leave policy without any other types of support from the government might not be able to make a significant change for women in corporations—for example, the provision of child care services matters. Compared to Nordic child care support, Yu's study indicated that women's perception of work and childcare support from their families are the key factors keeping them in the labourforce [24]. Without these, it is possible that women have to return the homemaker role, especially when institutional child care is private and relatively expensive for most families. Currently, in China, there is a lack of government-provided childcare services to support working parents, and typically, working parents need to receive support from their families for childcare to reduce the motherhood or fatherhood penalty [14]. According to Zhao, the higher income family would have an equal share of child caring time to those with lower income. The author explains this phenomenon that higher income families would have the ability to purchase formal childcare services, which reduces the overall caring time shared between the couples. Therefore, to support the balance share of child-caring time between couples, more state-provided and formal child care services might be required to reduce gender inequality and the motherhood penalty. For instance, there could be child care services like Finland, which is free universal daycare provided for children aged from 8 months old to 7 years old [25]. This would leave more opportunities and time for women to spend on their careers.

4.3. Challenged of Progress

All these further steps innovated from the Nordic system might be able to reduce gender inequality in China and the disadvantages of women in Chinese corporations. However, getting into further stages is not an easy thing. There are also barriers from the older generations, who are the current policymakers, and due to their traditional male breadwinner beliefs, it might be hard to make further reformation. For instance, before 2021, the introduction of parental leave was raised many times for many years by the Women's Organisation in China, and there was no policy change until 2021. This is because the leaders of the policymakers are the older generation and their ideology about the division of labour at home is very traditional, which is far from gender equality. Some of them even refuse the idea that men could play the carer roles at home [20]. Li and Liu gave an example that in 2021, a one-month fathers' parental leave policy was raised by the Shenzhen government [20]. However, the leading party did not approve and published this policy eventually. Therefore, although women's power is greater nowadays in China and more of the younger generation support

fatherhood, there are barriers to going further. Nevertheless, Li and Liu argue that this might not be a great concern in the longer term as the younger generation in China will take their places and support fatherhood [26].

5. Conclusion

Overall, this essay has analysed the Nordic and Chinese parental leave models. The policies in China are still not as supportive of feminism as in the Nordic world, and this essay finds that there are few things the Chinese model could learn from the Nordic.

Firstly, China could extend the duration of parental leave for both sides of parents so that there is more paid time available to take care of the child meaning that women do not need to sacrifice more of their working time. Secondly, China could introduce mandatory fathers' leave to ensure the participation rate of fatherhood. As evidenced by the Nordic, this could increase fatherhood and reduce gender inequality. To support the feminist ideology, the government could provide more formal child care services to reduce the overall caring time needed at home, which might be helpful to balance the caring time shared between the couples.

This essay has also stated some barriers that might slow down or stop the development of a less male-breadwinner ideology. Firms' expectations and support from the workplace matter; if the corporations cannot support fatherhood, it is hard for fathers to take leave even if they are willing to. So, there should be a collaboration between the firms and the states, like in the Norwegian context. When the collaboration is accompanied by supportive policymakers who believe in feminism, there might be a significant positive change in the future.

Parental leave would improve women's average income and participation in the labour market. In conclusion, as we have discussed in previous sections, without extending duration, formal childcare services provision, mandatory fathers' leave and collaboration between the corporations and the state, it might be hard to make significant improvements for Chinese women in corporations. However, as the parental leave introduction is relatively recent, there is a lack of information and data for analysis about the current parental leave policy's impact on Chinese working women. Therefore, further research is needed to make a more convincing conclusion.

