

# The Three-child Policy and Chinese Women: Career Development and Family Responsibility Choice under Patriarchal Culture

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### Abstract:

The impact of China's three-child policy on women's career development and family responsibilities is explored in this article. Research findings indicate that in a society deeply rooted in patriarchal culture, Chinese women face workplace discrimination and reduced career opportunities due to childbirth while pursuing their professional development. By comparing the professional and family roles of women in regions with profound patriarchal influence and economically developed culturally open areas, the article reveals the impact of regional cultural differences on women's career development. The research results show that women in economically developed areas have more opportunities and support for career development, whereas women in regions deeply influenced by Confucian culture are more constrained by traditional gender roles and family responsibilities. The novelty of this study is that it demonstrates that marital equality and family support significantly influence women's career and family responsibilities, a factor that has been overlooked in previous research. Based on these findings, the article proposes a series of policy recommendations aimed at promoting gender equality and supporting women's dual roles in both career and family life, providing empirical research foundations for government departments and academia.

**Keywords:** Three-child policy, patriarchal culture, women's career, work-family conflict

## 1. Introduction

From 2015 when China began to fully implement the

two-child policy to 2021 with the gradual introduction of the three-child policy, women's survival and development in the workplace have always been a

focal point of social concern. To optimize China's population structure, the choices and well-being of each family regarding childbirth from the two-child to the three-child policy are key points of concern for both academia and government departments. As a result, ensuring the economic conditions and social status of women as the main subjects of childbirth and owners of their dominant rights is an important condition for encouraging women of child-bearing age to have a second or even third child. However, despite the improvement in participation and status of Chinese women in the workplace, they still face numerous challenges, such as age discrimination in marriage and childbirth, and unequal promotion opportunities. Previous research has comprehensively analyzed the workplace difficulties of women under the current system in China, as well as the multifaceted impacts of childbirth on women, such as Li Huifen's research, which indicates that the employment ecology of women based on gender in the labor market remains an area that needs improvement in China. [1] Beyond the institutional level, analyzing the choices women make between career development and family responsibilities, introducing patriarchal culture—a deeply rooted cultural background in Chinese society—is a new area of research. Chieko Ueno defines patriarchy as “a system that distributes power to older males,” which aims at human reproduction and uses sexual domination as a means, covering every family in society. This system not only oppresses women within the family but also creates inequalities for women in the workplace at the societal level. [2] Patriarchal culture, as a social cultural phenomenon, has long shaped traditional expectations and role definitions for women. In China, this culture not only influences gender division within the family but also profoundly affects women's labor participation rates and career advancement opportunities. The concept of “maternal punishment” refers to the adverse treatment women face in the workplace due to their maternal role, including reduced career development opportunities and lower income. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in China because traditional patriarchal culture often expects women to take on more family and childcare responsibilities. The implementation of the three-child policy undoubtedly exacerbates this pressure, making the choices women face between career development and family responsibilities even more difficult. [3] China's women's labor participation rate has decreased by 1.2 percentage points since the implementation of the three-child policy in 2021, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China. [4] A survey by the China Women's Development Foundation shows that after the implementation of the three-child policy, women have experienced increased discrimination during job hunting, with about

40% of women reporting feeling gender discrimination when job hunting. [5]

Career advancement and women's leadership are two key issues in the field of management. The implementation of the three-child policy undoubtedly imposes more reproductive pressure on women, which not only restricts their time and energy in the workplace but also affects their career advancement opportunities. Research indicates that women face a “glass ceiling” phenomenon in their career advancement, where invisible barriers hinder their promotion to senior management positions. At the same time, there are differences between women and men in decision-making styles, team management, and innovation capabilities, which can lead to team leaps and vitality, but these differences are frequently underestimated or overlooked in patriarchal cultures. [6] Furthermore, the three-child policy also restricts the development of women's leadership because they need to find a balance between traditional gender roles and modern professional demands. This article will explore the choices Chinese women make between career development and family responsibilities under the three-child policy from a management perspective, combining the influence of patriarchal culture. We'll look at how women navigate their social lives and workplaces under the three-child policy, as well as the influence of patriarchal culture. In terms of research methodology, we adopt a comparative interview approach focusing on the professional and family roles of Chinese women under the three-child policy, particularly comparing regions with deep-rooted Confucian patriarchal culture with economically developed areas, addressing the lack of multidimensional analysis of the impact of the three-child policy in existing literature. Finally, this article will propose policy recommendations aimed at promoting gender equality and supporting women's dual roles in both career and family.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Gender equality and cultural norms

