The Impact of Maternity Insurance System on Women's High-Quality Employment -- Taking China as an Example

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Abstract. With the continuous development of China's market economy, women are playing an increasingly important role in economic construction. However, due to responsibilities in childbirth and population aging, women often face discrimination and many employment issues in the workplace, such as career interruptions. Therefore, in order to protect women's rights and interests in the workplace, the society must adopt practical and effective measures. Among them, expanding the expenditure of the maternity insurance fund appropriately and improving the maternity insurance system are key measures. The implementation of these measures will help strengthen women's position in the workplace, solve the problems they face, promote workplace equality and development, and ultimately promote social stability and sustainable development as a whole.

Keywords: Maternity insurance system, high-quality employment, Chinese women.

1. Introduction

The concept of high-quality employment for women refers to a form of employment that not only aims to increase the female employment rate but also ensures that female workers are provided with full respect, protection, opportunities, and promotion prospects. It also facilitates population growth and social development. Given the current social, economic, and population development context, the significance of promoting high-quality employment for women is increasingly prominent. Specifically, achieving high-quality employment for women requires the creation of more job opportunities, improvement in the income and job security of female workers, enhancement of their social status and professional skills, and the assurance of opportunities and pathways for career advancement. The key to high-quality employment for women lies in balancing the labor force participation rate and the population growth rate. In the process of social development and population structural adjustment, it is necessary to achieve the goal of high-quality employment for women and fully leverage the important role of female workers in economic and social construction. According to domestic and international research studies, high-quality employment for women plays a crucial role in national economic development and social stability [1]. Therefore, targeted policy measures need to be formulated to improve the quality and benefits of female employment, promote the self-development and career growth of female workers, and thereby advance economic modernization and social progress [2].

2. The Impact of Maternity Insurance System on Women's High-Quality Employment -- Taking China as an Example

2.1. Definition of the Maternity Insurance System in China

According to the research conducted by Jin, the maternity insurance system is a social insurance system that aims to provide income compensation, medical services, and maternity leave to individuals during the period of childbirth [3]. As a mandatory social security system established by legislation in China, the maternity insurance system mainly consists of two components: maternity allowance and maternity medical benefits [4]. During their employment, women may have to interrupt their work due to childbirth and breastfeeding. The establishment and implementation of the maternity insurance system are intended to ensure that these women can receive corresponding medical services and material assistance from the state and society during this period [5]. This system helps guarantee that women during the childbirth and breastfeeding periods can still access basic livelihood resources while temporarily pausing their work, which is beneficial for the stability of the country and society.

Since the trial implementation of the "Trial Measures for Enterprise Employees' Maternity Insurance" in 1995, China's maternity insurance system has developed for over 20 years and has been operating relatively stable as a whole. This system has played a positive role in safeguarding equal employment opportunities for women, protecting the reproductive rights of female workers, and promoting balanced population development [5]. However, there are currently several issues with the system, particularly regarding the inadequacy of maternity insurance benefits to keep up with the pace of time, making it difficult to realize the full potential of maternity support [6].

2.2. Challenges Faced by China's Maternity Insurance System

2.2.1. Inadequate coverage for maternity medical expenses

According to a study by Wang, the fixed reimbursement rates for maternity insurance medical expenses in China have remained unchanged for a long period of time, which no longer aligns with the continuous development of the socio-economic situation [7]. The low reimbursement rate directly increases the cost of childbirth for women, thereby reducing their willingness to have children.

In terms of prenatal examinations, Ji et al. pointed out that the reimbursement standards for prenatal examination expenses in China have been consistently low, resulting in high costs for pregnant women [6]. Women need to undergo at least nine prenatal check-ups from pregnancy to delivery, and the subsidies for prenatal examination expenses vary across different regions. For example, in Nantong City, the subsidy limit for prenatal examination expenses is set at 1000 yuan, while in Hefei City, the highest reimbursement standard for prenatal examinations is 800 yuan. Shenzhen City provides a one-off payment of 2000 yuan for the birth certificate of the baby, and the remaining prenatal examination expenses are reimbursed according to the city's designated standards. Any amount exceeding 2000 yuan is not covered.

Regarding hospitalization and childbirth, the single reimbursement standard for maternity insurance medical expenses does not meet the actual needs. For instance, in Nantong City, the reimbursement fees for childbirth are 3000 yuan for normal deliveries, 3200 yuan for difficult deliveries, and 4000 yuan for cesarean section surgeries. However, in practical situations, these payment policies, although seemingly covering many scenarios, do not account for various unforeseen factors during childbirth. The lack of detailed reimbursement standards results in certain emergency diseases being unable to be reimbursed in real life.

