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Second-Child Fertility Intentions Among Urban Women in Beijing Under the Two-Child Policy

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Abstract

Since the implementation of China's two-child policy in 2015, national efforts to raise fertility rates have met with limited success in urban areas, particularly among highly educated women in cities like Beijing. This paper explores the underlying factors influencing second-child fertility intentions among urban women, focusing on the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional dynamics that shape reproductive decision-making. Drawing on recent demographic data, policy analysis, and qualitative research, the study reveals a persistent gap between state-led pronatalist ambitions and the lived realities of urban women. Economic pressures, workplace discrimination, unequal domestic labor burdens, and emotional burnout serve as key deterrents. Moreover, the absence of structural support systems—such as affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements, and paternal leave—amplifies the cost of motherhood, making second childbirth a perceived risk rather than a rational choice. The paper argues for a shift from fertility-targeted policies to a framework of reproductive autonomy, in which social equity, gender-sensitive reforms, and the voices of women are placed at the center of population policymaking.

Keywords: second-child policy, urban women, fertility intention, Beijing, gender roles, reproductive autonomy, family policy, structural barriers

1. Introduction

China's demographic transition over the past four decades has been shaped by one of the most radical population control experiments in human history—the one-child policy. Introduced in 1979 and enforced through a combination of legal, economic, and social pressures, the policy was credited with curbing population growth but also led to a series of unintended consequences, including rapid population aging, a shrinking labor force, and skewed sex ratios. By the early 2010s, the Chinese government began to acknowledge these challenges, culminating in the implementation of the two-child policy in 2015.

The policy change was positioned as a corrective measure, intended to encourage family expansion and reverse declining fertility rates. State discourse emphasized national rejuvenation, demographic sustainability, and economic competitiveness. However, expectations that urban couples—especially well-educated, economically stable families—would respond positively were largely unmet.

In Beijing, the total fertility rate (TFR) stood at 0.7 in 2020, far below the replacement level of 2.1 and even lower than the national average of 1.3, according to the China Statistical Yearbook (2021). Despite the formal removal of policy restrictions, second-child birth rates in urban centers remained stagnant or declined, especially among women born in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, a 2019 study by Renmin University's Institute of Population and Development found that only 16.8% of urban women surveyed in Beijing intended to have a second child within the next five years.

Several early evaluations of the two-child policy revealed that the policy's legal relaxation failed to address the deeper socioeconomic and cultural drivers of low fertility. Unlike in rural areas where larger families once symbolized economic utility, urban fertility behavior is shaped by career pressures, housing costs, and individualistic values. In effect, the two-child policy removed the regulatory ceiling but not the practical or psychological constraints that limit family expansion.

What emerges is a fundamental misalignment between state fertility ambitions and urban women's lived realities. While the state seeks to "mobilize" fertility as a demographic resource, many women see childbirth—especially a second child—as a decision that involves significant personal and professional trade-offs. This disjunction sets the stage for exploring the perspectives, constraints, and decisions of women navigating fertility under Beijing's urban pressures.

2. Profiling Urban Women in a Changing Demographic Landscape

Understanding second-child fertility intentions among urban women in Beijing requires a nuanced profile of who these women are—not merely as a statistical cohort, but as social actors embedded in dynamic economic, cultural, and institutional contexts. These women are not passive recipients of policy; rather, they are active decision-makers whose reproductive intentions are deeply shaped by their educational backgrounds, professional trajectories, and evolving personal values.

Over the past two decades, the educational attainment of women in Beijing has undergone a remarkable transformation. According to data from the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics (2022), over 73% of women aged 25–39 hold a college degree or higher, a figure that outpaces both the national urban average and that of most OECD countries. Higher education often translates into delayed marriage and childbirth. National census data indicates that the mean age at first marriage for urban women in Beijing rose from 25.1 years in 2005 to 29.6 years in 2020, while the average age of first childbirth surpassed 29.3 years by 2021.

