

# Study on the Influence of Employment Quality on Fertility Intention of Women of Childbearing Age

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## Abstract

The fertility intention in a certain period has a direct impact on the current population dynamics. Currently, enhancing fertility intention is crucial for reversing the trend of population decline and addressing fertility challenges. This paper constructs an employment quality index system using data from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and measures employment quality based on the entropy method to examine its influence on the fertility intention of women of childbearing age. The study finds that the effect of employment quality on the fertility intention of women of childbearing age follows a "U" -shaped curve, first decreasing and then increasing, with a threshold value of 0.632. Re-measuring employment quality using the u-test test, equal-weight average method, reducing the sample size of fertility intention, and conducting endogeneity tests confirm these results. Heterogeneity analysis shows that employment quality significantly affects the fertility intention of urban women, women under 35, and those with high school education or below, maintaining a "U" -shaped curve relationship. Based on these conclusions, this paper provides theoretical insights into improving employment quality and implementing differentiated publicity and incentives for different educational groups, thereby increasing the fertility intention of women of childbearing age.

## Keywords

Women of Childbearing Age; Employment Quality; Fertility Intention; Entropy Value Method.

## 1. Introduction

"The population issue is a major concern for the development of the Chinese nation." Based on the latest data from the seventh national census released in 2020, China's current total fertility rate is only 1.3, significantly below the benchmark level of 2.1 required to maintain generational replacement [1]. The continuous decline in fertility has had a significant impact on China's demographic structure and economic development. To alleviate the low birth rate, China has gradually implemented policies such as the "two-child policy for both single-child parents," the "two-child policy for those who have lost their only child," the "universal two-child policy," and the "universal three-child policy." However, recent data on births in China show that these policies have not been effective, and the overall trend of declining fertility remains unchanged. Women of childbearing age not only play a crucial role in childcare but are also an important part of the labor market. According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2021, women account for 43.5% of total employment in China. Across various industries, women contribute significantly to economic development[2]. Employment and childbirth are not just matters for individual families; they are also vital to national economic growth. However, in real society, once women reach a certain age, they often find themselves in a dilemma between employment and childbirth. On one hand, the birth of a child brings mental joy and emotional

fulfillment to mothers. On the other hand, the process of childbirth involves increased costs, such as expenses for educational resources and healthcare, as well as the sacrifice of work time and the corresponding reduction in career income. Therefore, studying the impact of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age is significant for addressing the low fertility issue, alleviating the conflict between women's employment and childbirth, and promoting long-term balanced population development.

## 2. Literature Review

Fertility intention is a multi-level concept, referring to an individual's fertility plan based on their ideal family size, which to some extent reflects the fertility culture and attitudes of the entire society[3]. George Gallup The term "ideal number of children" was first used in a survey report in 1936 to define fertility intention[4]. Since then, fertility intention has entered the field of research. In studies on population fertility, scholars have meticulously divided the dimensions of fertility intention into two frameworks: three-dimensional and four-dimensional. Among these, the three-dimensional framework covers the number of desired children, gender preference, and timing of childbirth[5]. The four-dimensional framework adds the dimension of fertility motivation to this base[6]. Existing research primarily explores factors influencing fertility intentions from three aspects: First, the impact of individual characteristics at the micro level, such as gender, age, and education level [7]. Second, attention to family size, housing area, and per capita income, which affect fertility intentions [8]. Third, the influence of social welfare policies, including social insurance and fertility incentives, on fertility intentions [9,10]. However, few scholars have studied another significant factor affecting fertility intentions: employment quality.

Through a review of the literature, it is found that studies combining employment quality and fertility intentions are relatively few. Consensus holds that high employment quality promotes fertility intentions, while low employment quality suppresses them. Some research has found that an improvement in employment quality can boost the willingness of migrant populations to have a second child, with income effects playing a dominant role[11]. Other studies have discovered that informal employment, characterized by low wages, high unemployment risks, lack of related benefits, and long working hours, suppresses the willingness of rural-to-urban migrant workers to have a second child[12].

