

An Exploration of the Causes of Women's Reduced Fertility Intentions Under the Three-child Policy in the Context of Liberal and Radical Feminism in China

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Abstract. Under the implications of Chinese government's three-child policy, the fertility intentions of the women of fertility age present a declining trend. This essay, therefore, investigates the possible influences of feminism on women's fertility intentions. This study collected and researched previous studies about radical feminism and liberal feminism, then analyzed their possible influences on the fertility intentions. As a result, the theoretical results indicated that with the awakening of female consciousness, the fertility intentions would decrease. Finally, this essay concluded that the female consciousness and feminism would reduce the fertility intentions and proposed several suggestions for future institutional framework about fertility policies. For the past relative studies, few researchers had noticed the influences of feminism and female consciousness, which contributed to this essay's research motivation. A study of the reasons for women's reduced fertility intentions from the perspective of female consciousness would help to fill a gap in this field.

Keywords: Radical feminism, liberal feminism, fertility intentions.

1. Introduction

On 17 January 2022, China's National Bureau of Statistics announced that 10.62 million people were born in China in 2021, reducing the birth rate to 7.52 per 1,000. The Chinese society is faced with the rapid and early arrival of an era of 'zero growth' or 'evenegative growth' in the population. Against this backdrop, the Chinese government formally introduced the two-child policy in 2015, relaxing the birth restrictions. However, the policy did not meet the expected surge in births. On 31 May 2021, the government further announced the implementation of the policy of allowing one couple to have three children and supporting measures, including a series of support policies, yet the fertility willingness around the whole society is still lower under expectations. In this essay, the women of fertility age refers to the 15 to 44 years old. While the liberal feminism in the article will adopt the concept from Wollstonecraft, and the theories about marriage and fertility in radical feminism comes from Kate Millett.

Through previous studies, many researchers have analyzed the factors that may influence the fertility intentions from the society. They have attached great importance to the effects of financial costs of bearing a child, policies and the social recognitions. For instance, Pei Deyu points out that the perfection of fertility policies may help relieve the stress of bearing children [1]. Furthermore, researchers also noticed the changes and influences in social culture while criticized the radical perspectives on gender issues [2]. But to a lesser extent, most of the studies still focus on the influence of external factors on female fertility intentions while ignore the internal factors of women, who are treated as the subjects of childbirth by the whole society, which may include their own willingness for children and their pursuit of being far away from traditional families. This essay, therefore, will apply equality and rationality in liberal feminism and radical feminism to investigate the women themselves, the relationship between awakening awareness of women and the declining fertility intentions.

The essay is divided into three parts. First, a presentation and conclusion of the literature research and review about female fertility intentions, radical feminism and liberal feminism. The second part will explore the relationship between the awakening of women's consciousness and the decline in women's fertility intentions through the feminist theories. This is followed by a discussion about how to establish a maternity protection mechanism that can better implement gender equality and women's rights, that is, explore the specific direction of policy improvement. Then the last part is a total conclusion for the whold essay.

2. Feminism and declining fertility intentions in China

2.1 Radical feminism and fertility intentions

Radical Feminism, which is one of the theories in this essay, believes that the inequality between men and women is caused by gender, that the enemy of women is men, and that the division of gender roles must be destroyed to achieve equality between men and women. Radical feminism does not accept the need for marriage and calls for its abandonment. They believe that the oppressive nature of the traditional view of marriage is manifested in all aspects of society and that its power extends far beyond not only the external system of power but also the boundaries of class and race[3]. At the same time, radical feminism disagrees with the division between the public and private spheres, sees the family as the primary site of female oppression, and proposes the rejection of marriage as the oldest and most latent form of oppression in human history [4]. Radical feminists argue that it was neither the capitalist economic production of the social division of labor that led to the creation of sexism, nor was it private ownership that made gender oppression possible, as Engels argued, but rather it was the creation of the sexist institution of marriage that led to the creation of private ownership and the capitalist division of labor. Radical feminism argues that “the original model of all forms of oppression was the politically repressive system of male and female roles.” Besides, radical feminists are extremely hostile to the institution of male-female marriage, even to men. This theory seeks absolute female independence in social status, which coincided with the quest for an independent, liberal identity for women in modern society, and contradicts to the value placed on the family that had been retained in traditional Chinese culture. As women attempt to break free from the traditional family bonds of society, their ties to the family model of existence will weaken and they may resist having children or even getting married, thus making their desire to have children greatly reduced.

