

How the Modern Employment Environment Shapes Unmarried Professional Women's Attitudes toward Marriage and Childbirth

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Abstract. Scholars have previously focused on measuring actual marital and fertility behaviors but failed to identify the gap between actual behaviors and intentions for marriage and childbearing. This study adopted semi-structured interviews with unmarried professional women and aimed at finding the hidden rationale under their marital and fertility decisions in the Chinese context. Findings indicate that both objective limitations and ideological transformation can be attributed to low marital and fertility desires, which provides guidelines for the workplace and government to enact separate and more effective policies.

Keywords: workplace, anticipatory motherhood wage penalty, unmarried professional women.

1. Introduction

Female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) is an important gauge to measure women's place in a country [1]. FLFPR is a percentage that indicates the proportion of women (aged 15 and older) who are either employed or actively seeking employment. Tracing back to the early years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, it is noteworthy that China's FLFPR has stayed high in the world, primarily due to the intentional effect of historical policies attempting to encourage employment through the implementation of non-competitive centralized labor allocation system under the planned economy [2]. However, along with China's market-reformation since the late 1980s, private sectors have developed rapidly and resulted in the expansion of the gender wage gap. Even though the emphasis on fair competition and profit maximization is logically valid, it implies indirect discrimination against women. Recent studies have advanced our knowledge of the motherhood wage penalty by expanding its temporal scope and adding a contextualized perspective. Nowadays, a great number of women sacrifice family life to their career development.

Based on the above background, this paper hopes to explore through in-depth interviews how the anticipatory motherhood penalty, and the employment environment in general, influence the marital and fertility decisions of unmarried professional women in the Chinese context. This study's innovative value involves the following: First of all, this study expands the impact of motherhood wages penalty on mothers to unmarried women. Secondly, this study shifts its focus from the hidden rationale and reasoning of people when making fertility decisions, which are often disregarded.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Career dilemmas faced by women

Women have always experienced gender discrimination on the labor market, including both direct and indirect. Job discrimination occurs when an employment decision in some way harms or disadvantages an employee or a job applicant; the decision is based on the person's membership in a certain group, rather than on individual merit; the decision rests on prejudice, false stereotypes, or the assumption that the group in question is in some way inferior and thus does not deserve equal treatment. Existing research highlights that the gender wage gap is primarily a result of unequal job opportunities rather than different pay for equal work, which exists at different work stages [3]. For one thing, controlling for educational attainment and university tier, female graduates have a lower

employment rate compared to male graduates when seeking jobs [4]. For another, women encounter a “glass ceiling” in climbing the corporate ladder during promotion due to factors like social exclusion and limited roles in personnel decisions [5, 6].

2.2 Motherhood Wage Penalty: The work-family conflict

Scholars have shown persistent interest in the relationship between fertility and employment outcomes [7-10]. Theoretically speaking, the motherhood wage penalty refers to scenarios where women devote more time and energy to caring for their children after giving birth than men do, potentially resulting in negative consequences in terms of reduced employment opportunities for women, career disruption, and reduced pay [11]. The motherhood wage penalty arises from the clash between work and family roles [12]. While the public labor market promotes equal competition between male and female employees, the burden of child-rearing predominantly falls on women. One has proposed that the low fertility in advanced countries today is the outcome of a conflict or inconsistency between high levels of gender equity in individual-oriented social institutions and sustained gender inequity in family-oriented social institutions [13].

2.3 The effect of motherhood wage penalty on unmarried women

Recent studies began to expand the time scope of the motherhood wage penalty and develop a new term called anticipatory motherhood penalty [14, 15]. Anticipatory motherhood wage penalty occurred when women collect and evaluate information about uncertainties prior to family planning about fertility. Through this process, individuals and their households can rationally predict and assess the potential impacts of childbirth on household development, thereby making short-term decisions about whether to have children [14].

Majority of previous investigations are from a quantitative perspective that measures actual marital and fertility behaviors [16]. Scholars have automatically filled in the gap between actual marital and reproductive behaviors and intentions for marriage and childbearing. Yet, this seems logically problematic as some people may give up childbearing involuntarily due to objective limitations, whereas others may actively opt out of marriage and childbearing as their values are redefined by social shifts. Clear identification and separate discussions of these two conditions are essential for the government to enact more female-friendly laws.

