

Occupational Stress and Women's Fertility Intentions: The Dilemma and Outlet of Work-family Balance

Sun Zhiyi^{1,a,*}

¹*Institute of Political Science and Law, University of Jinan, Jinan, China*

^a*szy10080918@163.com*

^{*}*Corresponding author*

Keywords: Occupational stress, fertility intentions, parenting support

Abstract: Economic development has prompted more and more women to enter the workplace and take on important responsibilities. On this basis, both work and family place extremely high demands on women, which also leads to conflicts in the allocation of time and energy. This paper analyzes a series of dilemmas faced by women and offers some suggestions to alleviate the conflicts and increase the willingness to have children.

1. Introduction

Driven by globalization and modern economic development, women's participation in the labour force has continued to rise in all parts of the world, especially in cities. Along with the process of urbanization and the profound changes in economic structure, women have made remarkable progress in their careers, but at the same time, the dual pressures of career development and family life are increasingly becoming real challenges that they must face. In today's highly competitive workplace environment, women often have to make difficult trade-offs between career and family, and this choice directly affects their willingness to have children. In recent years, with the transformation of China's economic and social structure, fertility decisions have become more complicated, and fertility intentions have shown a continuous downward trend. China faces the dual challenges of declining fertility and an aging population, which has prompted the government to introduce a series of measures to encourage childbearing, including the comprehensive three-child policy, in a bid to alleviate demographic pressure. However, despite the gradual relaxation of policy restrictions, women's fertility intentions have not rebounded as significantly as expected. Factors such as occupational pressure, job uncertainty, gender discrimination in the workplace, and the lack of effective family and social support have become important variables affecting modern women's fertility decision-making, especially for working women, how to find a balance between career development and family responsibilities has become the core issue affecting their fertility intentions^[1].

The purpose of this study is to deeply analyze the dilemmas faced by professional women in work-family balance and the deep-seated reasons behind them. First, by exploring the impact of occupational pressure on women's fertility decisions, this paper aims to enrich existing research and further reveal the complexity of women's fertility intentions in the modern workplace environment. With the intensification of competition in the workplace, women not only need to face traditional childcare responsibilities, but also need to cope with tremendous pressure from career development,

and in such an environment, their concerns about childbearing are increasingly deepened. Secondly, this paper hopes to provide practical policy suggestions for the government and enterprises to help alleviate the multiple pressures faced by working women. For example, the government and enterprises can optimize the working environment, implement a more flexible work schedule, and provide better childcare support services to reduce women's pressure in the workplace, thereby increasing their willingness to give birth and improving their motivation and efficiency in the workplace^[2]. In addition, the significance of this study is to promote the further realization of gender equality in society. In today's society, women still face many practical barriers and cultural biases in reconciling their dual roles in the workplace and family. Therefore, by advocating the implementation of work-family balance policies, the government and enterprises can create a fairer workplace environment for women and encourage greater equality between men and women in the sharing of family responsibilities. This will not only help reduce women's psychological burden and occupational pressure, but also promote social recognition of women's dual contribution in the workplace and at home, thereby laying the foundation for the realization of gender equality.

2. The dilemma of work-family balance

The tension between parenting responsibilities and workplace expectations : The role of mothers in the family usually requires them to take on most of the childcare responsibilities, both in terms of day-to-day care and educational development. Particularly in societies with strong traditional attitudes, mothers are expected to play a central role in childcare. In practice, this division of responsibility usually means that women need to devote a great deal of time and energy to everything from infant and toddler care to school activities. However, this role is in clear conflict with the high expectations and demands of the workplace. The modern workplace often requires employees to work long hours, handle high-intensity tasks, and stay on top of their work at all times, especially in highly competitive career fields where women's career advancement and promotion require them to put in as much or even more effort than men. As a result, working women find it difficult to balance their childcare responsibilities with their workplace expectations and often face conflicting dilemmas, which not only affects their quality of life, but also undermines their willingness to have children^[3]. Conflict between career development and timing of childbirth: Professional women's promotion and development in the workplace often conflict with the timing of childbirth. Due to the highly competitive nature of the workplace, women may fear that pregnancy or childbearing at a critical stage of their career will affect their career development, such as missing out on promotions, being excluded from important projects, or being subjected to implicit discrimination. This conflict between career advancement and the timing of childbearing has led many women to delay childbearing or reduce their desire to have children so as not to jeopardize their career prospects.

Psychological pressure caused by work-family role conflict: Working women face not only external work-family conflicts, but also internal psychological pressure. They often struggle between social role expectations and self-realization, wanting to be successful in the workplace, but also wanting to play the role of mother and wife in the family. The psychological burden brought about by this role conflict may lead to long-term anxiety, depression and other psychological problems, further affecting their willingness to have children. Gender Unequal Sharing of Workplace and Family Responsibilities: Despite the increasing involvement of men in childcare, in many families, women still bear the majority of household responsibilities and childcare tasks, with limited participation by men. This pattern of unequal gender sharing of responsibilities prevents women from receiving adequate support when facing career pressures, increases their burden between work and family, and weakens their motivation to have children^[4]. Lack of support systems: The lack of family and social support systems is another important reason for the difficulties women face in balancing work and

family^[5]. In many families, the lack of help from elders or other family members leaves mothers to shoulder almost all the childcare responsibilities. The accessibility and quality of support systems at the social level, such as childcare services and early education institutions, also have a direct impact on women's ability to successfully balance work and family. Many working women face challenges in choosing childcare services due to the high cost of childcare, uneven distribution of resources, and varying quality of services. In addition, there is often a mismatch between the schedules of childcare providers and the working hours of the workplace, leaving women exhausted between picking up and dropping off their children and engaging in work. These realities exacerbate the dual pressures on women at home and in the workplace, making them more hesitant to make reproductive choices.

