

A Study on the Essence of Paternity Leave

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Abstract: The declining fertility rate in China is being considered a serious issue, and introducing maternity leaves for males is widely seen as a feasible solution. However, the possible effects of this practice are still uncertain. This paper mainly focuses on how paternity leaves contribute to the fertility rate. Furthermore, this paper draws on research that shows that when maternity leaves for females stand alone, women suffer from increasing discrimination in the workplace and legitimating maternity leaves for males could elevate gender equality. This paper also introduces research on Sweden's demography as a case of international comparison. This work concludes that paternity leave could raise peoples' willingness to bear children by reducing the tension in workplaces and families. It is pointed out in the work how, resulting from paternity leaves, promoted gender equality and fatherhood in families could increase the fertility rate, building up bases of further research in these areas.

Keywords: paternity leaves, fertility rate, gender equality, family relationships, China's birth rate

1. Introduction

During the last three decades, China's fertility rate has been far below the replacement level, pushing the society under the pressure of an aging population. The increasing stress from both workplace and family is a non-negligible reason for peoples' declining will to child-bearing. To reduce the stress of childbirth, the Chinese government has increased the length of maternity leave several times. However, the essence of maternity leaves for males has been continuously ignored. This essay will mainly focus on the positive influences of paternity leave and how it will boost the fertility rate.

2. Limitations of existing laws

The current paternity leave system in China has several limitations. On the one hand, the system itself has not been clarified and explained enough to the public. It is stated that couples who give birth with recognition of the law will be rewarded with maternity leave. Still, the relevant legislative power is given to the Provincial local people's congresses and governments, so the codification of paternity leave policies exists in provincial variations. Such policies are lowly ranked and lack authority, making it difficult to receive sufficient attention in practice. On the other hand, due to the lack of a unified high-rank regulation, paternity leave has different names in different places, and the number of days varies greatly, as well as the treatment levels. As a result, the system's effectiveness has been reduced severely [1]. Besides, it is hard for the government to ensure that companies follow the

regulations since the cost of violating the paternity leave policy is radically low [1]. If a company refuses a legal request for maternity leave from a worker, it is almost impossible for workers to receive proper reparations. Most importantly, paternity leave usually lasts only three to ten days, which is far too short [1]. Next paragraphs will introduce the advantages of increasing the length of paternity leave.

3. Essence of developing paternity leaves

3.1. benefits to the workplace

To start with, compulsory paternity leave can reduce the rate of workplace discrimination against women. The long periods of absence during parturition make it more costly for firms to employ female workers [2]. Increasing the maternity leave for women in the policy document without governmental reimbursement to companies further reduces female employees' market competitiveness. Studies have shown that lengthening the period of paid maternity leave for female workers hurts their long-term wages. Every extra day of maternity leave results in a decrease of 1.6% in female employee's monthly salary [3]. Another research indicated that the more children a woman has, the lower her prospective income would be since she is more likely to quit her full-time job and become self-employed or work part-time [4]. Meanwhile, discrimination based on the motherhood penalty theory assumes that a woman cannot be a good employee and a good mother at the same time, and this discrimination is manifest in the hiring process even in developed countries [4]. In this circumstance, due to the huge economic pressure, many women chose to have children at an older age or even refused to have children. Giving long paternity leave to male workers would equalize the cost of employing male workers or female workers, and it would be less likely for firms to exert gender-based discrimination in the hiring process and salary-calculating process [1]. Without the pressure from discrimination in the workplace, women will have a stable source of income and a more relaxed state of mind. In this way, women will be more likely to be willing to give birth to children.

3.2. benefits within families

Besides the positive effect on women's workplace position, paternity leave increases the presence of "fatherhood" within families and thus elevates children's mental health and women's level of happiness at home. Although women were claimed to be able to lift half of the sky in Mao's era after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the remnant of feudal ideology and its patriarchal component still existed. In a feudal Chinese family, males play the role of "breadwinners" while females stay at their homes and take the responsibility of bringing up children. Nowadays, with the development of industrialization and the widespread enlightenment of feminist movements, it is now taken for granted that women are entitled to pursue higher education and compete for equivalent payment in the job market. Nonetheless, many people still hold the view that the duty of child-bringing should be mainly fulfilled by mothers. This phenomenon of the absence of fatherhood during the course of raising children is called "widowed child-bearing" in popular culture and has triggered heated discussions. The absence of fatherhood could lead to many psychological defects in the family. Among the families that are considered typical "widowed-child-bearing" families, 44.6% of the couples admitted that they could not get along well with each other, and the behaviors of their children often contain depression and violence [5]. One way of tackling these problems would be to allow longer paternity leave. International experiences have demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between males' participation rate in bringing up their children and the length and number of their days off [6]. It has also been shown that husbands who are present during the birth of their children and stay with them in the following three days are more likely to have a high participation rate during

child-bringing [6]. With the increasing presence of fatherhood in families, child-bearing would be less of a burden for women. Also, with the support of their husbands, mothers would be less likely to suffer from postpartum depression [7]; therefore, they will have a healthier state of mind and body. The possible negative consequences of the absence of fatherhood in a family--the bad relationship between parents and misbehaviors of children--will reduce if longer paternity leaves are granted by laws. If fathers have long paternity leave, women would be more likely to be willing to have children due to the reduced burdens and risks.