The current maternity medical treatment falls far short of meeting the needs of women giving birth and is not conducive to increasing their willingness to have children. There is still a long way to go before the socialization of childbirth costs can be realized, and it is difficult to achieve the goal of providing support for childbirth. Feng pointed out that women calling for higher maternity medical treatment [8].

2.2.2. Coverage scope issue

In recent years, China's maternity insurance system has been gradually improving. However, there are still certain groups of women who do not receive the necessary protection, such as unmarried mothers and other special groups. Limited by certain regulations and normative documents, these women can only enjoy the most basic maternity insurance benefits [8]. It is worth noting that as of September 2022, some restrictive regulations have been halted, but in some regions, women are still required to provide marriage certificates to qualify for maternity insurance benefits. Currently, scholars have not yet reached a consensus on how to expand the scope of maternity insurance coverage. However, most people suggest increasing maternity insurance benefits for women [9]. Specifically, this includes comprehensive coverage for maternity medical expenses and increased investment in funds, fully paying the statutory maternity allowance or increasing it during the period of legal maternity leave, and specifying a "paternity leave" of around two weeks for men, with the allowance during the paternity leave being paid by the maternity insurance fund [10].

2.2.3. The impact of iaternity insurance system on high-quality employment of women: correcting gender discrimination issues in the workplace through maternity insurance

At the current level of legal enforcement, particularly with the revision of the "Population and Family Planning Regulations" by local governments to extend maternity leave, employers of women who have given birth face challenges such as short durations of maternity allowances and the need for companies to supplement wages. This may even lead to arbitration and litigation. In pursuit of their own interests, some employers may take actions such as limiting childbirth for female employees or reducing the number of female staff, disregarding the costs incurred previously for temporarily replacing, hiring substitutes, or training new employees to cover the workload of female workers on maternity leave. Thus, how to prevent employment discrimination against women who have given birth through the design of a maternity insurance system, and alleviate the pressures they face in the workplace, is not only the responsibility of individual families but also that of society as a whole. The design of the maternity insurance system reflects the social and governmental responsibilities towards addressing gender inequality issues in employment. The maternity insurance system should play a role in rectifying employment discrimination against women [11].

In order to achieve this goal, the design of the maternity insurance system should be approached from three levels: government, employers, and individuals. The government should enhance protection for women who have given birth, establish legal regulations, supervise employers, provide subsidy funds for female employees, encourage companies to set up nursing rooms, and offer flexible working hour arrangements. Companies should comply with the laws and regulations set by the government, provide maternity allowances according to the stipulated requirements, and take responsibility for providing relevant training to female employees. Additionally, they should provide more flexible working hour arrangements, enabling female employees to better care for their children alongside their work responsibilities. On an individual level, women should exercise their rights within the legal framework, promptly report any illegal behavior of employers, and protect their legitimate rights and interests.

2.3. Barriers to High-Quality Employment for Women

2.3.1. Gender discrimination

(1) Invisible barriers in the job application process

In recent years, gender discrimination in employment has become a focus of public attention in China. Women's rights should be protected by law, and it is urgent that measures be taken to address the infringement of women's employment rights.

In the reality of job searching in China, women often encounter varying degrees of gender discrimination. Among them, gender discrimination during job interviews is particularly prominent. According to surveys, women are often asked questions such as "Are you married?" or "Do you have children?" during interviews, while male applicants are rarely asked such questions. This phenomenon not only directly violates women's personal privacy but also indicates that women face more unequal treatment in the job market.

(2) Limited promotion opportunities and career bottlenecks

Compared to men, Chinese women usually retire at a younger age. Additionally, due to the responsibility of childbearing, women's childbearing age is mostly concentrated between 25 and 35, which is the peak period for personal career development. Therefore, their career paths are greatly impacted. Under these circumstances, some women may choose to resign and focus full-time on family care. Even women who have already reached middle to senior management positions may lose their original position foundation and ultimately miss out on opportunities for promotion and advancement [12].

(3) Difficulty in protecting employment rights from gender discrimination

Although some Chinese companies do not explicitly inquire about the marital status and childbirth intentions of female employees during interviews, it is still possible to infer from their resumes whether they are in the suitable age range for marriage and childbirth. This can lead to gender discrimination issues [13]. Furthermore, female employees during pregnancy may also face unfair treatment, such as a salary decrease during this period. Most female employees have a weak awareness of their rights in such infringements, and they often choose to endure silently instead of resorting to legal avenues. Additionally, in terms of protecting women's rights, the current institutions and regulations for seeking justice are still relatively inadequate. Female employees, even if they want to seek justice, are easily constrained by limitations and narrow channels, and can only suffer in silence.