2.2 Liberal feminism and fertility intentions

In contrast, liberal feminism was more moderate, still seeking women’s freedom and equality with men, but still aware of society's need to establish a family. In Britain, for example, Wollstonecraft argued against limiting women's role to that of family and mother and stressed that women had the same right to education as men. And on the issue of the root cause of gender inequality, liberal feminism, contrary to radical feminism, attributed the cause of male and female inequality to the influence of acquired human factors and opposed the theory of innate biological differences as the root cause of gender inequality. Opposition to the theory of gender inequality due to biological differences Both Wollstonecraft and Muller are critical of the theory of gender inequality caused by biological differences. They deny that the natural differences between men and women in terms of gender necessarily lead to differences between the sexes in various fields, and strongly refute the argument that men are more capable of reasoning than women [5].

They also strongly refute the argument that men are more capable of reasoning than women. Since the liberal feminism are not strongly opposed to marriage, but rather emphasize that women have the same rights as men in terms of freedom of marriage, to a certain extent such an idea is conducive to the survival of the family model. However, when women leave the home and seek their own independent identity in society, their dependence and ties to the family are still weakened. That is to say, despite the consideration of the freedom and survival of marriage, the rise of both types of feminism conflicted with the positioning and limitations of women in the traditional division of labour within the family. Whichever ideology influenced them, women's desire to have a family and children was greatly reduced.

2.3 Declining fertility intentions in China

However, the fertility intentions under the gradually relaxed fertility policies in mainland present a declining trend, which is against the primary goals of the three-child policy. In 2016, a survey jointly sponsored by Beijing Normal University and the All-China Women's Federation on the impact of the implementation of the comprehensive two-child policy on family education showed that 53.3% of families with one child did not want to have a second child, and this percentage was even higher in developed provinces, urban areas and among respondents with high education levels, reaching over 60%. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that since 2017, China’s birth rate has been declining year after year, with only 10.48‰ in 2019, and the natural population growth rate has fallen to a low fertility level of 3.34‰. In addition, the number of women of childbearing age has also shown a year-on-year decline, with approximately 7 million fewer in 2018 than in 2017 and 5 million fewer in 2019 than in 2018.

From previous studies, researchers have investigated plenty of people including men and women who are of the fertility stage. The results show that in addition to economic status, there are clear gender differences in the impact of socio-economic status on fertility intentions, thus reinforcing the level of gender justice in terms of socio-economic status. Besides, the division of gender roles, occupational gender inequity, intergenerational care support, child gender preference and marital stability have a significant impact on women's fertility intentions. In terms of socio-economic status, increased literacy increases women's ability to survive and their economic independence, and gender equality in education removes women from the confines of the family, providing an opportunity to change their fertility intentions. At the same time, women with a higher social status have a stronger desire to have children, suggesting that increasing women's social qualifications and capabilities is a prerequisite for increasing their desire to have children.

3. Discussions about the fertility intentions in China and suggestions

3.1 Discussions about the fertility intentions in China

According to the research and the review about the previous studies, the prevailing view is that there are two broad categories of factors that influence a woman's desire to have children, namely external factors and internal factors. External factors include social policies on childbirth, economic conditions, the availability of support from elders in childcare, and the treatment of women in the workplace after childbirth. Internal factors include women's educational and cultural levels, their financial independence and their personal perceptions of fertility. These studies have examined the influence of each of these factors on fertility intentions, but rarely have they looked at women's attitudes towards fertility. Little research has been conducted on the impact of women's consciousness on women's fertility intentions as they develop over time. Perhaps this is because the rise and development of feminism has been significant worldwide, but there is a lack of systematic academic research and support in China. Secondly, although the adjustment and relaxation of fertility policies have considered the impact of economic or social factors on women's fertility wishes, they have seldom thought about the actual difficulties faced by women themselves as the subjects of fertility. Feminist theory has long explored the impact of educational attainment and economic status on women's desire to have children. Both liberal and radical feminist theories adopted in this paper emphasize the importance of women's struggle for economic and social independence.