Not only mothers' well-being would be influenced by the presence of fatherhood, but children's as well. Many researchers have inferred that the relationship between couples can have a deep influence on their children's sense of value. Frequent conflict between parents often results in higher rates of depression and misdemeanor of their kids [8], and teenagers who grew up in a "widowed parenting" family are likely to have moral, psychological, and social problems. In the United States, 90% of criminal activity is committed by young people, and many of them come from families with a lack of fatherhood [5]. Such evidence indicates that the atmosphere within families has a great impact on children's value judgments, and the behavior of parents can influence children's opinions of marriage and child-bearing. For example, if a teenager grew up in a happy family with loving parents, their attitude towards getting married and raising children would likely be a positive one. In contrast, it is hard to imagine that a person who grew up without enough care and was left with a bad impression of their primary family would be passionate about building one. Therefore, improving the quality of relationships between family members could successfully reduce future generations' resistance towards marriage and childbearing. By providing fathers with more free time to spend with their families, children would have more chances to interact with both of their parents, especially the usually missing male role model, and wives would have fewer negative feelings that come from the stress of having to bring up children alone. In this case, the members of the family would develop a friendlier relationship, leaving the children a good impression of family life, therefore reducing the likelihood of them refusing to marry or give birth to children in the future.

After all, the presence of fatherhood in a family is not and should not be a burden for men. Just as the myth of motherhood brings both happiness and toil to mothers, the fulfillment of fatherhood for one's children is an entitlement for a father. It is a responsibility and a blessing at the same time. Men should not be deprived of the right to intimately interact with their children once they are born. Young men should be given the opportunity and proper training to become fathers in action and relationships, not just biological fathers. Therefore, extending paternity leave benefits women, children, and men in a family. Its implementation is the government's duty to enhance citizens' well-being.

3.3. benefits to society

Apart from the benefits of paternity leave for one family and the members in it, the equaling of the length of paternity leave with the length of maternity leave will have a generally positive effect on the society's atmosphere and attitudes towards the gender equality movement. Currently, the word "patriarchy" is usually used in contexts related to older generations. However, patriarchy runs through every aspect that involves the tug-of-war between the opposite genders. In the discussion of child-bearing and child-raising, who is burdened with the obligation to take care of the children is also a topic heavily related to patriarchy. In the feudal tradition, mothers are naturally obliged to take care of their newborn babies, although this may incur damage to their bodies as well as impairment to their careers. However, for their male partners, the responsibility to take care of the newborn babies is usually something optional and something worth praising by the public. A man who fulfills this responsibility is often rewarded with the title of "a good father who is willing to do extra tasks." These gender-related myths are rooted in many cultures and are only unveiled by the debate on paternity leave. The different lengths of maternity leave and paternity leave exhibit an endorsement

of authorities that mothers should spend more effort on child-raising compared with fathers. This endorsement is not only a signal to women that they are not supported by the authority to secure their equal rights but also a reinforcement of men's belief in their privileged position in this game. Therefore, the equaling of the lengths of maternity leave and paternity leave is not a charity for women, but the government's emergent task to ensure citizens' equal rights. If righteous policies are not set up, women lose the very grounding for righting the wrongs of patriarchy and arguing for equal rights in gender discussions.

One example of the successful use of paternity leave is Sweden. Since 1960, Swedish law has extended subsidies and parental leaves on both men and women [9]. Until 2015, all working parents enjoyed 16 months of paid parental leave, an equilibrium achieved by the wrestling between the state and the employer. The salary for the first 390 days of parental leave is 77.6% of the original salary, and the next 90 days contain a fixed salary of 180 crowns per day [9]. To encourage fathers to participate in parenting, Swedish law legislates that a father must take leave for at least two months. The fertility rate of Sweden experienced a rapid rise during the 1980s, reaching its peak of 2.13 in 1990 [10], implicating a strong correlation between paternity leave and childbirth rate. Although the Swedish fertility rate temporarily dropped in the next ten years, it rose again from 1.56 in 2000 to 1.92 in 2015 [11]. Apart from the economic factors in the workplace, the policies of guaranteed and paid paternity leave contributed as an important factor in the increasing fertility rate in Sweden [10].

4. Possible unexpected consequences

However, one problem with the regulation of paternity leave is that it is hard to implement. It would be difficult for the government to ensure that private companies in towns and rural areas follow the regulations. One possible solution is to make laws that legislate considerable punishments for companies that deprive male workers' rights of paternity leave and to set up a supervising group to promote its implementation. Moreover, since long paternity leave might be a heavy burden to small companies, increasing the governmental subsidies might be the indispensable solution to this problem. On the other hand, such a policy's significant impact on the economic system and governmental deficit must be considered. Surprisingly, there are other innovations of paternity leave in different forms. Some researchers advocate that if a mother heals her body and is willing to return to her working position in advance, her remaining maternity leave should be transferred to her husband [6]. However, this transference of parental leave must be homogeneous as measured by time and should not be transferred into money. A counter-example is that Beijing's policy in 2009 granted a 30-day paternity leave but allowed male workers to exchange it for a month's extra salary [6]. As a result, paternity leave was merely nominal in this case. In comparison, Sweden's mandatory and untransferrable paternity leave ensures men's transitioning into the new father role and their devotion to children and family [6].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, due to its positive influence on family relationships and gender equality in both the workplace and society as a whole, increasing the length of paternity leave could successfully increase the fertility rate in China. However, its complex influences on the economics and the market should not be ignored.

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