In academia, numerous researchers have delved into the impact of gender roles and patriarchal culture on women's career development. Gender theory provides a crucial analytical tool for this purpose, which is profoundly significant for formulating social policies that promote gender equality and women's mental health. Castro, Y., & Gordon, K. H. (2012) noted in their research that gender roles and patriarchal culture have a significant impact on women's mental health and career development, especially under multiple role pressures. In the context of the three-child policy, women not only bear the primary responsibility of childcare but also need to adapt to a highly

competitive workplace environment, which undoubtedly exacerbates the burden on women. [7]Bierema pointed out in his 1998 study that due to traditional norms, values, and assumptions often modeled after male career development, women struggle to find their place within these frameworks, thereby affecting their careers. [8]Ozaki and Otis's research further reveals the profound influence of Confucian teachings on the submissive role of women in Asian culture and indicates that this patriarchal culture has a significant impact on gender equality and women's status in the workplace and their responsibility for family responsibilities. [9]

Based on these studies, gender theory provides a theoretical framework for analyzing gender inequality and the "work-family" conflict experienced by working women, emphasizing the necessity of a gender perspective in social policy development and asserting that social policies are key measures to achieve gender equality.

## 2.2 Enhancement of women's subject consciousness and workplace leadership

The new liberal feminist critique theory of Nancy Fraser and Catherine Rottenberg argues that in the development process of neoliberal capitalism, women work "freely" but do not receive their due labor income, leading to a new feminist variant known as — "neoliberal feminism" rapidly replacing mainstream liberal feminism. This provides new policy-making directions for environmental protection in China's female workforce. Against the backdrop of China's three-child policy, China has formulated multiple policies to incorporate gender diversity in management into its long-term development strategy, including setting mandatory quotas for female executives in state-owned listed companies at appropriate times. These measures highlight the critical role of female leadership in business decision-making, organizational development, and social progress. Deloitte China proposes the butterfly effect of female leadership, emphasizing the positive impact of female leaders on organizations and society. The empathy and personal experiences of female leaders contribute to better business decisions, enhancing company performance and market recognition. In the context of China's three-child policy, the enhancement of female leadership is not only a necessity for economic development but also an embodiment of the awakening of women's subjectivity. In China, gender equality is positively correlated with financial performance and market performance, and the empathy and personal experiences of female leaders help companies make better business decisions, effectively improving company performance and market recognition. The improvement of [10] female leadership is not only a

necessity for economic development but also an embodiment of the awakening of women's subjectivity, with the increase in female leaders contributing to social progress and gender equality. [11]

Neoliberal feminist critical theory, while providing a framework for critiquing capitalism and patriarchy, may fail to adequately consider the specific experiences and needs of women in different cultural and social contexts, as well as how to achieve gender equality in these diverse contexts. Furthermore, the theory may overemphasize market and individualism while neglecting the crucial role of social structures and public policies in achieving gender equality.

## 2.3 The role of the female network

Social capital theory emphasizes the importance of social network resources and support for individual career development. In China, the development of women's networks is of great significance to their career advancement, especially under the three-child policy. Women's networks provide resources and information for career development while enhancing connections and support among women. Ibarra, H. (1997) found that women need to connect with other women's networks to advance to executive levels, and these networks offer more information and choices compared to when they do not have a network. [12] Yang Ying (2002) proposed that women employees account for 61% of the total workforce, and female partners account for over 30%, indicating the significant importance of women's networks for career development. [13]Mavin, S., & Bryans, P. (2002) studied the experiences of women in academia in the UK and found that networks are crucial for women's career development. This study also suggests that women's networks are not only important for women's career development but also play a significant role in women's lifelong planning and social role shaping. [14] Furthermore, corporate management has recognized the importance of developing women's networks for attracting and retaining female employees. Deloitte Risk Consulting launched the Women In Cyber (WIC) project aimed at helping female employees address career challenges and increasing awareness among women in cybersecurity. [15] Under China's three-child policy, the importance of social capital theory for women's career development is based on its emphasis on the importance of women's networks in providing resources, information support, and career development opportunities. By establishing and utilizing these networks Chinese women can better balance work and family responsibilities enhance their professional status and strive for more equality and opportunities within patriarchal culture.