Most scholars focus on the impact of fertility levels on employment quality. Studies have shown that having a second child has a negative effect on women's participation in the labor market and employment quality [13]. Other research indicates that fertility can also suppress the employment quality of migrant women, but this effect diminishes with the introduction of social capital [14]. Some studies explore the gender differences in employment quality caused by fertility, suggesting that it widens these differences. Fertility significantly reduces women's employment quality while enhancing men's [15].

Many scholars have studied the impact on fertility intentions from a certain dimension of employment quality. In terms of job security, some researchers found that participating in pension insurance has a negative effect on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age, and an increase in the number of insured individuals exhibits a certain "substitution effect" [16]. Regarding work income, studies have shown that the relationship between income and fertility intentions is not a simple linear one but rather a "U" -shaped curve, where disposable income can alleviate the pressure of fertility costs when it reaches a certain stage[17]. In terms of job satisfaction, research has found that an improvement in job environment satisfaction leads to a decrease in fertility intentions among eligible groups, with this effect being more pronounced in low-income groups[18]. Additionally, scholars have studied the impact of job stability on the

fertility intentions of women of childbearing age, finding that working in a state-owned enterprise has a certain promoting effect[19].

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Sample and Data Introduction

The data in this paper is sourced from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). Initiated by the Chinese Social Science Survey Center (ISSS) at Peking University, the CFPS officially began its fieldwork in 2010. The project focuses on the economic and non-economic well-being of Chinese residents, with a sample covering approximately 95% of the national population across 25 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, making it highly representative nationwide. To meet research needs, the study selected women aged 15 to 49 who are of childbearing age. After screening variables such as employment quality, squared employment quality, fertility intentions, age, squared age, party membership, marital status, health, household registration, years of education, property ownership, and family size, and removing missing and abnormal values, 2,462 valid data points were ultimately obtained.

#### 3.2. Description of Key Variables

##### 3.2.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of this study is the fertility intention of women of childbearing age. Referring to the definition of women of childbearing age by scholars Ruan et al. (2024) [20], the research subjects are women aged 15-49 years old. Drawing on the definition of fertility intention provided by scholar Tan (2004) [21], fertility intention is defined as the desired number of children, which is matched using the response to the question "How many children do you think are ideal?" from the CFPS2018 questionnaire.

##### 3.2.2. Main Explanatory Variables

The main explanatory variable in this study is employment quality. The concept of employment quality is referenced from the research by scholars Song and Gao (2023) [22], taking into account both subjective and objective employment quality. Work income, working hours, job stability, job security, and job satisfaction are selected as indicators to measure employment quality. In this paper, the entropy value method is used to construct the employment quality index. It is important to note that work income, job stability, job security, and job satisfaction are all positive indicators. In contrast, working hours are a negative indicator; the longer the working hours, the poorer the employment quality for women of childbearing age, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Employment quality index system

metric	computational method
work income	monthly income of respondents in 2018, +1 logarithm (unit: yuan)
operate time job stability	number of hours worked per week by respondents Outside the system = 0, inside the system =1
job security	according to the actual participation in social insurance, no = 0, yes =1
job satisfaction	very dissatisfied =1 not satisfied =2 average =3 fairly satisfied =4 very satisfied =5

##### 3.2.3. Control Variables

In this paper, the control variables are set as age, square of age, party membership, marriage, health, household registration, years of education, property rights and family size. These factors may affect the fertility intention of women of childbearing age. See Table 2 for details.

**Table 2. Variable Definitions**

variable	variable assignment	mean	standard error	least value	crest value
fertility intention	expect the number of children	1.721	0.591	0	5
employment quality	comprehensive index of employment quality	0.348	0.351	0.006	0.997
the square of employment quality	the composite index of employment quality squared	0.245	0.354	0	0.993
age	the respondents were aged 15 to 49	31.56	7.057	16	49
the square of age	age is square	1046	462.0	256	2401
party member	no = 0, yes =1	0.0290	0.169	0	1
years of education	actual years of education (unit: years)	11.63	3.850	0	22
marriage	other = 0, remarriage (with spouse) =1	0.768	0.422	0	1
health condition	unhealthy = 1, normal = 2, relatively healthy = 3, very healthy = 4, very healthy =5	3.283	0.991	1	5
number of households and total population	other = 0, agricultural household registration =1	0.664	0.472	0	1
building property right	other = 0, family members have full property rights, family members have partial property rights =1	0.783	0.412	0	1
household size	total number of household members (unit: person)	4.304	2.034	1	15

