Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Social Psychology and Humanity Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31974

# *Analysis of Women's Reproductive Challenges and Workplace Competitiveness: The Mechanism Chain of Maternity Punishment and Multi-Party Breakthrough Paths*

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***Abstract.*** Under the dual background of demographic transition and intensified competition in the workplace, the contradiction between women's fertility and career development has become increasingly prominent, which has become an important issue related to social livelihood and labor market efficiency. This paper focuses on the relationship between female fertility dilemma and workplace competitiveness and focuses on the mechanism and breakthrough path of fertility punishment. It is found that the female reproductive dilemma is the result of the structural mechanism. Through the chain of "feminization of care responsibility-fragmentation of time and energy-career interruption and loss of human capital-job marginalization and evaluation bias-long-term income and promotion loss", the female workplace competitiveness is systematically damaged, which is embodied in four dilemmas: physiological health pressure, family care burden, blocked career development and rising economic pressure. The causes involve cultural inertia, institutional supply, enterprise management and family consultation mechanism. The research points out that the government-led risk socialization, enterprise-driven organizational model transformation and family participation responsibility should be combined to form a multi-party force. The research in this paper provides theoretical support and practical guidance for cracking female reproductive punishment, promoting gender equality and sustainable development of labor market, and is of great significance for optimizing people's livelihood security and releasing human capital potential.

***Keywords:*** Women's reproductive challenges, workplace competitiveness, maternity punishment and multi-party breakthrough paths

## 1. Introduction

With the changes in population structure and the rising intensity of labor market competition, "childbearing" has transcended the scope of individuals and families and has become a social issue that concerns the well-being of the general public, such as labor supply, enterprise efficiency, and social development [1]. Over the past few decades, the labor participation rate and educational level of women have continued to increase. However, becoming a mother still has a significant impact on

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU31974

women's career paths: reduced job stability, slowed career development, suppressed income growth, and even being eliminated through the invisible mechanism of "pregnancy risk" during recruitment. The World Bank, when evaluating the institutional environment of various countries, found that, despite the continuous improvement of legal guarantees, there are still significant gaps in the implementation and supportive policies, especially in terms of care support and the execution level [2].

The core proposition of this article is that the reproductive difficulties of women are not a temporary disturbance caused by personal choices, but the result of a set of structural mechanisms. It systematically damages women's labor competitiveness through the path of "femaleization of care responsibilities - fragmentation of time and energy - interruption in work and loss of human capital - marginalization of positions and evaluation bias - long-term income and promotion losses". Therefore, all attempts to place solutions on the narrative of women being "more diligent" or "more self-disciplined" will once again transfer the structural problems to individuals. The breakthrough point can only be a redistribution jointly undertaken and institutionalized by the government, enterprises, and families.

## 2. Specific manifestations of women's reproductive challenges

### 2.1. Physiological and health challenges

During pregnancy and the postpartum period, these are objective physiological states. In highly intense, fast-paced, and "immediate response-oriented" organizational environments, physical costs are often translated into performance risks: mismatch between commuting and overtime hours, contradiction between job requirements and pregnancy restrictions, and long-term compression of work energy due to postpartum breastfeeding and insufficient sleep. It is not that female employees cannot "bear it", but that the organization defaults that "ideal employees" should be able to be mobilized at any time and do not need to take care - when mothers do not meet such defaults, they are easily labeled as "less stable" and "lower in commitment", and are overlooked in key project allocation and promotion candidate lists [3].

### 2.2. Family care challenges

The core of the care problem is not "whether there is love", but "who bears the main responsibility and what resources are used to bear it". The International Labour Organization believes that in many parts of the world, a large number of women are excluded from the labor market due to the obligation of unpaid care, and "care barriers" have a structural scale [4]. When childcare supply is insufficient, the coverage of public inclusive childcare is not extensive enough, and private childcare is expensive, families will "internalize" it, and the most common undertaker is women. The result is: women's time is fragmented, making it difficult to invest in tasks that require continuous attention and visible output; they are also passively absent from "opportunity-based work" such as business trips, evening gatherings, and temporary overtime, thus causing an invisible gap in the accumulation of career capital.

### 2.3. Workplace development challenges

At the workplace level, the impact of childbirth usually manifests in three ways: First, maternity leave and the postpartum period cause career disruptions. Second, after being passively returned to work, they face the "experience depreciation" caused by the need for ability renewal and project

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chain disruption. Third, they suffer from "maternity punishment" in the evaluation system: "Time limits brought by care" is misunderstood by the organization as "insufficient ability and commitment". A review study on the penalty for mothers' wages shows that, after controlling for many variables, the penalty for motherhood remains significant, and there are heterogeneity sources from model settings, samples, and regions [5]. That is to say, the impression of "not working hard" is not an individual's prejudice, but rather a result shaped by the institutionalized evaluation logic of the individual.

