

The Deepening of Gender-based Division of Labor under the Three-child Policy

Yuejia Zhu^{1,a,*}

¹University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA

a. yuejia@ucsb.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: As China has accomplished a successful “market transition” over the last four decades, the Chinese government’s fertility policies also continuously change in order to serve productivity needs. After the implementation of the one-child policy for decades, the government issued the two-child policy and the three-child policy in a short period of time. The three-child policy has gained much attention in contemporary Chinese society. Existing literature has made great contributions to analyzing the rationale and effectiveness of the implementation of the policy. However, to date, little attention has been paid to the role conflicts and dilemmas encountered by child-bearing women under the three-child policy. By employing interviews, online posts, and videos from Chinese social media such as weibo and xiaohongshu, and making great use of research results from previous academic papers, the study examines the three ways in which the implementation of the three-child policy has strengthened the gender-based division of labor in today’s China.

Keywords: Three-child policy, Labor division, Female rights, Gender equity, Reproduction

1. Introduction

Having long been influenced by Confucian patriarchal norms, most Chinese women continue to subscribe to the traditional gender-role expectations of bearing many children in contemporary society [1]. The Chinese government’s enactment of fertility policy also provides an encouraging environment for reproductive behaviors. However, as China has transformed from a socialist centralized economy to a profit-oriented market economy, the dual burden of pursuing career success and taking care of the family is imposed on women, which consequently leads to women’s disadvantages in urban labor markets. Simultaneously, the announcement of the three-child policy, which latently delegates women the responsibility of bearing more children, further deepens the traditional gender-based division of labor in patriarchal Chinese families.

This issue has received great scholarly attention. For example, a research report published by the People’s Bank of China examines the importance of reproduction for the economic development of China [2]. Thus, it justifies the reasonableness of the announcement of the three-child policy. However, it lacks comparative data to prove that the decrease in labor would lead to the economic stagnation in Chinese society. The paper also refers to reproduction as the sole responsibility of women and encourages women to bear children compellingly. Another research analyzes the cause of women’s loss of rights from a policy perspective [3]. It points out that the three-child policy has caused women to encounter problems regarding role conflicts within their families and employment

discrimination in job markets. The article concludes that bills such as the Constitution and the Employment Promotion Act lack operability in terms of employment equality, which results in women losing their employment after childbirth. In addition, Song Jian and Zhou Yuxiang examined the counter-effect of women's fertility status on their employment and promotion [4]. It found that women still serve as the main caretaker for children in most Chinese families, which adversely affects their employment since they're less likely to get a promotion or even be employed by enterprises. Lastly, scholars have also particularly analyzed how the three-child policy increases women's dual burden of working and taking care of children as well as its effect on women's family status from a sociological and ideological perspective [5].

Previous studies mostly focus on the obstruction of the implementation of the three-child policy or its repercussion for gender-based job discrimination. However, the question of how women's social status might change under the three-child policy has not received much scholarly attention. To bridge this gap, the present study demonstrates how the enactment of the three-child policy deepens gender-based division of labor. It further explores the causes of the undermining of women's rights both in families and the labor market from an ideological perspective. In this paper, gender-based division of labor refers to the allocation of labor in accordance with gender roles, such as biological traits and traditional gender expectations. The study explores how Chinese society ameliorates the disadvantages brought by the deepening of traditional gender-based division of labor under the three-child policy. It sheds light on the issue of gender equality in China. In addition, the result of the study contributes to the discussion of gender equality issues in China.

2. Methodology

The study employs quantitative review as the main research method. By gathering resources from Chinese social media, including weibo, xiaohongshu, official wechat accounts, and bilibili, the study analyzed videos, posts, and official tweets uploaded by people with various status backgrounds and ages. Specifically, the study examines five videos uploaded by five influencers on bilibili between 2021 and 2022, a few months after the implementation of the three-child policy. Resources provide by three female influencers, and two male influencers are selected to avoid the potentially biased selection of gender. The age of the influencers extends from 20 to 60, which includes those within their reproductive age and those who do not. Because the fertility policy exerts a more direct influence on women than men, the study examines slightly more numbers of videos made by female influencers.