### 3.3. Benchmark Model

$$\text{OLS model: fertility}_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{jobquality}_i + \alpha_2 \text{jobquality}_i^2 + \alpha_3 Z_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{1}$$

The dependent variable is the fertility intention of women of childbearing age (fertility), and the core independent variables are employment quality (jobquality) and its squared term (jobquality<sup>2</sup>).  $\alpha_0$  is the constant term, with coefficient  $\alpha_1$  indicating the effect of employment quality on fertility intention among women of childbearing age, and coefficient  $\alpha_2$  indicating the effect of the squared term of employment quality on fertility intention.  $\alpha_3$  represents the coefficients of control variables, where  $Z_i$  denotes other control variables, mainly including age, age squared, party membership, marital status, health, household registration, years of education, property rights, and family size.  $\varepsilon_i$  represents the residual.

## 4. Empirical Analysis

### 4.1. The Influence of Employment Quality on the Fertility Intention of Women of Childbearing Age

To verify the impact of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age, this paper uses CFPS2018 data and employs OLS regression analysis for empirical testing. Column (1) of Table 3 separately examines the effects of employment quality and its squared term on fertility intentions. Column (2) introduces individual control variables, while column (3) further incorporates family control variables. The empirical results are detailed in Table 3: Employment quality is significantly negative at the 1% level for women of childbearing age, and the squared term of employment quality is significantly positive at the 1% level. This preliminarily confirms that the influence of employment quality on fertility intentions follows a "U" -shaped curve, initially declining and then increasing (the "U" -shaped relationship will be further verified below).

**Table 3.** OLS regression of employment quality on fertility intention of women of childbearing age

	(1)	(2)	(3)
variable	fertility intention	fertility intention	fertility intention
employment quality	-0.614***	-0.338***	-0.348***
	(0.125)	(0.126)	(0.124)
the square of employment quality	0.480***	0.363***	0.371***
	(0.124)	(0.121)	(0.120)
age		0.029*	0.022
		(0.016)	(0.016)
the square of age		-0.000	-0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)
party member		0.051	0.049
		(0.069)	(0.068)
years of education		-0.025***	-0.020***
		(0.004)	(0.004)
marriage		0.129***	0.091***
		(0.034)	(0.034)
health condition		0.012	0.014
		(0.012)	(0.012)
number of households and total population		0.117***	0.112***
		(0.028)	(0.027)
building property right			-0.089***
			(0.030)
household size			0.049***
			(0.006)
constant term	1.818***	1.319***	1.209***
	(0.020)	(0.251)	(0.249)
observed value	2462.000	2462.000	2462.000
r <sup>2</sup>	0.014	0.073	0.096

Standard errors in parentheses \* p < 0.1, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01, and the standard error is reported in parentheses.

## 4.2. Robustness Test and Endogeneity Treatment

### 4.2.1. U-shaped Relationship Test

Haans et al. (2016) [23] found that the significance of only the quadratic term coefficient is not sufficient to fully confirm the existence of a "U" -shaped curve relationship. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct an u-test test on the "U" -shaped curve relationship. This paper uses CFPS (2018) data to perform an u-test test on the relationship between employment quality and fertility intentions among women of childbearing age. The detailed test results are shown in Table 4 and Figure 1. The range of employment quality is (0.005,0.997), with a threshold value of 0.632 falling within the range of the independent variable employment quality. The slope on the left side is -0.583 and is significant at the 1% level, while the slope on the right side is 0.339 and is also significant at the 1% level. This result further indicates that there is a "U" -shaped curve relationship between employment quality and fertility intentions among women of childbearing age.

