

## SOCIAL POLICY BRIEF SERIES

# FAMILY POLICIES IN CHINA

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### KEY MESSAGES

To further support parents in their child-rearing responsibilities there is a need to:

- Establish a comprehensive and systematic concept of family policy in China to support parents and families to raise the next generation in a healthier and more evidence-informed way, and to reduce the cost and pressures of parenting, with the ultimate aim to improve the overall quality of life of the population.
- Explore diverse family policy options by looking at lessons learned from other countries, because there is no single, simple, and universal solution for workplace policies, inclusive parent and child benefit policies, childcare service policies, and institutional fiscal policies.
- Identify comprehensive and sustainable family policies that support families from pre-birth and throughout childhood, while also helping elderly parents and caregivers.
- Address the ‘triple pressure’ that young parents are facing by creating a more tolerant and lenient parenting environment that supports people who wish to have children and by adjusting policies and institutions beyond family policy, for example, pensions, the education system, gender equality, marriage, and other social institutions.
- Support gender equality in the workplace and in households and address all forms of gender-based discrimination.

## I. Introduction

Family policies are the foundation for thriving communities and countries and are key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Parents play a key role in creating a nurturing home environment that supports healthy growth for their children, and family policies allow caregivers to achieve a healthy balance between work and home life (Daly et al., 2015; Filgueira & Rossel, 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the

Child (United Nations, 1989) calls on states to “render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and ensure the development of institutions, facilities, and services for the care of children”. There is significant diversity in the configuration of family policies across countries. Public policy should reflect changes in family structures and the population’s socio-economic and cultural circumstances.

We define family policy as statutory policies and government-led programmes that support and aim to improve conditions for adult family members caring for and bringing up children (up to the age of 18) (Waidler et al., 2021). Family policies include workplace policies, parental or child benefits policies, and care services policies that align with the types used in other UNICEF publications (Chopra & Krishnan, 2019; Waidler et al., 2021; United Nations Children’s Fund (China Office) & China Population Association, 2022). Please refer to Table 1 on family policy interventions covered in the global evidence synthesis. We focus on living conditions, family functioning, and employment as three main outcome areas, adapted from the report *Key Findings on Families, Family Policies and the Sustainable Development Goals* (Richardson, 2018).

## II. The context in China

Contextual factors are highlighted to comprehend the socio-demographic changes in China over the past few decades and are critical in assessing the necessity of revisiting current family policies.

- China’s population has declining fertility and rising life expectancy. Consequently, China has one of the fastest-growing ageing populations in the world. This changing demographic reduces the working-age population and challenges the pension and care systems.
- The fundamental shift from the one-child policy of the 1980s to the three-child policy issued in 2021 is likely to result in a need for a wide range of policy amendments.
- Three-generation households are relatively common in China, many of which have a ‘4-2-1’ structure – that is, a single child responsible for the care of two parents and four grandparents when the child grows up. This household structure places a heavy care burden on the single child.
- Women face discrimination and barriers to employment in China. The three-child policy may exacerbate women’s disadvantaged position within the household and increase discrimination in the workplace against women with childbearing plans.

- Many domestic migrant workers who have settled in cities may find it difficult to gain equal access to urban public services due to the *hukou* household registration system. Migrant and left-behind children (those who migrate with their parents to urban regions or remain in rural regions while parents work in urban areas) are especially vulnerable. Family policies can further support these migrant families by mitigating the institutional and financial barriers that prevent parents from keeping their children with them. These families also need equal access to urban public goods.
- A significant proportion of the workforce is engaged in informal economic activities, including self-employment and informal waged activities. Those working in the informal sector are often more vulnerable to poverty and insecurity.

## III. The family policy landscape in China

The overarching strategic direction for future family policies in China is outlined in two key policy documents: *Decision on Optimizing Fertility Policy and Promoting Long-term Balanced Population Development* (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and State Council, 2021); and *Guidance on the Further Improvement and Implementation of Active Reproductive Support Measures* (State Council, 2022a). Both documents – along with the amended National Population and Family Planning Law (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, 2021) – give a thorough understanding of central government mandates, as well as how local governments are required to implement them.

### Workplace policies

All provinces are mandated to optimize their birth and parental leave policies, improve the cost-sharing mechanism of leave policies, and protect employees’ leave entitlements. Accordingly, most provinces have extended maternity and paternity leave to more than 158 days and about 15 days respectively. Ongoing leave ranging from 5 to 20 days for parents with children under 3 years has

also been established in most provinces. Maternity insurance policies vary across provinces, in terms of coverage, level of benefits, eligibility, and so on. Local governments are required to ensure that workers in the informal sectors and unemployed women enrolling in the Urban and Rural Employees Basic Medical Insurance Scheme have access to maternity medical treatment by participating in the Residents Basic Medical Insurance Scheme. Current policies encourage flexible working and support breastfeeding at work. However, working overtime is normal in many sectors, and young people may feel that they do not have enough time or energy for parenting.