In order to assess the effect of the three-child policy from a realist perspective, the study selects four posts on xiaohongshu in which the uploaders reflect on their confrontation under the three-child policy. It also examines random street interviews in which a reporter from Beijing interviewed four women and two men and asked about their fertility intentions and opinions about the policy. Since the policy has first been proposed at the Beijing Conference, the viewpoints of the Beijing people should be considered valuable.

Besides, the paper analyzes two articles published by government departments and one tweet published by an online feminist club. The study investigates the aim, central claim, and diction of the articles published by the People's Bank of China and CPPCC Daily, and reviews the tweets that provide a comprehensive analysis of Chinese women's low fertility intention.

3. Findings

3.1. Gender-based Employment Discrimination

An independent survey (2009) indicated that 77.6 percent of women interviewed believed that the employment opportunities for men and women are fairly unequal. According to Married Women's Fertility and Its Effect on Their Employment: The Role of Economic Assistance and Care Support,

the probability of women with two children being employed is only 89 percent of that of women with one child [4]. Rejecting female job seekers because of their intended requirement for maternity leave, the unfair dismissal of female workers due to pregnancy, and the attribution of lower value to women's accomplishment was the main cause of women's insecurity in the workplace. Therefore, whether the three-child policy which creates an encouraging environment for reproductive behavior would exacerbate gender-based job discrimination remains essential in terms of changing the traditional well-defined role of Chinese women. The study found that the three-child policy did exert a non-negligible influence on the labor market in that it manipulated the tendency of discriminative employment.

First of all, during the implementation of the three-child policy, more enterprises and corporations incorporated gender factors into their employment decision-making. A short video made by Shenzhen Municipal Health Commission in 2021 presents the situation in which female job seekers are challenged and under-evaluated due to their gender. The video exemplifies the discriminative employment standard adopted by enterprises that reject to employ most female workers of childbearing age. The post titled "The Job-Hunting Dilemma of Married Women" on xiaohongshu specifically pointed out the discriminative questions provided for female job seekers. During the interview, almost all HR will detailly explore the female job seekers' fertility condition or reproductive plan to have a second or third child. However, married women of reproductive age are as highly likely to be declined or marginalized in the labor market as those with more than one child because enterprises are concerned for intended pregnancy and increasing family responsibilities relegated to women with children. In comparison, male jobseekers are rarely asked about their fertility plan or capability of balancing family and work. Instead, their interview questions are closely related to professional skills or career plans.

In addition, the discriminative treatment of male and female employees in the workplace further contributes to Chinese women's economic insecurity. A piece of hit news in 2021 regarding the illegal dismissal of a pregnant female worker in Guiyang demonstrates how pregnant women are forced to return home and be confined in the domestic sphere. However, many female employees are at risk of taking maternity leave. The enactment of the three-child policy has caused some families to have another child. Therefore, a significantly higher percentage of women will give up their careers for childbirth than men. Women are more likely than men to lose their source of income, which is also known as the "motherhood penalty." Even though the law explicitly prohibited gender discrimination, enterprises would set underlying barriers for women who hope to be re-employed after giving birth to a second or a third child. As a result, some of these women have to return home and take on the role of householders.

Unfortunately, women who encountered gender discrimination both during job interviews and in the workplace often chose to be silent and compromise. Since the traditional stereotype of women being the main caretaker of their families persists in Chinese patriarchal society, gender-based employment discrimination and its corresponding repercussion would strengthen the traditional notion. In the traditional sense, "men are turned towards society, women devote themselves to their family" [1]. The internalization of masculine domination disempowers Chinese women from an ideological perspective and leads to further reinforcement of gender roles.

3.2. Reproductive Pressure from Individual Families

Since women sometimes have to take on more responsibility during childbirth due to their inborn biological traits, they are automatically rendered the role of a child bearer and the main caregiver of their children. Historically, however, women's reproductive rights were controlled by men who used it as a tool to construct the family's lineage structure. After the enactment of the Reform and Opening policy over the last four decades, the Chinese government has encountered an irresolvable dilemma

with regard to women's reproductive autonomy. The traditional gendered role of women to take on the "sacred" responsibility of bearing children is still entrenched in Chinese people's minds. Although a considerable amount of research and scholars articulated the necessity of the implementation of the three-child policy, little attention has been paid to women's maintaining of reproductive autonomy in a fertility-friendly environment and the deepening of gender-based division of labor in public and private spheres. Since the childbearing process is time-consuming and consequently has an adverse impact on women's career, economic status, and marital power, whether the three-child policy contributes to women's confinement in the domestic sphere is essential for preserving women's reproductive autonomy and other inherent rights.