**4.2.2. Change the Employment Quality Measurement Standard**

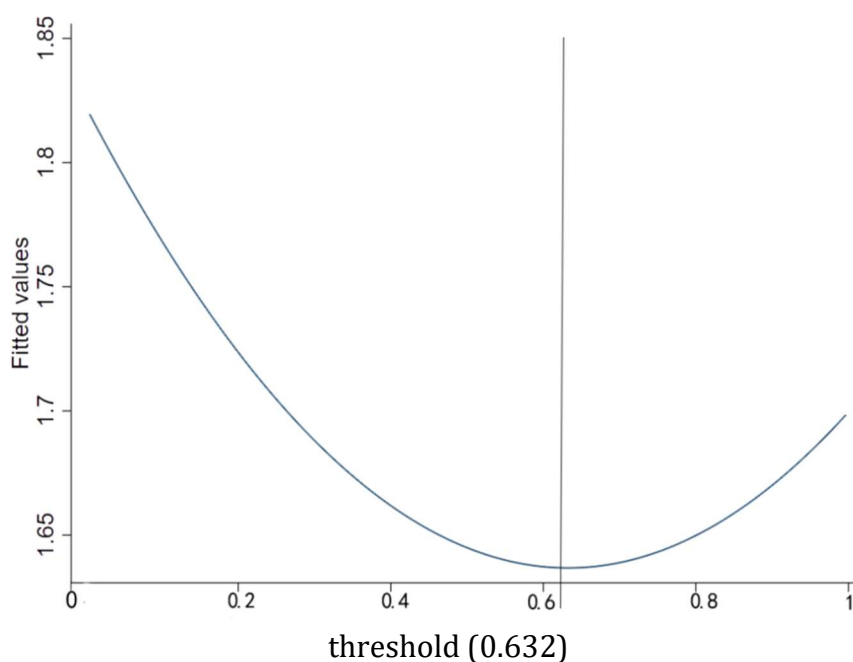
This paper also draws on a treatment method of Ming Juan (2018)[24] and adopts the equal-weighted average method to re-measure the employment quality. After using the equal weighted average method to measure the employment quality and then conducting regression analysis again, the empirical results are shown in column (1) of Table 5: The employment quality has a "U" -shaped curve relationship with the fertility intention of women of childbearing age, which shows a significant decline first and then an increase at the 1% level. This proves that the result is still reliable and effective after changing the measurement method.

**4.2.3. Reduce the Sample Size of Fertility Intention**

The Chinese have always valued their descendants. Even though modern people have gradually diluted the traditional fertility concepts of "raising children to support one's old age" or "continuing the family line," the importance of children to the family remains paramount [25]. In the earlier part of this paper, samples with zero fertility intentions were included; now, these samples are removed. By reducing the sample size, we observe changes in employment quality and fertility intentions to study the impact of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age. The empirical results are detailed in Table 5, column (2): Employment quality is significantly negative for the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age at the 5% level, while the square of employment quality is significantly positive at the same level, indicating that after reducing the sample size, a "U" -shaped curve relationship still exists, showing a decline followed by an increase.

**Table 4.** shows the results of u-test

variable	Lower bound	Upper bound
Interval	0.005	0.997
Slope	-0.583	0.339
t-value	-5.371	3.025
P> t	4.20e-08	0.001



**Figure 1.** Fit value diagram

**Table 5.** Results of robustness test

	(1)	(2)
variable	fertility intention	fertility intention
employment quality	-1.181***	-0.254**
	(0.424)	(0.115)
the square of employment quality	0.982***	0.281**
	(0.374)	(0.112)
age	0.022	0.006
	(0.016)	(0.015)
the square of age	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)
party member	0.052	0.099
	(0.069)	(0.065)
years of education	-0.019***	-0.020***
	(0.004)	(0.004)
marriage	0.092***	0.018
	(0.034)	(0.032)
health condition	0.015	0.005
	(0.012)	(0.011)
number of households and total population	0.107***	0.077***
	(0.027)	(0.026)
building property right	-0.088***	-0.095***
	(0.030)	(0.028)
household size	0.049***	0.049***
	(0.006)	(0.006)
constant term	1.478***	1.612***
	(0.267)	(0.234)
observed value	2462.000	2409.000
r2	0.096	0.085

Standard errors in parentheses \* p <0.1, \*\* p <0.05, \*\*\* p <0.01, and the standard error is reported in parentheses.

