

# A Comparative Institutional Study on Fertility Issues in East Asia and Northern Europe from the Perspective of Gender Equality

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**Abstract:** Low fertility rates have become a common population development challenge faced by East Asia and Northern Europe, but there are significant differences in the choice of institutional paths and policy effects between the two regions. From the perspective of gender equality, this article systematically compares the value orientation, policy tools and implementation mechanisms of fertility support systems in East Asia and Northern Europe through the construction of a theoretical analysis framework. Research has found that the "de-family-ization" policy model in Northern Europe has achieved a coordinated increase in fertility rates and women's development by reconstructing the gender division of labor order and strengthening the sharing of public responsibilities. However, the "family-based" policy in East Asia has fallen into a predicament of fertility support due to its failure to break free from the constraints of traditional gender concepts. The research conclusion provides theoretical references for East Asian countries to improve their fertility policy systems and promote the process of gender equality.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality; Fertility Policy; The East Asian Model; Nordic Mode; System Comparison

## 1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the global population structure has been accelerating its transformation, and low fertility rates have become a common challenge faced by most countries. According to the United Nations' "World Population Prospects 2022" report, the global total fertility rate has dropped from 4.9 in 1950 to 2.3 in 2021 and is projected to further decline to 2.1 by 2050 [1]. East Asia and Northern Europe, as two typical development models, show significant differentiation in fertility rate performance: The

East Asian region (represented by Japan and South Korea) has long been trapped in the "ultra-low fertility rate trap", with the total fertility rate consistently below 1.3 [2]; The Nordic countries (represented by Sweden and Norway) have maintained a replacement fertility rate of around 1.7 through institutional innovation [3]. This difference not only stems from the disparity in economic development stages, but is also closely related to the design logic of gender equality policies in various countries.

Traditional demographic theory attributes the decline in fertility rate to the inevitable outcome of the miniaturization of family size during the process of industrialization [4]. However, Nordic practices have shown that by reconfiguring the gender division of labor model through institutions, it is possible to ensure the development of women while maintaining a moderate fertility level. For instance, Sweden has effectively alleviated the work-family conflict for women by implementing a "father-exclusive parental leave" policy, which has increased the usage rate of father-exclusive parental leave to over 40% [5]. In contrast, although East Asian countries have invested a large amount of financial resources to support fertility, due to the failure of policy design to break through the path dependence of "family-oriented", the policy effect has never been able to break through the "low fertility trap". Since 2006, the South Korean government has implemented the "Low Fertility Rate and Aging Society Basic Plan", with a cumulative investment of over 200 trillion won. However, the total fertility rate still dropped from 1.13 in 2006 to 0.78 in 2022 [6]. This contradictory phenomenon highlights the core position of the gender equality perspective in the analysis of fertility policies.

This article takes gender equality theory as the analytical framework, systematically compares the value orientation, policy tools and

implementation mechanisms of fertility support systems in East Asia and Northern Europe, reveals the gender logic differences behind policy design, and provides theoretical inspiration for East Asian countries to break through the low fertility predicament. The research adopts the methods of literature analysis and comparative study. By sorting out the policy texts, academic literature and reports of international organizations of the two countries, an analytical chain of "value orientation - policy tools - implementation effects" is constructed.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Core Concepts**

### **2.1 The Interactive Mechanism between Gender Equality and Fertility Decision-making**

The impact of gender equality on the fertility rate follows a dual path: Firstly, the improvement of women's educational level and the increase in labor participation rate will directly compress the time window for childbirth, forming a "development inhibition effect" [7]; Secondly, public policies can alleviate work-family conflicts and create a "policy compensation effect" by reconstructing the gender division of labor model within families [8]. The practice of Nordic countries shows that when the policy compensation effect is stronger than the development inhibitory effect, the fertility rate can be maintained near the replacement level. The core of this interactive mechanism lies in whether the system can break the traditional parenting division of labor model of "mother as the main body and father as the auxiliary", and achieve the socialized sharing of parenting responsibilities.

### **2.2 Dimension Selection for Institutional Comparison**

This study conducts comparisons from three dimensions: First, the value orientation dimension, examines whether the policy design takes gender equality as the core goal; Secondly, in terms of policy tools, analyze the combination methods of tools such as cash subsidies, childcare services, and parental leave. Thirdly, in terms of the implementation mechanism dimension, assess the responsive-sharing model among the government, enterprises and families during policy implementation. This multi-dimensional comparison framework can

reveal the institutional logic behind policy differences and avoid the one-sidedness of single-indicator comparisons.