Based on the result from previous research, the study found that there is a great possibility that women's traditional responsibility of carrying on the family line is further strengthened under the three-child policy. Miller and his colleagues' model of fertility motivation and behavior shows the role of significant others in influencing women's reproductive decisions [6]. In 2021, A Chinese influencer posted a video on xiaohongshu in which she reflected on her own experience of being compellingly persuaded by her mother to get married and have a child. She recalled that some of her relatives and friends even expressed their shame about her bachelordom. In 2022, the notorious news regarding a Chinese woman in Feng County being forced to give birth to eight children received international attention. The eight-child mother incident, which is a case of human trafficking, sexual mistreatment, and reproductive coercion, reveals the fact that in a patriarchal family system it is of greater possible for men to exert a decisive influence on women's fertility intention. They often imposed pressure on women's reproductive decisions by using their family power or even by force. Admittedly, masculine manipulation in women's childbearing process has been a historical problem. Having long been influenced by unequal power relations in the family system and the traditional reproductive notion of "Duo Zi Duo Sun," husbands and their family members are more likely to play a dominant role in fertility decision-making. In particular, women who possess lower marital power are distinctively susceptible to spousal influence because lower marital power discourages them from negotiating with their husbands and translating their fertility intentions into actual outcomes [7]. In a patriarchal society, traditional notions of reproduction would endanger women in that it naturalizes their reproduction and commercializes their bodies. Therefore, the announcement of the three-child policy has a latent flaw of depriving women of public identity and undermining women's reproductive rights. Although there is little direct evidence to prove that the three-child policy would inevitably lead to the deepening of gender-based division of labor, it did increase the risk of evaluating women based on their marital and reproductive status or even delegating them to reproductive machines.

3.3. Official Propaganda of the Three-child Policy

According to Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and State*, the full emancipation of women can only be realized through participating in social production and liberating themselves from the patriarchal family system [8]. In post-reform China, although the Chinese Communist Party enacted effective policies that encourage women to find jobs and alleviate their household burdens, the state deliberately retained patriarchal ideology and gender-based division of labor in the family system for the purpose of serving production needs [9]. During this period, families served as economic units of socialist construction, which resulted in the interweaving of the private and public spheres. Song's theory of "private embedded in the public sphere" and Hershtatter's idea of "invisible household labor" inferred how family systems are incorporated into the public sphere, with social production given the highest priority [10,11]. In such social contexts, the official propaganda of sacrificing private benefits for socialist construction seems to become inevitable. Under the three-child policy and with the government's propaganda, women have made impressive strides in choosing

between either “return to home” or “balancing family duties and jobs.” Nonetheless, women are more likely than men to become the victims of such propaganda due to the gendered roles of expectations. Under the three-child policy, many government officials overly emphasize the Chinese traditional reproductive notion. In many interview reports or national journals, it is declared that getting married at an early age and bearing multiple children are the mainstream of Chinese reproductive culture. Couples who do not want children are also criticized as being misled by “perverted values of reproduction.” To create an inspiring fertility environment, a video titled “I Supported the Three-child Policy” was uploaded on Father’s Day to elaborate on the feasibility and benefits of the three-child policy. The video reveals the government’s manipulation of the press to exclusively report the advantageous outcome of having a third child while omitting the dilemma and predicament caused by reproduction.

Moreover, some government officials even attribute the low fertility intention in China to the misguidance of “western values of reproduction,” asserting that most college students are misdirected by the western culture of individualism. Likewise, the PBC Working Paper appealed to the government to enact a universal policy of reproduction and called on women of childbearing age to give birth to as many children as possible. These examples demonstrate how the state’s propaganda uses the ideology of gender-based division of labor to mobilize women’s sacrifice for socialist construction and underscore the reasonableness of the three-child policy from a misogynist perspective.