This delay is closely tied to career prioritization. In Beijing's hyper-competitive labor market, many women enter sectors such as finance, technology, media, and civil service, where performance metrics and promotion cycles leave little room for extended maternity leave or childcare breaks. As one interviewee in a 2020 Peking University study put it: *"Taking a year off for a second child means giving up a three-year promotion track."* This sentiment reflects a broader tension between institutional demands and biological timelines—a tension intensified by the lack of structural support for working mothers.

At the same time, there has been a clear generational shift in how urban women conceptualize motherhood. For the post-80s and post-90s cohorts in Beijing, motherhood is no longer a compulsory marker of feminine success. Instead, personal development, life satisfaction, and emotional autonomy often rank higher than traditional family formation goals. A 2020 survey conducted by the Institute of Population and Labor Economics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that 42.6% of urban women in first-tier cities viewed a single-child family as "sufficient and optimal," citing time, energy, and emotional bandwidth as major reasons.

This value shift is also influenced by the intensive parenting culture that dominates urban China. Middle-class families in cities like Beijing often feel compelled to invest heavily in early childhood education, extracurricular training, and emotional involvement. The idea of having a second child often elicits not concerns about state policy, but about one's capacity to *adequately parent* two children in a high-pressure environment. Raising a single child is increasingly seen not as minimalist, but as responsible.

Nevertheless, urban women are not a monolith. Class, hukou status, employment type, and access to social resources all shape the

experience of motherhood. Women with Beijing hukou and stable civil service jobs, for example, may have access to extended maternity leave, employer-sponsored childcare, and family housing. In contrast, migrant women working in private firms or informal sectors may lack even basic social protections. For them, a second child represents not just an emotional or ideological choice, but a material risk with long-term livelihood implications.

In this changing demographic landscape, fertility becomes an increasingly individualized decision-making process. The urban woman in Beijing is navigating a contradictory terrain: a policy that encourages more births, a culture that demands perfection in parenting, and a personal life path that often prioritizes autonomy, achievement, and wellbeing. Understanding this evolving profile is crucial to interpreting why second-child fertility intentions remain low—even among those who are economically and legally "eligible" to have more children.

3. Economic and Structural Challenges in Beijing

3.1 The Financial Weight of a Second Child

For urban women in Beijing, the decision to have a second child is rarely a question of preference alone—it is deeply rooted in the economic realities of city life. Beijing consistently ranks among the most expensive cities in China in terms of housing, education, and healthcare, all of which weigh heavily on reproductive planning.

Housing presents one of the most significant barriers. For many families, having a second child implies the need for a larger living space. According to data from the China Index Academy (2023), the average price of new residential property in Beijing exceeds ¥70,000 per square meter, making housing upgrades financially burdensome for most middle-class households. Even for those who already own property, the prospect of renovating, relocating, or renting additional space often deters consideration of a second child.

Education costs further reinforce this hesitation. "Education anxiety" is pervasive in Beijing's urban parenting culture, where intense competition for access to high-quality public schools and elite private training begins as early as preschool. Families often invest in "school district housing" (学区房), pay for after-school tutoring, and compete for limited slots in bilingual or international programs. According to a 2021 report by New Oriental Education, the average annual spending on a single primary school student in Beijing exceeded ¥35,000—and this figure does not include childcare or extracurricular costs. The idea of doubling this investment for a second child often feels financially unsustainable, even for dual-income households.

Childcare expenses and early education access are also crucial factors. Public childcare for children under age 3 remains extremely limited, and most affordable nursery options have long waiting lists. Private kindergartens are often prohibitively expensive and vary widely in quality. Without reliable and affordable childcare, women face the prospect of exiting the labor market temporarily or hiring domestic help, both of which carry high costs or career penalties.

These cumulative financial pressures make the idea of having a second child a deeply calculated risk—one that many urban couples, especially women, are unwilling to take in the absence of substantial external support.

3.2 Inflexible Institutions and Workplace Disincentives

Beyond direct financial costs, the structural organization of work and public services in Beijing creates additional barriers that disproportionately affect women's fertility intentions. Despite state-level pronatalist rhetoric, the everyday institutions governing labor, maternity, and family support remain largely inflexible and underdeveloped.