### Parental or child benefits

Tax breaks are one of the first policies introduced in recent years to support families with children. Based on the *Provisional Measures for Special Additional Deduction for Personal Income Tax* (State Council, 2018) and *Notice on the Establishment of Special Additional Deduction for Personal Income Tax for the Care of Infants and Children Under the Age of 3* (State Council, 2022b), taxpayers who take care of children aged under 3 years, those in preschool, or those full-time education, can deduct a flat amount of RMB1,000 (approximately

US\$140) per month per child before calculating their personal income tax payments. In addition, local governments are encouraged to implement a childcare subsidy system, and/or pilot child grants for families who have more than one child.

### Childcare services

In general, there is a scarcity of low-cost and inclusive public childcare facilities for children aged 0–3 and 3–6 years. Along with the *Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Development of Care Services for Infants and Toddlers under the Age of 3* (State Council, 2019), all levels of government are required to design actionable measures to increase the supply of inclusive childcare services. These actions include: setting fee caps for public childcare institutions; supporting eligible employers to provide childcare services; encouraging housekeeping enterprises to provide home infant and childcare services; developing family childcare locations; supporting qualified kindergartens to enrol 2- to 3-year-olds; subsidizing the construction of inclusive childcare facilities; and implementing a professional qualification access system for childcare practitioners, as well as to support intergenerational care, family ‘peer support’ and other care models, and strengthen parenting education.

**Table 1 Family policy interventions covered in the global evidence synthesis**

Interventions	
Domain	Policy/programme
Workplace policies	Maternity, paternity, and parental leave after childbirth
	Ongoing leave through childhood
	Flexible working
	Support breastfeeding and facilities at work
	Other labour market regulations (e.g., gender discriminatory legislation)
	Combined workplace interventions (policies combining two or more workplace intervention sub-domains)
Parental or child benefits	Tax breaks and benefits for families with children
	Non-contributory cash transfer programmes for children, for pregnant and lactating women, or families with children (social assistance means-tested or universal)
	Birth grants and in-kind benefits (usually social assistance)
	School-related payments/subsidies/meals
	Other benefits supporting families (e.g., old age pension)
Care services	Combined parental or child benefits (policies combining two or more benefit sub-domains)
	Pre- and postnatal services (not primary or secondary health care-e.g., childcare counselling service, nurse home visiting)
	Formal childcare (e.g., childcare subsidies, expansion of childcare facilities)
	Other care services supporting childrearing (group sessions, home visiting programmes, parenting programmes, parent-child classes and daycare centres)
Mixed policy packages	Combined care services (policies combining two or more care service sub-domains)
	Policies combining two or more intervention domains

## IV. Global family policy – practice and impact

We mapped and synthesized global evidence (covering 53 countries) on the impact of family policies on outcomes for families and caregivers of children from 184 peer-reviewed studies published from 2010.

### Workplace policies

Three types of workplace policies were examined: maternity, paternity, and parental leave (n=40); flexible working (n=4); and other labour market regulations (n=5).

Most workplace policies had positive effects on employment, living conditions, and family functioning outcomes, reflected in cases from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, while some showed mixed or negative effects.

Policy	Effects	Evidence
Maternity, paternity, and parental leave	Positive	<p><b>On leave taking:</b> <b>US:</b> California Paid Family Leave (CA-PFL); <b>Sweden:</b> The 'Daddy month'</p> <p><b>On employment:</b> <b>US:</b> CA-PFL programme; <b>US:</b> Paid maternity leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA); <b>Luxembourg:</b> Universal parental leave; <b>Canada:</b> 'Daddy quota' programme; <b>Colombia:</b> Labour law extension of maternity leave</p> <p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>US:</b> CA-PFL programme; <b>Denmark:</b> The parental leave system</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>Australia:</b> The paid parental leave scheme</p>
	Negative	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Czechia:</b> 1995 parental benefit reform; <b>Germany:</b> Extended parental leave entitlements; <b>US:</b> Extension of state maternal leave policies beyond the FMLA; <b>Colombia:</b> The labour law extension of maternity leave</p>
	Mixed	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Norway:</b> Expansion of parental leave duration</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>US:</b> CA-PFL programme; <b>Germany:</b> Extended parental leave entitlements; <b>Canada:</b> Quebec's 'use it or lose it' parental leave policy; <b>Norway:</b> The 'Daddy quota' policy</p>
Flexible working	Positive	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>UK:</b> Flexible Working Act; <b>Switzerland:</b> Arrangements for flexible work</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>China:</b> Flexible working arrangements under Hong Kong Employment Ordinance</p>
	Negative	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Spain:</b> Flexible work arrangements due to the 39/1999 Law to Promote the Reconciliation of Work and Family Life</p>
	Mixed	<p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>Switzerland:</b> Arrangements for flexible work schedules and locations</p>
Other labour market regulations	Positive	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>US:</b> Welfare-to-Work programmes</p> <p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>US:</b> Unemployment insurance programmes</p>
	Mixed	<p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>India:</b> National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>South Korea:</b> Five-Day Working Policy Reform; <b>US:</b> Increases in the minimum wage</p>



## Parental and child benefits

Four types of parental or child benefit policies were examined: non-contributory cash transfer programmes for children, pregnant and lactating women, or families with children (n=56); tax breaks and benefits (n=12); school-related subsidies (n=3); birth grants or in-kind benefits (n=3).