## 2.4 Diversified career development of Chinese women

The theory of intersecting genders emphasizes the intersectionality of different social identities, urging us to deeply recognize the career development barriers faced by Chinese women under the three-child policy. These barriers not only stem from traditional gender role divisions but are also closely related to the policy environment and social culture. To overcome these barriers, it is necessary to achieve this through diversified career paths and policy support. [16]

Research shows that supportive organizational culture and effective training programs are key facilitators of career development for Chinese female university graduates in terms of career planning, assistance, and employment advancement. This indicates that to help women find a balance between their careers and families, businesses and society should prioritize the diverse needs of female employees and provide career planning and transition support. [17] These studies further highlight the need for China to promote policies that drive diversified career development, offering women a variety of career paths and flexible work arrangements to address career advancement barriers under the three-child policy.

Furthermore, human capital theory emphasizes the importance of education and training for enhancing individual career development, while career development theory focuses on how individuals achieve their career goals through different career stages. Under the dual influence of the three-child policy and patriarchal culture, Chinese women require more support to achieve career development, which includes educational opportunities, vocational training, and balancing work and family responsibilities. To promote gender equality and career development, it is necessary to adopt diversified career development policies that provide a variety of career paths and flexible work arrangements to support women in finding balance between their careers and families. [18]

Gender crossover theory, while providing a multidimensional analytical framework, may overlook the dynamism of cultural norms over time and individual adaptability and resistance in different cultural contexts. This theory may not adequately consider the impact of individual differences and personal choices on women's leadership development, as well as the variations in women's leadership performance across different cultural backgrounds.

In summary, although the above research has comprehensively explored the impact of gender roles and patriarchal culture on women's career development, it lacks a multidimensional analysis of cultural norms, such as insufficient in-depth analysis of how cultural norms specifically

affect women's career development at different social levels (such as education, family, workplace). Additionally, in terms of cultural penetration, while some studies have pointed out the influence of Confucian teachings on the submissive role of women in Asian culture, there is still insufficient in-depth exploration of how Confucian culture continues to influence women's roles and career development through channels such as family and education in modern society. In practical application, although theories emphasize the importance of diverse career paths, there is a lack of empirical research on specific career path choices for Chinese women under the three-child policy, particularly insufficient analysis of the impact of intersecting social identities. In theory, there is less applied and empirical research on the theories of Nancy Fraser and Catherine Rottenberg in the Chinese context, necessitating more studies that integrate Chinese national conditions to explore the impact of neoliberal feminism on the Chinese female labor market.

Based on these gaps, interdisciplinary research can be strengthened through the application of research methods from sociology, management, economics, and other disciplines to deeply analyze the multi-dimensional impact of cultural norms on women's career development in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding. More empirical studies on the impact of the three-child policy on women's career development, as well as analyses on how the policy can more effectively promote gender equality, should be conducted in conjunction with gender theory.

## 3. Method

This study employs comparative analysis method and interview methods, comparing data and actual cases as well as through dialogue interviews to investigate the career development and family responsibility choices of women in regions with profound influence of Confucian culture (such as Shandong, Fujian, and rural areas) versus economically developed and culturally advanced regions (such as Shanghai, Shenzhen), under the three-child policy, to reveal the impact of patriarchal culture on women's employment and career choices in different cultural contexts.

In China, the establishment of patriarchy is closely linked to Confucian culture. Confucian culture emphasizes the division of labor in the family where "men manage external affairs and women manage internal affairs," a model that has long dominated Chinese history and sets clear expectations and assumptions about the roles and status of women. Patriarchal culture is characterized by male centrism, which has long shaped a passive, dependent, and weak feminine image. This cultural system has had a pro-

found impact in rural areas, Shandong, Fujian, and other regions where traditional culture is deeply rooted, setting clear expectations and assumptions about the roles and status of women. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze how women from different cultural backgrounds balance their career development and family responsibilities under the context of the three-child policy, and whether regions with a strong influence of Confucian culture have imposed deeper pressures on women adopting the three-child policy.