One major constraint is the limited availability of paid parental leave, particularly for fathers. While Beijing offers 158 days of maternity leave, paternity leave is typically just 7 to 15 days, depending on the employer and local implementation. This reinforces traditional gender roles, where child-rearing is seen as the mother's sole responsibility, placing additional pressure on women to manage both professional and domestic spheres during and after childbirth.

Moreover, many private-sector employers in Beijing—especially in tech, media, and finance—are reluctant to hire or promote women of childbearing age. Though illegal, such discriminatory practices persist in subtle forms: informal interview questions, delayed contracts,

and performance-based promotion delays. A 2020 study by the Beijing Women's Federation reported that over 56% of surveyed women believed pregnancy negatively impacted their career progression, particularly when having a second child.

Workplace flexibility is also limited. Remote work options, part-time arrangements, or on-site childcare facilities remain rare in most organizations. This lack of institutional accommodation makes it difficult for women to re-enter the workforce after childbirth or to balance dual roles as workers and caregivers. The result is often a "motherhood penalty" that intensifies with a second child, making the choice not just difficult—but systemically discouraged.

In sum, Beijing's economic and structural environment sends conflicting signals: while the state encourages childbirth, the institutions that shape women's daily lives offer little practical support for raising a second child. This contradiction helps explain why many urban women are increasingly resistant to expanding their families, despite legal permission or policy encouragement.

4. Gender Roles and the Domestic Burden of Motherhood

4.1 Persistent Gender Norms in Urban Households

Despite the rise of education and employment among urban women in Beijing, traditional gender roles remain deeply embedded in family life. Marriage and child-rearing continue to be feminized responsibilities, with social expectations placing the burden of domestic labor squarely on women's shoulders. This is particularly evident during and after the transition to motherhood, when even dual-income couples often revert to conventional divisions of labor.

A study by the All-China Women's Federation (2021) revealed that among urban families with one or more children, women perform over 75% of unpaid domestic work, including childcare, cooking, and housework. These numbers persist even among couples who claim to support "gender equality." This imbalance becomes more acute with the birth of a second child, when time demands double but structural support remains stagnant.

Cultural expectations further reinforce this disparity. The ideal of the "self-sacrificing mother" continues to dominate media portrayals, parenting forums, and peer discourse. For many women, this results in intense psychological pressure to not only have children, but to be the *primary* and *perfect* caregiver. The societal judgment against "outsourcing motherhood"—such as relying on nannies or grandparents—adds emotional strain to an already burdensome role.

Even when male partners express willingness to participate in parenting, workplace norms and limited paternity leave often prevent them from doing so in practice. Consequently, second-child decisions are not made in isolation—they are evaluated within the context of existing gendered labor expectations, which overwhelmingly disincentivize women from expanding their families.

4.2 The Invisible Cost of Maternal Sacrifice

The decision to have a second child often demands a level of personal compromise from women that extends beyond time and energy—it impacts their identity, autonomy, and mental health. In many cases, the physical and emotional demands of first-time motherhood leave women feeling exhausted, undervalued, and unsupported. The idea of repeating this experience with a second child is often perceived as emotionally unsustainable.

Qualitative interviews conducted by Renmin University's Family Studies Center (2020) showed that among mothers who chose not to have a second child, many cited "loss of self," "emotional burnout," and "constant mental overload" as key reasons. These narratives challenge the assumption that economic factors alone deter second-child births. Instead, they point to a broader issue: motherhood in contemporary urban China is not simply a private joy, but a socially undervalued and emotionally taxing labor.

Moreover, maternal identity in urban China is closely linked to performance. Mothers are expected not just to *raise* children, but to *optimize* them—academically, socially, and emotionally. This "intensive mothering" model amplifies the stakes of parenting and makes the thought of dividing attention and resources between two children daunting, if not overwhelming.