In the book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett, a representative of radical feminism, first introduced the concept of masculinity or patriarchy into feminist theory and expanded its meaning: one to refer to male domination over women; and one to refer to male elders dominating their juniors. From the 1960s onwards, patriarchy has been defined as the systematic mechanism of male dominance over women. Masculinity is a systemic, structured and unjust system of male domination over women by viewing the male body and life pattern as the formal, ideal form of social organization. According to a summary by domestic scholar Professor Li Yinhe, there are four main elements of the patriarchy. First, male domination. All positions of authority in the public and private spheres of society are reserved for men; all standards for measuring and evaluating women are set by male participation, and women cannot participate in setting standards related to themselves, let alone independently setting any standards or rules for men. Secondly, male identity. The core cultural perceptions of society's positive, praiseworthy and valuable identification are always associated with masculinity. This has led to a generally accepted division of labor between men and women, where paid work in the public sphere is regarded as labor and a career, while society generally disapproves of unpaid domestic work, which is mainly carried out by women. Thirdly, the objectification of women. Women are made objects in male affairs and transactions, denying or limiting women's rights to gain knowledge, raise awareness and exercise creativity. Fourth is the patriarchal mindset. This includes dichotomous thinking, which pits men and women against each other, and hierarchical thinking, which holds that there is a hierarchy among all things in the world, with men at the top and women below them [6]. In a word, the patriarchal society believes that there are not only physical differences between men and women, but also a gulf in temperament and depth of rational understanding, and it is these differences that make women only in a position of domination by men. In fact, the existence

of patriarchy and the oppression of women is quite common in mainland societies. For example, the common emphasis in Chinese society on the masculinity of men and the femininity of women is a division of labor and the fixation of male and female roles. Secondly, the division of labor within the family, where the man is the head of the family and the woman is the head of the family, is also not conducive to women breaking free from the shackles of the family and entering society. Although this concept is gradually being diluted as society develops and more and more women enter the workplace, it still has a significant impact on the thinking of the next generation. In this context, women do not have the right to choose their own fertility, and it has become a social consensus that heterosexuals should combine with each other, form families and have children.

It is for this reason that radical feminism is strongly opposed to the institution of marriage and, in some cases, to the union of women with men. In the context of radical feminist resistance to patriarchy, the marriage of a woman to a man implies the undermining of women's rights. Especially in China, a society that takes the birth of children for granted, women lose the right to choose their own fertility if they enter into marriage. In China's history, there have been family planning systems promulgated to curb excessive population growth. Later on, the Chinese government began to liberalize its fertility policy in response to the needs of the country, which inherently was a way of controlling women's fertility from a national and governmental perspective. In practice, however, the lack of a birth wave and the decline in fertility intentions have confirmed that women's fertility intentions are hardly influenced by the policy. Moreover, if the state's fertility policy is followed, the status of women in society will be squeezed. Radical feminism also suggests that women are still oppressed by patriarchy in what is traditionally considered to be the 'private sphere' of the family. Whether or not a male-dominated, female-dominated division of labor is created, women who should be entering the workforce on an equal footing with men will be forced to miss work due to the physical constraints of childbirth. This will have a negative impact on the competitiveness of women of childbearing age in the workplace, as employers will be more likely to consider employees who will not be absent from work. Even though the government has enacted complementary measures to accompany maternity measures, such as subsidizing employers to give women maternity leave, it does not change the nature of the problem. The existence of a radical feminist opposition to marriage and childbirth reduces the likelihood that women will be excluded from the workplace because of childbirth.