#### 4.2.4. Instrumental Variable Regression

There may be a bidirectional causal relationship between employment quality and the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age, leading to biases in the baseline model estimates. Based on the upper-level aggregation number, which can serve as an instrumental variable for lower-level explanatory variables [26], this paper selects the "mean score of county-level employment quality" as the instrumental variable (IV) for employment quality, using ivregress2 for 2SLS estimation and its tests. The empirical results are detailed in Table 6. Columns (1) and (2) in Table 6 present the first-stage regression results, where the instrumental variable coefficients are significant, and both F-values exceed 10. Column (3) presents the second-stage regression results, with Cragg-Donald Wald F statistic and Anderson canon. corr. LM statistic rejecting the null hypothesis at the 1% level, indicating that the instrumental variable is valid. The coefficient of employment quality is -1.110, significantly negative at the 1% level, while the coefficient of the squared term of employment quality is 0.894, positively significant at the 1% level, further confirming the "U" -shaped impact of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age.

**Table 6.** Results of two-stage regression analysis of 2SLS

variable	(1)	(2)	(3)
	employment quality	the square of employment quality	fertility intention
the average quality of employment	0.491***		
	(3.951)		
the square of the mean of employment quality		1.240***	
		(9.640)	
employment quality			-1.110***
			(-4.085)
the square of employment quality			0.894***
			(3.481)
constant term	-0.148	-0.080	1.233***
	(-1.183)	(-0.618)	(4.862)
Cragg-Donald Wald F statistic			227.143
Anderson canon. corr. LM statistic			385.104
observed value	2462.000	2462.000	2462.000

t statistics in parentheses \* p <0.1, \*\* p <0.05, \*\*\* p <0.01, and the t value is reported in parentheses.

### 4.3. Heterogeneity Analysis of Employment Quality on Fertility Intention of Women of Childbearing Age

#### 4.3.1. Test based on the Perspective of Urban-rural Classification Differences

This study divided the sample into urban and rural areas according to their place of residence to more accurately reflect the differences in employment quality between urban and rural areas, and to delve deeper into the heterogeneity of employment quality's impact on fertility intentions among women of childbearing age in both urban and rural settings. The empirical results are shown in Table 7 column (1) and column (2): The coefficients for the impact of employment quality and its square term on fertility intentions among women of childbearing age in rural areas are -0.296 and 0.384, respectively, while those for urban areas are -0.408 and 0.401, respectively. Compared to rural areas, an improvement in employment quality shows a more pronounced "U" -shaped curve characteristic of first decreasing and then increasing fertility intentions among women of childbearing age in urban areas.

In the early stages of improving employment quality, people's job quality remains relatively low. The reduction in job opportunities and increased risk of career interruptions due to childbirth lead to a "motherhood penalty" [27]. In contrast, urban areas have better economic development levels, which attract talent and result in an oversupply of labor, leading to imbalances between employers and employees. This makes jobs somewhat substitutable and more mobile. When employment quality reaches a certain threshold, the willingness to have children among urban women of childbearing age shows a significant upward trend compared to rural women of childbearing age. This is because at this point, employment quality has improved significantly, with better working hours, income, stability, security, and job satisfaction, alleviating concerns about the costs of childbirth. Additionally, urban areas offer more convenient public services, medical facilities, educational resources, and transportation compared to rural areas.

### 4.3.2. Testing based on the Perspective of Age Difference

The previous results show that the impact of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age follows a "U" -shaped curve, first decreasing and then increasing. For women of childbearing age, an increase in age leads to changes in physical function, increased risks of difficult labor, decreased egg quality, and higher infertility rates, all of which affect their fertility intentions. Medically, women aged 35 and older are defined as advanced maternal age [28]. Therefore, this paper categorizes women of childbearing age into two groups: those under 35 and those 35 and older, to further examine the differences between the two. The empirical results are shown in Table 7 column (3) and column (4):the coefficients for the impact of employment quality and its squared term on the fertility intentions of women under 35 are -0.395 and 0.428, respectively, while for women 35 and older, they are -0.256 and 0.278, respectively. Compared to women aged 35 and older, employment quality more prominently exhibits the "U" -shaped curve characteristic of first decreasing and then increasing fertility intentions among women under 35.