In this context, many women view choosing to have only one child as a rational act of self-preservation. Far from being a sign of selfishness or individualism, it reflects a deeper

resistance to societal structures that place the weight of parenting disproportionately on mothers while offering little in return.

5. Women's Perceptions and Lived Experiences

While policy debates and demographic statistics provide a macro-level understanding of fertility trends, the decision to have—or not have—a second child is ultimately made at the micro level, within individual lives shaped by emotion, uncertainty, and deeply personal trade-offs. For many urban women in Beijing, the choice regarding a second child is not simply a reaction to national policy, but a reflection of their lived experiences with motherhood, work, marriage, and identity.

Empirical studies and qualitative interviews reveal that women's fertility intentions are rarely binary. Rather than a clear "yes" or "no," most women express ambivalence—an internal negotiation between desire, capacity, and fear. A 2020 study by the Institute of Population and Labor Economics (CASS) found that while approximately 41% of urban women in Beijing under 40 said they were "open to the idea" of a second child, only 13% said they were actively planning for one. The gap between abstract openness and actual planning speaks to the weight of invisible constraints many women internalize after experiencing motherhood for the first time.

For some, the first childbirth experience itself becomes a turning point. Many report feeling unprepared for the physical toll, psychological isolation, and abrupt shift in identity. Support systems—whether spousal, familial, or institutional—are often inadequate. Even when partners are supportive, the default burden of parenting frequently falls on the mother, reinforcing the sense of "doing it alone." As one respondent in a 2021 Tsinghua University qualitative study expressed: *"I love my child, but I lost myself for two years. I can't imagine doing that again."*

These narratives challenge the assumption that the absence of a second child stems from selfishness, materialism, or a lack of patriotism—as sometimes implied in media or political discourse. Instead, they point to a rational response to an environment in which the costs of additional motherhood—emotional, professional, and physical—often outweigh the perceived benefits. Many women articulate this as a matter of quality over quantity: raising one child "well" is preferable to struggling to raise two under constant stress.

Peer influence and social comparisons also play a subtle role. Within urban professional circles, having only one child has increasingly become normalized. When nearly all one's peers opt for single-child families, the pressure to conform to a two-child ideal—already weak—further diminishes. In this sense, lived experience intersects with emerging social norms to create a fertility culture distinct from both state messaging and older generational expectations.

What emerges from these accounts is not a rejection of family or motherhood, but a careful redefinition of what family means in a modern urban context. Second-child fertility intentions are filtered through prior experience, anticipated burden, and the deeply personal need for emotional sustainability. Recognizing and centering these lived realities is essential if policies are to resonate with the very women they aim to influence.

6. Policy Limitations and Misalignment with Lived Realities

The two-child policy, introduced in 2015 as a major reform in China's population control regime, was underpinned by a top-down demographic logic: it aimed to slow population aging, rebalance the workforce, and secure long-term economic sustainability. However, the policy was conceptualized and implemented primarily through a macroeconomic lens, with insufficient attention to the social, emotional, and structural conditions that shape reproductive decision-making—especially for urban women. This has resulted in a growing gap between what the policy assumes and what women actually experience.

A fundamental limitation of the policy lies in its instrumentalist framing of fertility, treating childbearing as a national duty rather than a deeply personal and socially embedded choice. Official discourse often portrays increased fertility as a moral contribution to the nation, yet it fails to engage with the reality that motherhood, particularly in urban centers like Beijing, entails significant individual costs. The state's approach assumes that once the previous restrictions were lifted, women would respond with enthusiasm. But this assumption overlooks how the lived context of modern life has shifted dramatically since the era of the one-child policy.

Moreover, the policy has been poorly integrated with the broader welfare system. Although some cities, including Beijing, offer cash subsidies, extended maternity leave, or childbirth allowances, these measures are often limited in scope, uneven in implementation, and fail to address core issues such as affordable childcare, flexible working arrangements, and comprehensive paternal leave. According to a 2022 report by the National Health Commission, while 85% of surveyed families supported the idea of government financial assistance for second children, only 17% reported receiving any form of meaningful support beyond birth registration.