### 2.4. Economic pressure dilemma

The rising costs of childbirth and parenting (medical care, childcare, education) have forced families to calculate cash flow and opportunity costs. Once women experience career interruptions, their income reduction not only occurs in the current period but also leads to long-term return losses through the lack of work experience, promotion, performance points, and social capital. Therefore, many women are forced to adopt "risk minimization strategies": doing stable but unremarkable jobs, avoiding difficult tracks, or breaking themselves at critical moments. This is not "lack of ambition", but rather an inevitable move under the constraints of real conditions.

Beyond the immediate household budget shock, this "risk minimization" has a compounding, path- dependent effect on women's careers. When families are liquidity-constrained, the priority often shifts from maximizing long-term earnings to ensuring predictable short-term income and benefits—especially health insurance, paid leave, and job security. As a result, women may self-select out of high-variance but high-upside roles (e.g., commission-based positions, early-stage startups, intensive client-facing tracks) precisely during the years when career acceleration typically happens [6,7]. This choice can permanently flatten wage trajectories due to lost "growth years," weaker bargaining power in future salary negotiations, and reduced access to high-visibility projects that function as promotion gateways. Meanwhile, the economic burden does not end when women return to work: childcare expenses can effectively operate like an implicit tax on maternal employment, making additional working hours yield diminishing net returns. Under these conditions, what looks externally like "opting out" is often a rational adaptation to a system where the financial architecture of care makes sustained competition disproportionately costly for mothers.

## 3. Multiple causes of the predicament: from culture to institutions, and then to organizations and families

### 3.1. Cultural causes

Under patriarchy, the division of family roles: Men's role is to work outside to support the family; Women's role is to take care of the family, especially children. In addition, there are higher requirements for the level of motherhood care. If there are problems with the child, people will first think of criticizing and educating the mother rather than the father. This has shaped the evaluation logic that taking care of the child is something that women "should do", thus providing a "justification" for excluding women from the labor market search. The predicament that women face in balancing their career development and family responsibilities stems fundamentally from the deep-rooted social and cultural structure. In the current era, although the traditional gender concept of "men outside, women inside" has undergone some changes and weakening, the expectation that women should prioritize their "maternal duties" still deeply takes root in the mainstream society. Women are still conventionally expected to bear the main responsibility for taking care of the

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family, and their social identity is often primarily defined as "mother" or "wife", rather than an independent individual [8].

At the same time, the implicit "ideal employee" model in modern workplaces has further exacerbated this predicament. This model assumes that workers possess characteristics such as high flexibility in time, stable commitment, and emotional neutrality. Its premise is actually based on the implicit assumption of "no major family care responsibilities". This standard, seemingly neutral at the institutional level, actually better aligns with the roles traditionally assigned to men by society, thereby objectively excluding a large number of female workers who bear family responsibilities.

### 3.2. Institutional policy causes

The problem of care is a typical public good: Without universal childcare and affordable care services, families will use individual time to "fill the gaps".Research pointed out in its systematic review of global childcare policies that childcare services and childcare leave are important institutional combinations for promoting gender equality in labor participation [2]. The childcare system in the Chinese context is also accelerating its construction: The state has conducted a childcare service statistics survey and provided detailed reports on supply capacity, institution construction, and policy implementation [7]. At the same time, the quality and norms of childcare are being implemented through standardized paths, such as the quality assessment standards for childcare institutions specifying requirements for qualifications, personnel, and service content. However, if implementation and accessibility do not keep up, the system still cannot truly reduce the pressure on the family side.

### 3.3. Enterprise management causes

Under competitive pressure, enterprises tend to view childbirth as an uncertain cost: maternity leave arrangements, job replacement, training, and management costs will all be included in the employment risk; if there is a lack of institutionalized job handover, return-to-work training, and flexible arrangements, enterprises are more likely to "pre-emptively avoid" in recruitment and promotion, passing the pressure on to individual women. More covertly, there is the performance system: Many organizations reward "presence time", "immediate response", and "frequent visible output". And these are precisely the areas that conflict with the time structure during the baby care period. Therefore, women are not lagging behind due to a decline in ability, but rather due to the evaluation systematically placing caregivers in a disadvantageous position.

### 3.4. Individual and family causes

Many people attribute the reason for women's withdrawal from competition to "personal choice", but in fact, people should see that behind this choice there are its prerequisites: resource limitations, responsibility differences, and institutional deficiencies. In families lacking negotiation and responsibility calculation, women usually sacrifice their own career opportunities to ensure the family, so in this case, the "voluntary exit" decision they make is more of a passive choice.

A deeper problem is that many households operate without transparent "care accounting" no explicit accounting for who does what, for how long, with what mental load and

what the career costs are for each partner. Without this visibility, the default solution tends to follow existing power and gender norms: the partner with comparatively lower current income or

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more "flexible" work—often the woman—absorbs the shock of childcare and domestic labor. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: reduced work hours or paused employment lowers women's earnings and bargaining power, which then becomes the next justification for why she should "naturally" take on even more care work. Importantly, negotiation is not simply a matter of willingness or communication skills; it is structured by external constraints such as workplace rigidity, the availability and affordability of childcare, and the presence (or absence) of father-specific leave. When those supports are missing, family negotiation becomes a negotiation over scarcity, and women's "choice" frequently becomes the path of least resistance rather than the path of greatest preference or potential [9].