References

- [1] Javornik, J., & Kurowska, A. (2017). *Work and care opportunities under different parental leave systems: Gender and class inequalities in Northern Europe*. *Social Policy & Administration*, 51(4), 617-637
- [2] Zhang, Y., Hannum, E., & Wang, M. (2008). *Gender-based employment and income differences in urban China: Considering the contributions of marriage and parenthood*. *Social Forces*, 86(4), 1529-1560
- [3] Ma, X. (2022). *Parenthood and the gender wage gap in urban China*. *Journal of Asian Economics*, 80, 101479
- [4] Windwehr, J., Duvander, A. Z., Ellingsater, A. L., Eydal, G. B., Humer, Z., & Nakazato, H. (2022). *The Nordic Model of Father Quotas in Leave Policies: A Case of Policy Transfer?*. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 29(1), 190-214
- [5] Huang XW (2021) *The Policy Feasibility Analysis of Paid Fatherspecific Parental Leave Policy in China Discussion from the Perspective of Policy Comparison*, *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, volume 189
- [6] World Economic Forum (2021) *Global Gender Gap Report*. Available at <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/in-full/gggr2-benchmarking-gender-gaps-finding-from-the-global-gender-gap-index-2021#1-2-global-results> (accessed 30th March 2021)
- [7] Lorber, J. (2010). *Feminisms and their contributions to gender equality*. *Gender inequality: Feminist theories and politics*, 1-20
- [8] Sweden Sverige (2021) *In Sweden, it's possible to combine career with family life. Here's why*. Available at <https://sweden.se/life/society/work-life-balance> (accessed 1st June 2021)
- [9] European Commission (2022) *Norway - Benefits for pregnancy, birth and adoption*. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1123&intPageId=4704&langId=en>

- [10] Oresunddirekt (2022) Parental leave when working in Denmark. Available at <https://www.oresunddirekt.se/en/working-in-denmark/family-and-parenting/parental-leave-when-working-in-denmark> (accessed 2nd September 2022)
- [11] Halrynjo, S., & Mangset, M. (2022). Parental leave vs. competition for clients: Motherhood penalty in competitive work environments. *Journal of Family Research*
- [12] Kleven, H., Landais, C., & Sogaard, J. E. (2019). Children and gender inequality: Evidence from Denmark. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 11(4), 181-209
- [13] Chinese General Office of the State Council (2019) The General Office of the State Council issuing the opinions on childcare development under 3 years old. Available at http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2019-05/09/content_5389983.htm (accessed 9th May 2019)
- [14] Zheng CY (2022) *Institutional Difficulties and Legal Perfection of the Maternity Leave under the "Three-Child Policy"*, *Shandong Trade Union Tribune*, Vol28, No2
- [15] Linda Haas & C. Philip Hwang (2019) Policy is not enough – the influence of the gendered workplace on fathers' use of parental leave in Sweden, *Community, Work & Family*, 22:1, 58-76
- [16] Ruopeng An, Xiaoling Xiang, Na Xu, and Jing Shen (2020) Influence of Grandparental Child Care on Childhood Obesity: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, *Childhood Obesity*, 16:3, 141-153
- [17] Li J (2004) Gender inequality, family planning, and maternal and child care in a rural Chinese county, *Social Science and Medicine*, Volume 59, Issue 4, Pages 695-708
- [18] Yang F (2021) Parental Leave: Inspiration for China and Practice of Developed countries, *China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House, Population and Health*, Vol. 288
- [19] Tekna (2022) Parental leave in Norway? What should you know? Available at <https://www.tekna.no/en/salary-and-negotiations/employment-law/parental-leave-in-norway--what-you-should-know/> (accessed 27th April 2022)
- [20] Li HY and Liu C (2020) Exploration of the Difficulties in Advocating Parental Leave in China, *Journal of China Women's University*, Mar. 2020, No2
- [21] Qian, Y., Qian, Z. Work, Family, and Gendered Happiness Among Married People in Urban China. *Soc Indic Res* 121, 61–74 (2015)
- [22] Zhao, S. (2020) Gender in Families: A Comparison of the Gendered Division of Child Care in Rural and Urban China. *Child Youth Care Forum* 49, 511–531
- [23] Brandth, B., & Kvande, E. (2019). Workplace support of fathers' parental leave use in Norway. *Community, Work & Family*, 22(1), 43-57
- [24] Yu, Y. (2015). The male breadwinner/female homemaker model and perceived marital stability: A comparison of Chinese wives in the United States and urban China. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 36(1), 34-47
- [25] World Economic Forum (2019) Why Nordic Nations are the best places to have children? Available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/03/nordic-nations-best-places-for-parents-children/> (accessed 15th March 2019)
- [26] Koslowski, A., & O'Brien, M. (2022). *Fathers and Family Leave Policies: What Public Policy Can Do to Support Families. Engaged Fatherhood for Men, Families and Gender Equality*, 141.