3. Research Methods

Table 1. Participant Information

Respondent Number	Age	Occupation	Location	Education
S1	23	Three job experiences: two in foreign trade, 1 as non-governmental teacher; currently a graduate student	Fujian Province	Master's degree
S2	24	Social media content creator	Heilongjiang Province	Vocational high school
S3	23	Mandarin Chinese teacher	Shanghai	Bachelor's degree
S4	28	Public sector service	Liaoning Province	Master's degree
S5	23	Internship at new media company during junior and senior years	Gansu Province	Bachelor's degree in UK
S6	30	Construction industry	Shandong Province	Bachelor's degree

This study adopted semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection. In terms of sampling, a purposive sampling strategy was employed in order to enhance the relevance of the

conversation and depth of story-narration. A total of six unmarried and childless women who at least have one working experience were recruited through self-selected sampling on a Chinese social media called the Rednote, with each interview lasting 45 to 90 minutes. Data collection took place between January 16th to 18th and ceased once the interview content sufficiently addressed the research questions. Efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants in terms of occupation. Additional demographic details of the participants are presented in Table 1.

The discussions primarily focused on the following themes: gender discrimination in the workplace, marital and fertility choices, motherhood wage penalty, and women-inclusive policies.

4. Findings

4.1 Objective Limitation

4.1.1 Child Welfare Concerns

“Fertility costs” consist of both the expenses from pregnancy to childbirth as well as childrearing and education costs. Among these, the “cost of raising” constitutes the majority. From a purely economic perspective, estimates show that the average cost of raising a child from ages 0 to 17 in China is 538,000 yuan, with urban and rural families averaging 667,000 yuan and 365,000 yuan, respectively [16]. Unmarried professional women’s fear toward childbearing extends beyond how having children might affect their career path—they also question whether they are financially capable of raising a child [17].

There is consensus among participants that a solid economic foundation is the prerequisite for childbearing, but there lacks enough support in the working place and society.

S1: *“Without a solid financial foundation, no amount of temporary support—whether six months’ pay or a ¥1,000 subsidy—can make up for the lifelong cost of raising a child. These measures don’t address the root issue.”*

S4: *“A ¥500 subsidy and 80% coverage? These perks won’t increase my willingness to have a child. I mean, it’s as insignificant as getting a ¥5 discount on a BMW.”*

Beyond meeting basic needs, S1 pointed out that raising children also involves substantial investment in their future development—a potentially bottomless pit given today’s competitive environment. “When considering having children, I think about their future education and hobbies—I want to afford everything they need. For example, I hope to support their hobbies so they never feel inferior when compared to others. I want to provide enough resources to help them master different kinds of skills, ensuring they have a way to earn a living. More skills mean better opportunities in society.”

Above suggesting an innovative perspective of this study, revealing that women’s fertility decisions are not only influenced by personal development considerations but also by evaluations of their offspring’s future quality of life. A layer of responsibility is added here: To nurture a life is to bear the weight of that existence. However, the current support from society and enterprises is so insufficient that families lack the confidence to have children.

Apart from those future considerations, the workplace itself has a more practical issue: it simply fails to provide a secure environment for female workers during their pregnancy. S3 highlights the potential danger faced by a pregnant teacher as her colleague once experienced miscarriage due to a bump caused by a student, whereas the school did not provide the female worker with a proper resolution.

4.1.2 Hinder job pursuit

Child-bearing and child-rearing interrupt women’s labor force participation, and women’s intermittent labor force participation reduces their human capital investment and therefore lowers their earnings [18, 19]. One essential judgement women make when making fertility decisions is whether they want to ‘breed’ or ‘succeed’, as the “fertility cost” also encompasses women’s own time

cost and opportunity cost. The maternity leave disconnects professional women from their workplace by eliminating the time to hone their skills and establish social networks. S2 shared her painful experience when collaborating with a mother editor. Since the editor could only review and publish her articles after her child fell asleep, S2 often experienced delaying publication and payment. *“This is not discrimination, but reality. Using motherhood as an excuse to everything undermines both accountability and gender equality.”* Childrearing has significantly diminished the editor’s competitiveness: her articles are of low quality due to her limited spare time to read and enhance writing skills; she has seldom collaborators as she was deprived of the time to expand the contact base. As mentioned earlier, a key factor behind the gender wage gap is that female workers often experience social exclusion and are less favored in promotion opportunities. This situation is likely to be exacerbated when a woman becomes a mother. The added responsibilities of child rearing further reduce the time she has to establish and maintain social networks—connections that are crucial for accessing promotion opportunities.