The lack of intersectional sensitivity further weakens policy effectiveness. Urban women are not a homogenous group—differences in hukou status, employment type, class position, and education level dramatically influence one's ability to act on fertility intentions. Migrant women without local hukou often lack access to subsidized healthcare and public kindergarten slots, while women in the private sector may face more career penalties than their counterparts in public institutions. These variations are rarely reflected in policy design, which tends to operate on the assumption of a uniform, able-bodied, middle-class mother.

Another disconnect arises from the absence of gender analysis in fertility governance. While state narratives increasingly emphasize "shared parenting responsibilities," actual policy tools continue to place the onus of reproduction on women, both symbolically and practically. Maternity leave policies are longer and more developed than paternity ones; family planning propaganda still targets women disproportionately. The resulting asymmetry reinforces the idea that reproductive labor is primarily a female obligation, thereby perpetuating the very gender dynamics that deter many women from having more children.

Finally, there is a lack of feedback mechanisms to incorporate women's voices into fertility policymaking. Surveys, when conducted, are rarely used to shape concrete reforms. There are few consultative channels between local authorities and actual mothers who face these choices daily. In this context, the two-child policy becomes a one-way directive—technically permissive, but socially disconnected.

The result is a policy environment that is demographically ambitious but socially tone-deaf. By treating fertility as a problem of numbers rather than one of social wellbeing, the state continues to miss the opportunity to craft reproductive policies grounded in respect for individual autonomy, gender equity, and everyday realities. Until such alignment is achieved, the gap between policy intention and public response is likely to persist, if not widen.

7. Building a Supportive Framework for Reproductive Autonomy

To meaningfully address the declining fertility intentions among urban women in Beijing, the policy focus must shift from encouraging more births to supporting the people—particularly women—who bear the social, emotional, and economic weight of reproduction. This requires moving beyond numerical targets and demographic engineering toward a framework rooted in reproductive autonomy, gender equality, and structural support.

Central to such a framework is the recognition that reproductive choices are shaped by systems, not just preferences. The state must acknowledge that women are not withholding fertility out of apathy or selfishness, but because their lived environments—employment conditions, family dynamics, access to care—often make the idea of a second child feel untenable. Reframing fertility policy through a lens of choice rather than obligation means respecting women's rights to have, delay, or forgo additional childbirth without social or institutional penalties.

A key pillar of this support structure should be the expansion and normalization of public childcare services. Beijing currently suffers from a significant shortage of affordable childcare options, particularly for children under the age of three. Introducing publicly funded, high-quality early childhood care centers—available regardless of hukou status—would relieve mothers of the impossible burden of being full-time caregivers while pursuing a career.

Equally important is workplace reform. Flexible scheduling, part-time return tracks, and guaranteed protection against discrimination due to pregnancy or maternity leave must become standard rather than exceptional. Encouraging paternal involvement through longer, compulsory paternity leave and incentivizing employers to create

family-friendly policies would begin to rebalance gendered parenting roles. Lessons can be drawn from countries like Sweden and Iceland, where generous, non-transferable paternal leave has contributed to more equitable divisions of care and increased fertility stability.

On a cultural level, the societal narrative surrounding motherhood and success must also evolve. Current representations—whether in media, education, or government messaging—often frame motherhood as both an individual duty and a national contribution, without questioning the cost or support mechanisms involved. A more inclusive narrative would embrace diverse family forms and parenting choices, including the decision to have one or no children, without stigma or moral judgment.

Finally, policy design must include the voices and experiences of women themselves. Whether through participatory policymaking, regular feedback surveys, or consultative forums, the state should actively seek out and respond to the perspectives of the women its fertility policies target. This would not only improve the legitimacy of such policies but also ensure that interventions are grounded in lived experience rather than abstract projections.

In essence, building a supportive framework for reproductive autonomy means seeing women not as tools for demographic recovery but as full citizens with complex lives, aspirations, and constraints. Policies that align with their realities—rather than attempting to reshape them—are far more likely to foster a sustainable, equitable approach to family and population in contemporary urban China.

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