Influence of cultural and social expectations: Traditional socio-cultural expectations of women's family roles exacerbate the inherent conflict between women's careers and their families. Many societies still maintain the traditional concept of gender division of labor, believing that women should take on more family responsibilities, especially childcare and housework. Under such cultural expectations, women who focus on career development are often seen as neglecting their family roles, and are thus subject to social and family pressures. The influence of such socio-cultural values is not only present within the family, but is also reflected in the workplace environment. In the workplace, women who need to take care of their families may be perceived as not being able to devote themselves fully to their work, thus affecting their career development prospects. This combination of internal and external pressures puts women in a deeper dilemma in their reproductive decision-making, with a desire to pursue professional success and a fear of not being able to fulfill culturally expected family responsibilities.

3. Policies and paths to promote work-family balance

Flexible working and telecommuting: Flexible working and telecommuting is one of the effective measures to alleviate women's professional stress and improve work-family balance. Flexible working allows employees to arrange their working hours flexibly according to their personal needs and family responsibilities, enabling women to better manage the dual demands of childcare tasks and career development. Especially for women with small children, flexible work arrangements can help them juggle family responsibilities without sacrificing career development. And telecommuting, an emerging work model that was widely used, especially during the epidemic, also offers women more flexibility. Telecommuting eliminates the need for women to commute daily and reduces time conflicts between work and family life, allowing them to manage work and childcare responsibilities more efficiently from home. Therefore, promoting the popularization of flexible working and telecommuting will help to alleviate the work pressure of working women and enhance their willingness to have children.

Improvements in parental leave policies: The improvement of parental leave policies is an important measure to promote women's willingness to have children. Currently, many countries have introduced statutory maternity leave policies, but they tend to target women only, while parental leave for men is relatively short or not clearly defined. This disproportionately concentrates childcare responsibilities on women, further exacerbating their work-family conflicts. Improving parental leave policies, particularly by promoting shared parental leave between men and women, not only reduces the pressure on women to provide childcare, but also promotes more equal sharing of responsibilities within the family. Research shows that when men are more involved in childcare, women's stress in the workplace is significantly reduced and their willingness to have children increases. Therefore, the policy of extending parental leave and introducing shared parental leave for both men and women will have a positive effect on reducing women's burden of childcare and increasing the fertility rate.

Childcare support: Childcare support provided by governments and businesses is essential to

promote work-family balance. High-quality and affordable childcare services can help working women free themselves from the heavy burden of childcare responsibilities and reduce their concern that they will not be able to devote themselves fully to the workplace due to childcare. Enterprises can reduce the burden on women in the workplace by providing in-house childcare facilities and subsidizing childcare for their employees, thereby increasing their work efficiency and willingness to give birth. In addition, the government should continue to invest in childcare services, including strengthening the supervision of childcare organizations to ensure their service quality and rationally allocating childcare resources, especially in areas with a high concentration of women in the workplace, so as to provide more convenient childcare options. The improvement of childcare services can effectively ease women's family responsibilities and make the balance between work and family more manageable. Elimination of gender discrimination in the workplace: Gender discrimination in the workplace is an important obstacle to women's career development and a key factor in reducing their willingness to have children. Many women face the “glass ceiling” phenomenon after giving birth, with fewer opportunities for promotion in the workplace, slower salary increases and even implicit or explicit gender discrimination. This inequality in career development puts greater pressure on women to weigh their careers against childbirth. Therefore, measures to eliminate gender discrimination in the workplace are crucial. The government and enterprises need to reduce gender discrimination by strengthening legislation, implementing fairer workplace policies and promoting cultural change. For example, enterprises can set up anti-gender discrimination policies, establish transparent promotion mechanisms and provide childcare support facilities to help women receive equal treatment in the workplace. In addition, encouraging men to be more involved in childcare responsibilities can also reduce the traditional social perception that women “must take on more family responsibilities” and further alleviate gender inequality in the workplace. Through these measures, women will be able to make a balanced choice between career development and family reproduction with greater ease.

4. Research Conclusion

Through a comprehensive analysis of existing research and social reality, this paper summarizes the specific dilemmas faced by women in work-family balance and their impact on fertility intentions, and ultimately puts forward a series of policy recommendations. The purpose is to effectively reduce occupational pressure, increase women's fertility intentions, and promote gender equality and work-family balance, so as to help women better balance their dual roles in the workplace and at home.

References

- [1] Begall K, Mills M. *The Impact of Subjective Work Control, Job Strain and Work-Family Conflict on Fertility Intentions: a European Comparison*[J].*European Journal of Population / Revue européenne de Démographie*, 2011, 27(4): 433-456.
- [2] Clémentine Rossier, Bernardi L. *Social Interaction Effects on Fertility: Intentions and Behaviors*[J].*European Journal Of Population*, 2009, 25(4):467-485.
- [3] Fu Zhengxin, Yang Xiaojun, Kang Chuankun. *Promotion or childbearing - the impact of career development on women's fertility* [J]. *Journal of Shanxi University of Finance and Economics*, 2024, 46(10):14-27.
- [4] Livia Sz. Oláh. *Gendering fertility: Second births in Sweden and Hungary*[J].*Population Research & Policy Review*, 2003, 22(2):171-200.
- [5] Zhang Xiaoqian, Song Jian. *The effect of work-family conflict on women's willingness to have another child and the role of family childcare support*[J]. *China Population Science*, 2024, 38(03):81-97.