In addition, fertility behaviors have progressively shifted from natural fertility to controlled fertility as fertility disrupts the natural working cycle. For a middle-school teacher in China who has a complete pedagogical cycle of three years, fertility will significantly influence her future job prospects. For one thing, since she lacks the experience of teaching 3 years in a row until the end of Zhongkao, which is particularly paramount in the Chinese education system, her opportunities for job-hopping are reduced as her “age and resume are mismatched”. For another, parents may also be less confident about her capabilities and working enthusiasm. However, it is crucial to highlight the fact that if a woman postpones fertility due to career pressure, she would become an elderly parturient woman and may pose a threat to her health.

Moreover, many professional women hesitate to have children due to the fast pace and rapid changes occurring in society. In fields like education, where textbooks and syllabus are constantly updating, teachers have to reprepare their lesson plans all over again after maternity leave—a time-consuming and inefficient process. This challenge extends beyond education: if an industry undergoes structural shifts, such as AI integration, a woman on leave may miss training sessions. After returning, she’ll find a mismatch between her skills and what the job demands.

4.1.3 Different occupational characteristics

The job sector is a meaningful and practical perspective for understanding the contextualized nature of the motherhood penalty in China [15]. During the interviews, participants reported foreseeing the diverging impacts of childrearing on their career trajectories depending on the sector in which they worked. For instance, S1 implied that she could already anticipate the prominently adverse impact on her foreign trade career. *“Our working hours are inflexible due to time zone differences with international clients which is incompatible with caregiving demands. Also, taking maternity leave often results in redistribution of your client portfolios to other colleagues—a critical disadvantage where established relationships directly determine earnings.”*

In contrast, S4, who works at a public sector, shared a distinct experience. She showed a relatively neutral attitude toward having children, attributing this to the secure and less competitive working environment. She observed that since wages are largely funded by government budgets and tax revenue, income is fixed and not performance-based. Furthermore, she highlighted that promotions in the public sector are more dependent on seniority and educational qualifications rather than aggressive career competition.

4.2 Evolution of opinions

4.2.1 Hinder Personal Development

On a global scale, the industrial revolution has significantly altered family patterns. From the perspective of agricultural production in pre-industrial societies, since women did not have the capacity to participate in labor practices back then, the objectively evident biological gender difference determined the intra-household labor division. In other words, most women could only

rely on their husbands in order to make a living. The gender essentialism in which husband is the breadwinner and wife is the homemaker can be explained by the theory of maximizing utility [20]. The advent of technology has promoted gender egalitarian as machines took over heavy-labor tasks, meaning that women were able to make fortunes themselves. Similarly, during the reform and opening-up in China, the Chinese government promoted numerous movements to liberate female productivity. In this way, the function of marriage is no longer an “economic partnership” to make a living. Instead, women have begun seeking a deeper connection with men in terms of intellect, culture, and emotions [21]. The essence of marriage has shifted from an economic activity to a romantic attraction.

Participants expressed their views toward marriage:

S1: *“If I truly step into marriage, I hope this won’t hinder my personal growth. I don’t want to be a housewife, not that there’s anything bad with this role—it involves meaningful contribution—but I refuse to become someone who orbits around another person’s life. That would be exhausting, and worse, it would strip my sense of self-identity.”*

S2: *“I once collaborated with an editor who dropped out of the labor market due to childbearing. She even had to pay me using grocery money her husband gave her. This contradicts with my goal of fulfillment of self-worth.”*

S4: *“In the public sector, promotions are not determined by individual ability, but are more influenced by your EQ and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, compared to achieving certain accomplishments at work, my family may be more important to me.”*

S4’s response stands out among the participants. This provides reasoning from the converse perspective—when career development does not directly link to self-actualization, women may not give up fertility for a career.

It’s obvious that in the modern day world, marriage has become an optional variable for self-cultivation. The need for self-actualization has motivated women to pursue higher education and success in their careers, leading to a delay in the age of marriage and childbirth, and a choice to not have or have fewer children [22].