In conclusion, the propaganda of the three-child policy appears in various forms, ranging from tweets on official wechat accounts to interview reports included in academic papers. However, it is connotated in the diction of the propaganda that bearing children and recognizing domestic identity are women’s priorities, while women’s sufferings and disadvantages brought by reproduction, such as motherhood penalty, health problems, and lack of personal freedom, are rarely mentioned. Similarly, men’s domestic duties of sharing household labor and the collaborative roles of taking care of children are often neglected, which leads to the deepening of gender-based division of labor. Accordingly, men belong to the public sphere while women are confined to the private sphere. Inspired by the excessive propaganda of the three-child policy, women’s traditional role of the birth giver and main caretaker of the family is inexorably reinforced. Chinese women continue to be subscribed to traditional gendered roles of expectations. These roles indoctrinate them with the responsibility of passing on the family lineage and sacrificing their public identity for household duties.

4. Suggestions

To protect the lawful rights of female workers, the state should improve the anti-discrimination law and establish related labor arbitration institutions. For instance, laws and regulations should be in place to restrict HR from enquiring about women’s marital and reproductive status during job interviews. Labor protection departments can be set up to provide free consultation and vocational training for women who want to participate in labor markets after reproduction. Moreover, the ineffectiveness of the current supervision system has led to enterprises’ non-compliance with labor law. Thus, women’s federations and labor unions should strengthen their force of supervision. They can establish a punishment system to sanction the mistreatment of female workers and award organizations and individuals that made notable achievements in protecting women’s rights and interests. Many women compromise to gender discrimination in the job market partially due to their lack of legal knowledge. The state can enforce the dissemination of legal knowledge regarding how to seek legal assistance when individual rights are violated.

With regard to childbirth, most women faced the dilemma of balancing careers and family. At present, the absence of Chinese men in family childcare made more people realize that childcare is

not only the responsibility of women. Certain policies, such as the requirement of men to take maternity leave, should be made in order to give play to the role of men in the family and reduce the pressure on women after childbirth. In addition, the state should establish and improve the maternity leave system for employees and ensure that male employees enjoy the right to take leave during their pregnancy. For example, the maternal leave for men could be extended to more than 15 days given that the current system only allows men to ask for seven to fifteen days' leave.

5. Conclusion

The three-child policy has been implemented in 2021 in China. The policy is aimed at alleviating the population problems in contemporary China. However, the policy has the latent risk of deteriorating gender equality in China. The implementation of the three-child policy leads to the deepening of the gendered division of labor through gender-based employment discrimination, women's fertility pressure from families, and excessive government propaganda. These three factors triggered stereotypes of women as the main caretakers of children and supporters of household labor.

In labor markets, gender-based employment discrimination is largely caused by the contradiction between women's maternity leave and enterprises' pursuit of operational efficiency. Most enterprises enquire about the fertility intention of female job seekers during job interviews. Regardless of their marital and reproductive status, female workers encountered different levels of discrimination. Women who have more than one child are most vulnerable to gender discrimination. Married women who do not have reproductive intentions or have no children are preferred over those who have only one child. As the result, childbirth can easily become the "invisible ceiling" that restricts women's career development.

In addition, due to traditional gender norms, women are still expected to take the role of bearing children and handling the bulk of household tasks. Nevertheless, in the context of socialist construction, women's domestic contributions are often devalued by society compared to men's participation in the labor market. The economic domination of men deprived women of the bargaining power in domestic spheres. Consequently, encouraged by the three-child policy, some Chinese men attempt to manipulate women's fertility intentions using their dominant position or by force. The decline of women's reproductive rights should be considered as one of the side effects of the three-child policy.

On the political theme, the excessive propaganda of the three-child policy directs the tendency of female reproduction. The Chinese government primarily relies on the press to propagandize the policy, justifying women's sacrifice of reproductive autonomy for collective efforts of combating the population problems. Moreover, the official articles and interview reports published by government departments also connotatively assign women the priority task of reproduction while neglecting men's role of sharing household labor and other domestic duties. The gender-based distribution of reproductive tasks and domestic burden implied by the official propaganda deepens the traditional division of labor in contemporary Chinese society.

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