### 4.3.3. Tests based on Education Level

Existing research generally suggests that education level is related to women's fertility intentions [29]. Therefore, this paper reclassifies education levels into high school and below, and college and above for heterogeneity testing. The empirical results are shown in Table 7 column (5) and column (6):Compared to women of college and above, those with high school and below show a more pronounced "U" -shaped curve in employment quality and fertility intentions, which first declines and then rises at the 5% significance level. This may be because women with lower education levels typically secure low-skilled, low-wage jobs. Limited by their narrow knowledge base, heavy life burdens, and challenging work conditions, they often struggle to consider multiple factors beyond fertility decisions. However, once employment quality reaches a certain threshold, their fertility intentions tend to rise. Specifically, as employment quality improves, economic conditions enhance, and job stability increases, these factors provide them with a stronger material foundation and psychological support, thereby boosting their fertility intentions.

**Table 7.** Heterogeneity regression results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
variable	village	town	under 35	35 years and over	high school and below	college degree or above
employment quality	-0.296	-0.408***	-0.395***	-0.256	-0.394**	-0.324
	(0.211)	(0.156)	(0.146)	(0.239)	(0.159)	(0.223)
the square of employment quality	0.384*	0.401***	0.428***	0.278	0.353**	0.348*
	(0.218)	(0.147)	(0.141)	(0.233)	(0.175)	(0.197)
controlled variable	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
constant term	1.635***	1.012***	1.622***	1.646***	1.238***	0.611
	(0.393)	(0.326)	(0.094)	(0.132)	(0.286)	(0.522)
observed value	835.000	1627.000	1724.000	738.000	1505.000	957.000
r2	0.109	0.085	0.083	0.109	0.082	0.039

Standard errors in parentheses \* p <0.1, \*\* p <0.05, \*\*\* p <0.01, and the standard error is reported in parentheses.

For women with higher levels of education, they often have access to broader employment opportunities and demonstrate stronger economic independence, tending to invest more time in work rather than focusing solely on family matters and reproductive activities. At the same

time, for women of childbearing age with higher education levels, the focus of child-rearing is more on quality rather than quantity. In this process of quality parenting, there are conflicts and contradictions between economic costs, time costs, living standards, and personal space and time. Additionally, women with higher education levels, due to their rich and diverse knowledge systems, are more likely to embrace and integrate into modern trends. They pursue the realization of personal value and the quality of independent living, enjoying the pleasure brought by personal interests.

## 5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

### 5.1. Research Conclusions

This paper explores the impact of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age and uses data from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) for empirical testing, leading to the following conclusions: First, the effect of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age follows a "U" -shaped curve, initially declining and then increasing. The conclusion remains valid after robustness tests and heterogeneity adjustments. Second, the influence of employment quality on the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age varies across different factors such as place of residence, age, and education level, with more significant effects observed among urban residents, women under 35, and those with high school education or below.

### 5.2. Policy Recommendations

First, improve the employment quality of women of childbearing age. Firstly, the state should strengthen supervision and inspection of enterprises and employers, fully implement the rights of female employees regarding labor and rest, increase work efficiency, and ensure that working hours do not exceed legal standards. Secondly, efforts should be intensified to combat and prohibit discrimination against female workers in the labor market, protecting the equal employment rights of women who are pregnant or nursing. It is essential to effectively safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of female employees and prevent hidden "motherhood penalties" due to childbirth. This can be achieved by further improving laws to strictly punish employers who engage in such "motherhood penalties."

Second, adopt differentiated publicity and incentive measures for groups with different levels of education. The government and social organizations can enhance the willingness of highly educated women to have children through educational campaigns. This includes promoting fertility policies, informing people about government support measures for childbirth, and boosting confidence and willingness to have children. At the same time, they should increase expectations for economic benefits, encouraging childbirth during their undergraduate, master's, and doctoral studies. Rewards should be given to those who choose to have children during these periods, such as setting up award ceremonies and presenting prizes to families with multiple children, making childbirth an implicit benefit. For women of lower education levels, the government should strengthen policy support by introducing vocational training and re-education policies tailored for low-educated women, incentive's businesses and training institutions through fiscal subsidies and tax incentives. Additionally, optimize the education system to encourage closer alignment between vocational education and market demands, offering specialized courses suitable for women to enhance practical skills and employ ability.

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