Participant two shared a similar view when she pointed out, *“Marriage is like a flower on a cream cake.”*

To conclude, marriage is no longer a necessity for women. This stems from the job opportunities created by the labor market wherein women are now able to live on themselves. Yet, the sense of non-necessity differs between individuals as one claims marriage would be an encumbrance while another contends that marriage is more of an embellishment to one’s life.

4.2.2 Barriers to Gender Equality

Workplace serves as an essential place for secondary socialization where young females can gain actual insight into marriage and fertilization. Compared with the first impression acquired from family and parents, individuals can witness the harsh realities faced by post-marital and postpartum women in a patriarchal society during working. According to the Social Cognitive Theory proposed by Bandura, individuals’ behavior is modelled by other members of a group and acquired through observation and imitation based on the consequences of a behavior [23]. The negative consequences they observe, which are products under the patriarchal system, bolster their image of a patriarchal family structure. In order to promote gender egalitarian instead of reinforcing unequal gender roles, women actively choose not to participate in marriage and motherhood.

Based on the interview, oppression experienced by women in a patriarchal society can often be seen in the following two forms:

Within families:

Being a primary school teacher, S3 can get in touch with many families during home-visits: *“Having seen so many terrible families, I’ve spotted the red flag. During home visits, I’ve witnessed some families operating under absolute patriarchy—the man would boss the mother around even in front of people visiting, while she would just endure it silently.”*

“They raised a very troubled child with serious behavioral issues—a boy who disrespects his mother, lies, steals, and bullies weaker classmates.”

S3 highlights how gender inequality perpetuates through generations. The solution to end this ceaseless cycle is to give up marriage and childbirth.

In the labor market:

“Entering the workforce has sharpened my awareness of workplace discrimination—what I once only read about in books or on social medias has become virtually real.” This form of discrimination includes, but is not limited to, interview questions such as *“Are you married or planning to have children?”* or *“Do you intend to get pregnant in the next few years?”* Such unfairness places women in a disadvantaged position, compelling them to strive for equality through additional efforts. To counteract this systemic bias, many women resort to self-improvement, often by pursuing higher education or delaying childbearing to allocate more time to human capital development.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study adopted semi-structured interviews with unmarried professional women about their attitudes toward marriage and childbearing. It is found that under the current employment environment in China, female workers have the preference of not having children and the influence on marriage is less evident. There are two fundamentally different reasoning processes behind their decisions about childbirth. One possibility is that individuals are deterred by the objective challenges associated with pregnancy and childbirth, such as an insecure work environment, the high costs of raising children leading to worries about their children’s future welfare, and career stagnation that results in significant opportunity costs related to skill development and human capital. Alternatively, some may find that marriage and parenthood conflict with their personal values, leading them to choose not to pursue these paths. This perspective is supported by the dual roles of the labor market: it allows women to compete independently, making marriage a mere optional variable for self-actualization, and it serves as a space for secondary socialization which reveals the negative products of a patriarchal society, leading to the belief that marriage and having children hinder gender equality.

After identifying these two different ways in which unmarried professional women decide not to have children, the government and workplaces can use these insights as a guideline to implement better policies and foster a more female-friendly society. To start with, in order to deal with scenarios where women’s fertility decisions are influenced by objective struggles, the government should adjust the mode of subsidy provision, such as reducing the difference between private sector and public sector to a reasonable amount and implement a city-tiered allowance system, where Tier-1 cities receive higher subsidies to offset their elevated living costs. In addition, employers should implement a more thorough protection system. For example, pregnant or breastfeeding workers might be temporarily moved to positions that involve less direct contact with crowded settings, reducing health risks. At the same time, workplaces should provide core training sessions for employees on maternity leave. For instance, synchronized trainings may better prepare mothers for their return to work after maternity leave, shorten transition time and minimize skill gaps. Secondly, aiming to reframe unmarried women’s negative opinions on marriage, government policies should better address the problem of unequal labor division within family-oriented social institutions. For example, the government and enterprises can implement and encourage paternity leave [5]. Being a father inherently entails the responsibility of participating in child-rearing, and it should not be considered an extra credit. However, special protection measures should be used with caution, and considerations should be made from the perspective of pure gender equality to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes.

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