According to data comparison and literature investigation, these impacts can be divided into two aspects: economic education and cultural policies. In terms of the economy, Niu Lijuan (2017) found in her research that taking Shenzhen as an example, economically developed cities with higher levels of economic development provide more job opportunities and career development prospects for women. [19] The development of the digital economy brings new opportunities for the employment quality of women with three children, thereby improving their employment quality. [20] While Shandong, Fujian, and rural areas have relatively lower levels of economic development and limited employment opportunities, traditional cultural constraints limit women's career prospects and professional development, and women face unequal access to education with educational resources significantly favoring males. [21]

In terms of culture, regions with strong patriarchal cultures exhibit significant occupational barriers and implicit discrimination. Since the Chinese government relaxed the two-child policy in 2015, urban women have faced more difficulties in promotion and increased implicit employment discrimination, further increasing the risk of occupational barriers. These issues may be even more severe in areas heavily influenced by patriarchal culture. [22] Research on rural women's human resource development indicates that rural women face bottlenecks in human resource capacity building, which limits their career development. Patriarchal culture also potentially constrains women's career choices and development. The constraints imposed by traditional thoughts and family values are more pronounced in regions with strong patriarchal cultures, where women often bear more family responsibilities, limiting their opportunities for career advancement. According to World Bank data, women's participation rate in the labor force decreased from 57% in 1990 to 55% in 2012, but in some low-income countries, the participation rate is close to 90%, reflecting employment necessity and living conditions rather than choice and opportunity. This suggests that in economically underdeveloped and culturally conservative regions, women may be more forced to participate in labor, often in low-paying and low-status

jobs. [23] Analysis shows that in high-level management positions, companies in economically developed regions place greater emphasis on cultivating and utilizing female leadership, leading to an increasing proportion of women in senior leadership roles. In Shandong, Fujian, and rural areas, the cultivation and utilization of female leadership in corporate practices are insufficient, resulting in a lower proportion of women in senior leadership positions. [24] Longitudinal studies on the impact of childbirth on women's career development have shown that women who have had one child have higher rates of career advancement compared to those with two children, a finding that may be more pronounced in Shenzhen and Shanghai. [25] The interview method of this study selected four interviewees based on their region, career development status, family division of labor (mother mainly responsible for childcare, father mainly responsible for childcare or co-care), their economic level, and their marital relationship, as well as their husbands, as needed. The interviews focused on their personal career and family role expectations, work experiences after childbirth, and the reasons for having a second or third child, with a series of questions formulated and summarized accordingly.

Ms. Wang, a professional woman from Shanghai, works at a venture capital firm, is 35 years old, has two children, and her family's economic situation is good with an equal relationship between husband and wife and joint child-rearing. "In big cities like Shanghai, although the workplace competition is intense, career development opportunities for women are still quite open relatively. After having my two children, my company gave me a longer maternity leave and provided me with some support and understanding when I returned to work. However, I also feel the pressure, especially in terms of promotion. Perhaps because I have more family responsibilities, sometimes opportunities tend to favor colleagues without family burdens. "

Ms. Chen, a rural woman in Fujian, works part-time as a laborer, is 30 years old, has three children, and her family's economic situation is average. Her marital relationship is stable but she has strong traditional values, with the main responsibility for childcare falling on her. The interviewee said: "In our area, after a woman has children, many people stop working. I have tried to find a job, but many employers immediately refuse me upon hearing that I have three children. They say they are worried that I cannot focus fully on my work while also taking care of the children. I feel that this prejudice makes it difficult for me to develop my career. "

Ms. Shen, a professional woman from Shenzhen, works at a hotel, is 32 years old, has a two-year-old daughter, and her family's financial situation is good. Her husband

supports her career development and mainly takes care of childcare. “Shenzhen is a vibrant city where I have experienced many opportunities. Although I have children, my company is very supportive of me, providing me with flexible working hours and remote work opportunities. I feel that this is very helpful for balancing my work and family life.”

Ms.Zhao, 30 years old, lives in Shandong and has two children, works as a clerk in a company. Her family’s economic situation is average, and her marital relationship is equal, with both parents sharing child-rearing responsibilities. “In Shandong, I feel that women still face many restrictions in the workplace. After having two children, I found it very difficult to return to work. My colleagues seem to think that my primary responsibility is at home, not at work. This perception makes me feel very frustrated because I actually want to achieve something in my career.”