## 4. Multi-party countermeasures to break the predicament and enhance workplace competitiveness

### 4.1. At the government level

improving the guarantee and implementation mechanisms for childbirth. To prevent enterprises from shifting the costs onto women, stronger social sharing and more stringent enforcement constraints are needed. Second, expand the supply of universal childcare and increase the accessibility of subsidies. Childcare is not just about having an institution; it is also about being "affordable, accessible, and trustworthy". The national report on the promotion of childcare emphasizes the need to dynamically grasp the supply capacity and development status, essentially providing a basis for precise policy investment and structural optimization [7]. Establishing a return-to-work support system: through training subsidies, re-employment services, and career alignment programs to break the "childbirth - disconnection - deceleration" path lock.

### 4.2. At the enterprise level

Implementing scalable flexible working systems - including working from home, flexible working hours, outcome-oriented, with job handovers and process documentation, reducing the requirement for personal "presence"; Second, establish a training period and buffer period for returning to work after childbirth, and set performance standards for these periods: making the return to work not "returning to the periphery"; Third, establish a fair promotion channel: integrating the institutional absence of paternity and parental leave into a unified standard, avoiding the mistaken perception that structural absence is due to personal lack of effort.

International experience in paternity leave is worth noting. OECD emphasizes increasing the use of paternity leave and making the responsibility for care more symmetrical, which is conducive to reducing the risk of workplace discrimination where "only women take leaves", thereby easing the motherhood penalty. From the perspective of enterprises, this is not a form of welfare but an investment to reduce female talent loss and increase the return rate of organizational human capital.

### 4.3. At the family level

Emphasizing the substantive participation of men in childcare, including caring for sleeping infants, household management, emotional labor, etc., rather than just "playing with children". Second, integrate supportive resources: combine the support of the elderly and socialized childcare, rather than understanding family support as "women alone bearing the burden". Third, support women's career development as part of the family goal: equal negotiation of family plans, career milestones,

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residence and workplace, etc., reducing the probability of women being decelerated during important growth stages.

To transform this "joint project" into something more than rhetoric, families require clear guidelines for coordinating their efforts as well as mechanisms for holding each other accountable. For example, they might establish a rotating "care-work schedule" that is posted every week: which includes not only overt labor (feeding, bathing, school drop-offs) but covert mental workload (scheduling doctors' visits, tracking items, contacting caretakers, meal planning) [10].

Couples can then agree on minimum standards—e.g., each partner owns specific domains end-to-end—so that responsibility is not reduced to "helping" but becomes true ownership. In parallel, families can set career-protection commitments, such as ring-fencing uninterrupted work blocks for both partners, rotating who takes emergency leave, and making major career decisions (job change, relocation, graduate study) through a two-career lens rather than treating one career as the default and the other as adjustable. Finally, combining elder support and paid childcare works best when framed as a reliability strategy: elders provide flexibility for emergencies, while formal childcare provides predictable coverage—together they reduce volatility, which is precisely what forces mothers into constant trade-offs. When households institutionalize these practices, they not only reduce women's care burden but also prevent long-term human capital erosion and create a more stable platform for both partners to compete professionally.

## 5. Conclusion

The core of the female childbirth predicament is not "whether women are working hard enough", but how risks and costs are distributed. As long as the care tasks remain highly feminized, public childcare remains insufficient, and organizations still use "ideal employees" as the implicit standard, the motherhood penalty will continue to exist in a more hidden way. The solution is to shift the burden of care from the private burden within the family to government, enterprises, and institutionalized supply and sharing; transform fatherhood care from an "optional" to a "structural equality"; transform performance standards from "presence-oriented" to "results and capabilities". After these structural conditions change, women no longer need to give up their careers in exchange for the possibility of motherhood and child-rearing behaviors, and organizations and society can also obtain a more lasting human capital reserve and economic growth momentum.

Note that "redistribution" must be thought of not as a moral appeal but as a redesign of incentives: when parental leave and maternity leave are viewed as a kind of infrastructure (transportation or education) then recruitment-related risks; and making promotion of women the sole province of individual female employees. That is why it reduces the motivation of employers to engage in statistical discrimination during the recruitment stage and to implement "silent punishments" (such as temporary assignment of tasks, stagnant promotion paths, or lowered performance expectations) after returning to work. At the same time, an irreplaceable and well-paid father's leave can change the bargaining power within the family: if men are institutionally expected to take leave, then the care burden for women will become less predictable, thereby breaking the cultural and organizational assumption that "motherhood necessarily means lower input". Finally, shifting the evaluation criteria from "working hours" to achievements and capabilities requires specific management tools - clear deliverables, documented handover systems, and similar retraining methods upon returning to work - so that the temporary absence does not permanently erase the accumulated value. In this sense, cost is not just an aid program, but rather a pro-productivity program which could prevent talent loss, stabilize career development paths, and transform the care work from an individual burden to a social common investment.

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