As mentioned above, liberal feminism sees acquired human factors as the source of gender inequality, and that innate differences do not determine the inequality of gender status. Liberal feminism also advocates the emancipation of women's nature and their ownership of their rights in society and their own autonomy, and opposes the confinement of women by traditional social concepts. Although it is true that there are innate differences between men and women, the positioning and division of labor that society constructs through these differences is very unreasonable, as they are derived from stereotypes of the innate differences between men and women, thus creating a distinction between the resources and conditions that men and women receive in the process of growing up, which further reinforces the positioning, division of labor and stereotypes of the two sexes in society. For example, liberal feminism also notes the stereotypical division of labor between 'male dominated and female dominated' resulting from the differences between the sexes. The latter can be developed gradually through education and nurturing during the formative years and is largely unrelated to gender.

However, in contrast to radical feminism, liberal feminism, because it advocates women's rights, including the right to make their own choices, only opposes the backward traditional social stereotypes of the sexes and the fetters placed on women, but is not inherently opposed to the existence of marriage as a model, because liberal feminism is entirely based on women's subjectivity and supports women's right to choose whether or not to marry and to have children. In the current situation in China, this is perhaps the ideal form of family formation for the majority of society: both parents are equal in status, not bound by traditional concepts, and women can choose whether to have children or not, or whether to have one or two children, when the financial situation allows. This idealized model places more emphasis on women's right to make their own choices than on the

influence of policies and incentives to have children. Under the auspices of this theory, the factors that influence Chinese women's desire to have children are more economic in nature. However, the shortcoming is that liberal feminism's emphasis on women's rights cannot be separated from the reference to men's rights, that is, it focuses on what women's rights are lacking compared to men's, rather than excluding men from the discussion of the female subject. On the whole, liberal feminism's reference to men's rights is still essentially a cult of male power and the pursuit of male rights, when the difference between acquired and human factors can be filled, and women are ideally the same as men, who become the models and role models of society. In other words, the liberal feminist discussion of women's rights does not go beyond the framework of patriarchy.

3.2 Suggestions

According to the above discussions, this essay therefore argues that the next direction of state policy may not be to interfere with women's intentions to have children or to simply encourage women to have children, but rather to consider how to create a childcare-friendly environment from the perspective of protecting women's rights, balancing the differences between the sexes and trying to promote equal social status for gender. From this perspective, the theory of liberal feminism is more relevant to the current situation in China. The government can start with social propaganda to liberate women from the fetters imposed on them by traditional social concepts, to change the traditional understanding of the division of labor between the sexes, and to minimize the construction of gender differences. Secondly, the government should respect women's self-motivation and protect their right to equal access to education and work. When economic conditions improve, women's willingness to have children will also increase. For the whole country or for the future, it is more important to respect and protect women's rights than to restrict their rights.

4. Conclusions

Through an in-depth study of radical feminist and liberal feminist perspectives on marriage and reproductive rights, this article analyses the impact of the development of feminism on women's reproductive intentions in the context of the current situation in China.

The first part therefore begins by summarizing previous research by combining feminist theories and papers related to fertility intentions. It can be seen that scholars have often attributed factors affecting fertility intentions to economic and workplace factors, with the influence of policy not being a major factor. The second part is a discussion of the causes of lower fertility intentions from women themselves, combining liberal and radical feminism. In line with the hypothesis, this study concludes that fertility intentions do decline as women become more influenced by female consciousness. Finally, some ideas and suggestions have been proposed for future fertility policies development.

With modernization, adherence to the traditional gender division of labor will undoubtedly lead to greater gender imbalances in society and further suppression of women's rights, which is inconsistent with the demands of a modern society and civilization. One reason for this is that the early arrival of an ageing society conflicts with the need for further economic development in a country that has not yet completed its industrial restructuring. Even with the support of complementary policies, in a Chinese society which is still patriarchal, encouraging childbearing without adequate protection of women's rights means suppressing women's rights and social status. In essence, women's quest for an autonomous social status is at odds with the current positioning of women in China's social climate. This is because patriarchy continues to locate the responsibility for childbearing on women, thereby limiting their rights and freedom to move into society. This paper also attempts to fill the gap in the study of women's self-awareness, in favor of a greater social focus on the aspirations of women themselves.

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