When asked if she was willing to become a housewife, Ms.Chen stated, “I once considered becoming a full-time mother, especially when my children were younger. However, I soon realized that this was not a good choice for me because I needed to work to maintain the family’s financial situation.” Another woman who has been a housewife, Ms.Wang, said, “I did have the experience of being a full-time mother, especially after the birth of my first child. During that time, I enjoyed spending time with my children, but over time, I began to feel anxious and uneasy because there was intense competition in my field, and I was concerned that my career development would be affected. It is taken for granted that once a woman has children and enters the family, her career will be handed over.”

Inquiring about their views on career development and balancing work and family, the answers from Shenzhen-Shanghai region and Shandong-Fujian region were not entirely the same. Ms.Zhao’s husband said: “As a husband, I understand the pressure she faces in her career, but I believe that family and children come first. I hope she pays more attention to her family, although I also support her career development, I think it should be moderate.” Ms.Chen’s husband said: “I believe women should take on more family responsibilities, especially when the children are young. Although she has a job, I hope she can devote more time to the growth of her children.” The husbands from Shanghai and Shenzhen said: “I support her career development and understand her desire to balance work and family. I am willing to share more household and childcare responsibilities so that she can focus better on her work.”

## 4. Discussion

Based on the above survey results analysis, regions with a profound influence of Confucian culture may place greater emphasis on women’s roles in the family, while economically developed and culturally open areas may focus more on gender equality and women’s career development, showing significantly higher levels of education and cultural openness. According to research, family division of labor is closely related to the career development of third-time birth mothers, demonstrating the importance of family division patterns in women’s career development. Women in families where both parents are involved in childcare experience more support, whereas in families where childcare is primarily the responsibility of women, women’s career development is more restricted. The equality of spousal relationships may facilitate third-time mothers in pursuing their careers better, which is a new finding of this study, and an egalitarian and mutually supportive spousal relationship allows women to find balance between their careers and family life. Economically developed regions offer more job opportunities and career development platforms as well as policy support, while regions deeply influenced by Confucian culture may limit women’s career opportunities due to economic development levels. The results show that regional economic development, family support, and spousal equality have a significant impact on women’s career development and expectations of family roles. Collectively, these factors have an impact on women’s career planning and family life, as well as their work experiences and fertility decisions.

This study examines the impact of different regions, family division of labor, economic levels, and marital relationships on women’s career development, proposing policy recommendations to promote gender equality and support women in their dual roles in both work and family life, and providing empirical research foundations for government departments and academia. In terms of social culture, increasing gender equality awareness through media and public promotion to raise public awareness of gender role diversity and equality. Changing traditional gender role perceptions: encouraging and supporting the redefinition of gender roles within communities and families, particularly modernizing the understanding of women’s roles. Promoting fathers’ involvement in childcare and household chores, reducing assumptions about women’s family responsibilities, and creating a family-friendly society. In the workplace, companies should strengthen women’s networks and support systems, establish and expand professional networks for women, provide career development resources and support, encourage companies to form women’s employee support groups, and offer ca-

reer guidance and mutual assistance. Promoting flexible working arrangements, such as remote work and flexible working hours, to help women better balance work and family responsibilities. In terms of policy, implementing family-friendly policies such as providing paid maternity leave and parental leave. Implementing tax incentives and subsidies to reduce the economic burden of family childcare. Strengthening women's career development support: providing opportunities for women's vocational training and re-education to enhance women's competitiveness in the workplace. Encouraging companies to implement gender equality policies, such as setting targets for female executive representation. Improving the employment environment for women: enacting and enforcing anti-discrimination laws to protect women's rights in recruitment. Increasing women's representation at the decision-making level: increasing support for women's entrepreneurship and strengthening legal and policy enforcement.

Although this study emphasizes the profound impact of patriarchal culture on women's roles and career development, there is still insufficient in-depth investigation into how Confucian patriarchal culture continues to influence women's roles and career development in modern society through channels such as family and education. Future research needs to more thoroughly analyze the specific mechanisms by which patriarchal cultural norms affect women's career development at different social levels.

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