### **2.3 Typicality of East Asia and Northern Europe**

The selection of East Asia and Northern Europe as comparative objects is based on the following considerations: At the cultural level, East Asia belongs to the Confucian cultural circle, emphasizing family-oriented and intergenerational responsibilities, and has a high degree of homogeneity in gender concepts; Northern Europe adheres to individualistic values, attaches great importance to the protection of individual rights, and its practices of gender equality have a global exemplary effect. At the institutional level, both countries are under pressure from an aging population, but their policy response paths are completely different: East Asia adopts a "family support" policy, while Northern Europe implements a "social support" policy. This contrast can clearly present the impact of different value orientations on policy effects.

## **3. The Gender Equality Dilemma of Fertility Support Systems in East Asia**

### **3.1 Value Orientation: The Solidification of Gender Division of Labor under the Family-Centered Approach**

The fertility policy in East Asia takes "supporting family child-rearing" as its core goal. However, the policy design implicitly contains the inherent assumptions of traditional gender division of labor. In Japan, the "Basic Law on Countermeasures for a Society with a Low Birth Rate" explicitly states that "the parenting function of families should be strengthened", regarding families as the main bearers of parenting. South Korea's "Basic Law on Low Fertility Rate and Aging Society" even prioritizes "promoting family stability" as its top priority, emphasizing the core role of families in fertility decisions and the process of raising children. This family-oriented value orientation has led to the formulation of policy tools to focus on cash subsidies and the extension of parental leave, while seriously neglecting the supply of public childcare services. In policy texts, expressions such as "mother's responsibility" and "family support" frequently appear. These expressions, in an intangible way,

reinforce the role positioning of women as the main caregivers, firmly binding the heavy responsibility of child-rearing to women and hindering the pace of the transformation of the gender division of labor model toward modernization. For instance, in the context of family parenting, mothers are often tacitly assumed to take on more daily care and educational responsibilities, while the role of fathers is relatively marginalized. This rigid gender division of labor model not only restricts women's career development but also hinders men's role play in the parenting process, thereby affecting the gender equality process of the entire society.

### **3.2 Policy Tools: The Limited Compensatory Effect of Cash Subsidies**

Cash subsidies are generally used as the main tool for fertility support policies in East Asian countries, but there are obvious limitations in the subsidy standards and coverage. Take Japan as an example. It offers stepwise subsidies for children aged 0 to 15. However, the subsidy amount can only cover a small part of the cost of raising children, and its effect on alleviating the economic pressure on families in raising children is very limited. Although South Korea has implemented a "one-time subsidy of 3 million won for childbirth", considering the high cost of raising children in South Korea, including educational expenses and time costs, this subsidy seems to be a drop in the bucket, and its effect has been greatly reduced. More importantly, the cash subsidy has not changed the traditional division of labor in child-rearing, where the mother takes the lead and the father plays a supporting role. In reality, the usage rate of parental leave for fathers has remained at a low level for a long time, which indicates that cash subsidies have failed to effectively motivate fathers to participate in child-rearing. This policy design essentially further privatizes the responsibility of raising children, placing more of the burden on mothers and intensifying the work-family conflict for women. When women are under the dual pressure of career development and parenting responsibilities, they often have to make sacrifices and choose to give up some career development opportunities to take on the responsibility of parenting.

### **3.3 Implementation Mechanism: Gender Bias in Policy Enforcement**

The implementation mechanism of fertility policies in East Asia has systemic gender bias, which further exacerbates gender inequality. Firstly, the supply of childcare services is seriously insufficient and the quality varies greatly. Due to the inability of public childcare services to meet the demand, many families have to rely on private childcare institutions. However, the high costs have deterred some families, eventually forcing women to suspend their career development and return to their families. Secondly, gender discrimination in the workplace has not been effectively alleviated due to the introduction of the fertility policy. Women still face a "glass ceiling" in terms of promotion and salary. Childbirth often becomes an obstacle to women's career development, and many women find it difficult to obtain the same career development opportunities as men after giving birth. Thirdly, the excessive beautification of "full-time mothers" by social culture has further strengthened women's self-attribution of parenting responsibilities. In such a cultural atmosphere, women often consider raising children as their vocation, thus taking on more parenting responsibilities voluntarily and giving up their own career development pursuits. This implementation mechanism has led to the paradox of "the more subsidies, the lower the fertility rate" in the fertility policy. The increase in the female labor participation rate and the decline in the fertility rate have formed a vicious cycle, seriously hindering the positive interaction between gender equality and the fertility policy.