2.3.2. Women juggling multiple social roles leading to a lack of employment opportunities

From a traditional Chinese perspective, there is a different division of labor between men and women, with women often inclined to take on the responsibility of caring for family members. This phenomenon makes it more challenging and pressurizing for women to pursue personal education and participate in employment. Especially in an aging society and under the background of the "Three-Child" policy, women face greater social pressure, thus some women choose to resign or give up career development to focus solely on family life [11]. In addition, women after giving birth often face fewer job opportunities, which is also one of the significant factors leading to the difficulty for many talented women to find employment [12].

2.4. The Impact of Expanding Maternity Insurance on Women's Employment

2.4.1. International research status

Li conducted quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews with pregnant women and mothers of infants aged 0-11 months [13]. It was found that women in formal employment in Vietnam have a high awareness and acceptance of maternity protection rights, and generally believe that maternity protection policies are beneficial for them. In the sample, the majority of women were able to take up to 180 days of maternity leave and return to their pre-delivery positions and salaries [14].

In Schmieder's study, the author used data from the 2010 Mexican census and the exogenous fertility rate differences generated by parents' preferences for mixed-sibling siblings [15]. The results indicate that increasing fertility beyond the second child does not lead to a reduction in women's labor supply. Especially in environments characterized by low household wealth, informal childcare, and high employment opportunities, mothers' employment opportunities in the informal sector significantly increase when the number of children exceeds two. This study provides an important reference for understanding the relationship between family planning, the number of children, and maternal employment.

2.4.2. Current research status in China

In married women, childbirth significantly reduces their working hours. While women may continue to stay in the labor market after giving birth, there may be a decrease in work hours due to a lack of adequate childcare for their children. They may also need to take time off to care for their children or pick them up from school, which can lead to work distractions. Based on data from China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), this study examines the impact of childbirth on the employment choices of married women and explores the moderating effects of grandparent care, early childhood education, skill training, and the internet on the relationship between childbirth and employment choices for married women. Heterogeneity analysis is conducted for different groups. The results indicate that an increase in the number of young children significantly reduces the employment rate of married women, with a greater impact on employed positions than self-employment. Furthermore, experiencing interrupted employment due to childbirth significantly lowers the probability of future employed positions and self-employment for married women, indicating a long-term negative impact of childbirth on employment. Increasing the number of young children significantly increases the probability of transition from employment to non-employment for married women and significantly raises the probability of transition from formal employment to informal employment [8].

The adjustment of China's childbirth policy has three effects on the quality of female employment. On one hand, policy adjustments have an entry effect on female employment. Employers, while bearing the actual and potential costs of childbirth, may lower the evaluation of female human capital, leading to gender discrimination in hiring and promotion processes. On the other hand, policy adjustments also have an interrupting effect on female employment. After policy adjustments, the costs of childbirth borne by women increase, forcing or prompting women to leave the labor market. Thirdly, policy adjustments have a constraint effect on the quality of female employment. Following policy adjustments, employers may arrange for female employees to leave their original positions or restrict their career advancement opportunities due to the increased actual and potential costs of childbirth, ultimately resulting in wage penalties for mothers, exacerbating the gender pay gap, and impacting the quality of female employment in China [5].

2.5. Problems with China's Maternity Insurance System

Currently, China's maternity insurance system has undergone three important changes, namely the implementation of a fully liberalized three-child policy, an extension of maternity leave, and the integration of maternity insurance into basic medical insurance. However, these changes have not yet resolved issues such as the source of funds for maternity insurance and the level of benefits [10].

The interests involved in the reproductive process of women in the labor market are complex. It not only includes pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care but also the stage of raising children, which increases the management costs for employers. Therefore, while improving maternity insurance benefits, it is also necessary to subsidize the economic expenses of employers [11]. In addition, a single policy constraint is insufficient to achieve gender equality in the labor market [5].

Currently, the maternity insurance fund is facing a deficit, with low insurance rates and reduced fund income leading to high pressure on fund expenditure and an imbalanced expenditure structure for maternity benefits [8]. Moreover, the coverage of maternity insurance is not wide enough, and there is a regional imbalance, which fails to protect women's employment rights. The implementation of the liberalized maternity policy requires a large amount of funds, and the proportion of the burden shared by the government, families, and employers needs to be calculated more accurately, with difficulties in implementation as well [13].

In the pilot implementation of merging maternity insurance with medical insurance, there are also issues such as low insurance rates, reduced fund income leading to a high pressure on fund expenditure, and a lower level of overall planning for maternity insurance [11].

The conflict between maternity policies and female employment is mainly due to the lack of support from complementary family policies. In the phase of an increased female fertility rate, the cost of child-rearing is a major obstacle to employment, and the current social insurance system in China lacks a family allowance insurance system [6]. At the same time, there is an insufficient supply of public childcare services, and high fees, which means that the current systems are not fully able to alleviate the economic pressure on women and reduce the burden on families. Extending maternity leave may seem to alleviate the burden on women, but in reality, it reinforces the sense of responsibility as the primary caregiver and exacerbates the disadvantaged position of women in the labor market. In addition, the cost of childbirth has also increased for employers, leading to hidden increases in gender discrimination against women [3].

The lack of support from government public finance may result in insufficient solvency of the maternity insurance fund and the neglect of regulatory issues. Therefore, the Chinese government should play a leading role in strengthening the construction of public childcare service systems, regulating the nanny industry, and guiding social capital into the childcare industry [10].

2.6. Development Direction of China's Maternity Insurance

2.6.1. International experience

The "parental subsidy" policy implemented in Sweden aims to promote gender equality and encourage full employment. This policy has extended the remaining vacation days in Sweden to 490 days, reducing the dependence of women on their families. In addition, the country's maternity policies also reflect a population policy that encourages childbirth, with the government and society jointly bearing the cost of childbirth. Through taxation, the policy narrows the gap in living standards between families with and without children, reducing the financial burden of expenses related to children [9].

In comparison, the experience in the United Kingdom lies in providing professional skills training for women, encouraging women to start their own businesses, and providing financial support. It has also established special reemployment allowance systems to promote women's employment [7].

2.6.2. The development direction of maternity insurance in China

From the perspective of China's Maternity Insurance Law, recent legislation has shifted from purely protecting the economic losses incurred during women's pregnancy to addressing employment discrimination caused by childbirth. The reform of the Maternity Insurance Law first focuses on balancing the interests of employers and employees, not only by reducing the losses caused by female employees' childbirth but also by minimizing employers' economic losses and eliminating disruptions to production and operations. Secondly, it aims to balance the interests of employers and the state by providing financial subsidies to guarantee maternity benefits for female employees and their reemployment rights.

Research indicates that the government should promptly improve maternity protection and provide economic support during women's pregnancy, which can have a buffering effect. By refining maternity insurance policies and increasing subsidy support, the cost of childbirth for women can be reduced, thereby minimizing career interruptions caused by childbirth [9]. To enhance women's employability, it is necessary to promote the socialization of housework and utilize the digital economy to support family development. The government should implement relevant incentives and support policies to promote the socialization of housework, alleviate women's burdens, and increase the female labor force participation rate [12].

The principles for establishing China's maternity insurance system should be "financial support determines revenue, with the state as the bottom line." In addition to reasonable contributions from employers, a national safety net system should be established to ensure a balanced population structure. It should not compete with the "revenue determines expenditure" management system in medical insurance. Furthermore, supervision and management of the labor and wage relationship of the maternity population should be strengthened, and the participation behavior of maternity insurance should be standardized. The waiting period for maternity insurance benefits should be appropriately extended to reduce operational risks and increase the utilization rate of the funds [9]. Maternity medical expenses account for a relatively small portion of the total childbirth cost and may even inhibit childbirth. Therefore, maternity allowances and maternity leave should be the focus of supportive policies under the maternity insurance system. From the perspective of promoting childbirth, the scope and coverage of social maternity insurance should be expanded [11]. The establishment of a dynamic financing mechanism for maternity insurance can contribute to the balance of the fund's income and expenditure. After the relaxation of childbirth policies, the expenditure on maternity allowances will increase rapidly. Data from 2015 showed that the maternity insurance fund had the lowest reserve compared to other "five insurance" funds. The implementation of maternity insurance should be adjusted based on regional and operational conditions [9].

3. Conclusion

With the announcement of the "three-child" policy in China and the continuing aging population, the issue of maternity insurance has become more prominent. It is urgent to address the discrimination against women in employment. There are various factors affecting the career development of Chinese women, including the number of children, family responsibilities, economic pressure, and gender stereotypes. A study by CLDS analysis demonstrates an "inverted U-shaped" relationship between the number of children and women's labor force participation rate, reaching its peak with two children. However, six out of ten women still believe that childbirth has a negative impact on their career development.

Against the backdrop of low fertility rates in China, maintaining and improving a sound maternity protection system plays a positive role in protecting women's reproductive rights, increasing fertility willingness, and promoting women's high-quality employment. However, the contradiction between women's reproductive rights and employment rights has become increasingly prominent, and women's interests have been compromised. Although scholars from various countries have conducted certain research, compared with foreign countries, there are still shortcomings in China's research, and it is necessary to improve the guarantee of women's reproductive rights. Therefore, in addition to learning from foreign experience, it is necessary to gradually implement methods and measures suitable for China based on specific national conditions and relevant policies. At the same time, measures should be taken to alleviate the problem of compromised women's rights and further improve the institutional and policy protection of women's reproductive rights.

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