## **4. Gender Equality Innovation in the Nordic Fertility Support System**

### **4.1 Value Orientation: Reconstruction of Gender Equality Oriented towards Individual Rights**

The Nordic policy takes "promoting work-family balance" as its core goal and regards gender equality as the institutional prerequisite for increasing the fertility rate. Sweden's Social Services Act clearly stipulates that "children have the right to high-quality childcare services", and Norway's Gender Equality Act requires that enterprises must provide equal opportunities for male and female employees to use parental leave. This individual rights orientation enables policy tool design to break through family boundaries and shift toward the construction of a socialized

parenting support system. The policy text emphasizes concepts such as "shared responsibility of parents" and "priority for children's development", providing a value foundation for institutional innovation.

#### **4.2 Policy Tools: Innovative Policy Mix for "De-Family-ization"**

The Nordic countries have established a three-dimensional policy system of "cash subsidies + childcare services + parental leave", whose core feature is "de-family-oriented". Firstly, cash subsidies cover the entire life cycle and are decoupled from family income. In Sweden, child subsidies last until the age of 16, and additional subsidies for families with multiple children increase with the number of children. Secondly, childcare services have been made accessible to all. In Iceland, the rate of children aged 0-3 attending kindergartens has reached 60%, and public finance covers over 75% of the cost of childcare. Thirdly, the parental leave system forces fathers to participate. In Sweden, 90 days out of 480 parental leave are exclusively for fathers, while in Norway, the utilization rate of parental leave for fathers exceeds 40%. This policy combination has effectively restructured the social sharing mechanism of parenting responsibilities.

#### **4.3 Implementation Mechanism: A Responsibility-Sharing Model Involving Multiple Parties**

The success of the Nordic fertility policy is attributed to a multi-party collaborative implementation mechanism. The government has passed legislation to clarify corporate responsibilities, requiring employers to provide flexible working hours and occupational protection for employees raising children. Enterprises incorporate gender equality into their social responsibility systems and proactively optimize the child-friendly workplace environment. The community supplements the blind spots in public service coverage by developing non-profit childcare institutions. This implementation mechanism of "government-led, enterprise-participated and community-supplemented" ensures the effective implementation of policy tools and avoids the predicament of "policy idling" in East Asian countries.

## **5. Implications and Policy Recommendations for East Asian Countries**

### **5.1 Value Orientation Transformation: From Family-Oriented to Individual Rights**

East Asian countries need to break through the path dependence of "family support" and establish gender equality as the core goal of their fertility policies. Policy design should abandon the implicit assumption of "mother's responsibility" and emphasize the concepts of "shared responsibility of parents" and "prioritizing children's development". The legal responsibilities of enterprises and the government in child-rearing support can be clarified by amending laws such as the Labor Standards Act and the Gender Equality Promotion Act, providing legal guarantees for institutional innovation.

### **5.2 Policy Tool Optimization: Establish a Socialized Parenting Support System**

East Asian countries should adjust their policy tool mix, reduce reliance on cash subsidies, and focus on developing inclusive childcare services. We can draw on the experience of Northern Europe and encourage social forces to participate in the construction of childcare institutions through measures such as financial subsidies and tax incentives, striving to achieve an enrollment rate of over 50% for children aged 0-3. At the same time, a mandatory "father-exclusive parental leave" system will be implemented, and the utilization rate of father-exclusive parental leave will be incorporated into the corporate social responsibility assessment system to promote the modernization of the gender division of labor model.

### **5.3 Implementation Mechanism Innovation: Establish a Multi-Party Collaborative Governance Structure**

East Asian countries need to establish a collaborative governance mechanism of "government - enterprise - community". The government should play a leading role and clarify the boundaries of responsibilities of all parties through legislation. Enterprises should incorporate child-rearing support into their human resource management strategies and offer flexible working hours and career development plans. Communities should develop mutual assistance parenting support networks to

alleviate the coverage pressure of public services. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen the supervision of policy implementation, establish a gender equality audit system, and ensure that policy tools truly benefit the target groups.

## 6. Conclusion

The comparison of fertility policies between East Asia and Northern Europe reveals the differences in institutional logic from the perspective of gender equality: Northern Europe has restructured the gender division of labor order through the "de-family-ization" policy model, achieving a coordinated improvement in fertility rates and female development; East Asia has fallen into a predicament of fertility support due to its insistence on the "family-oriented" value orientation. This comparison indicates that the success of the fertility policy not only depends on the scale of financial input, but also on whether the institutional design can break through the constraints of traditional gender concepts and build a socialized child-rearing support system. East Asian countries need to take gender equality as a breakthrough point to promote the transformation of their fertility policies from "family support" to "social support", so as to break through the trap of low fertility and achieve sustainable population development.

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