Most parental and child benefit policies had positive effects on employment, living conditions, and family functioning outcomes, reflected in cases from both OECD and developing countries, while some showed mixed effects.

Policy	Effects	Evidence
Cash transfer programmes for children, pregnant and lactating women, or families with children	Positive	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Israel:</b> Back-to-Work Bonus programme; <b>Bolivia:</b> Bono Juancito Pinto cash transfer programme; <b>Chile:</b> Cash transfers targeting the poorest 6 per cent of households</p> <p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>US:</b> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme; <b>South Africa:</b> Child Support Grant</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>US:</b> Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); <b>Turkey:</b> The Emergency Social Safety Net; <b>Zimbabwe:</b> Harmonized Social Cash Transfer programme; <b>Honduras:</b> Programa de Asignación Familiar; <b>Mexico:</b> PROGRESA transfer programme; <b>South Africa:</b> Child Support Grant</p>
	Negative	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Uruguay:</b> Family Allowance Assistance Programme; <b>US:</b> TANF</p>
	Mixed	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Germany:</b> Parental allowance programme, Elterngeld</p>
Tax breaks and benefits	Positive	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>US:</b> Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) policy</p>
	Mixed	<p><b>On living conditions and family functioning:</b> <b>US:</b> EITC policy</p>
School-related subsidies	Positive	<p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>US:</b> National School Breakfast and Lunch programmes</p>
Birth grants or in-kind benefits	Positive	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Spain:</b> Universal Childcare Cash Benefit</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>India:</b> Safe Motherhood Scheme</p>

## Care services

Three types of care service policies were examined: formal childcare (n=34); pre- and postnatal services (n=2); and other care services supporting child rearing (n=9).

Most care service policies had positive or mixed effects, and cases are concentrated in OECD countries. Most cases with mixed effects have at least one positive finding that proves that the policies have a positive impact on women’s labour market participation, especially women with young children.

Policy	Effects	Evidence
Formal childcare	Positive	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>US:</b> Child Care and Development Fund; <b>France:</b> 2004 reform that sharply increased childcare subsidies; <b>Germany:</b> A major childcare expansion in the mid-2000s; <b>Norway, Japan, Hungary,</b> and <b>Germany:</b> Expanding subsidized childcare; <b>Japan:</b> Expansion of licensed early childhood education and care services for children aged 0–2 years</p> <p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>US:</b> TANF programme; <b>US:</b> Child Care and Development Fund</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>US:</b> Child Care and Development Fund</p>
	Negative	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Norway:</b> 'Cash-for-Care' reform; <b>Canada:</b> Universal Child Care Benefit</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>US:</b> Child Care and Development Fund</p>
	Mixed	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Netherlands:</b> Introduction of the law on childcare in 2005; <b>Mexico:</b> Childcare programme to support working mothers (PEI) policy; <b>Italy:</b> Expanded availability of early kindergarten; <b>France:</b> Universal pre-elementary school for 3-year-olds; <b>Norway:</b> Policies to lower the day-care prices and increase the capacity of day-care slots; <b>Germany:</b> Abolishing day-care fees for preschoolers in 2006; <b>Chile:</b> Offering afterschool care for children aged 6–13 years in 2011; <b>US:</b> Universal preschool policy in 2007 in Illinois for children aged 3–4 years; <b>US:</b> Head Start programme; <b>South Korea:</b> Lowering the age thresholds for children to be enrolled in public school</p> <p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>Mexico:</b> PEI policy; <b>US:</b> Head Start programme; <b>Canada:</b> Expansion of Universal Child Care Benefit</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>Mexico:</b> PEI policy; <b>Chile:</b> Afterschool care for children aged 6–13 years in 2011; <b>Canada:</b> Quebec low-fee childcare policy; <b>Algeria:</b> Free public preschool for children aged 3–4 years; <b>US:</b> Head Start programme</p>
Pre- and postnatal services	Mixed	<p><b>On employment and family functioning:</b> <b>Germany:</b> Pro Kind programme</p>
Other care services supporting child rearing	Positive	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>Japan:</b> Provision of various childcare services in the early 2000s</p> <p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>US:</b> Building Nebraska’s Families programme</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>US:</b> Child and Family Nurse Programme; <b>US:</b> Healthy Families Massachusetts home visiting programme</p>
	Mixed	<p><b>On employment:</b> <b>US:</b> Maryland’s Home and Community-based Services Medicaid waiver for children with autism; <b>US:</b> Healthy Families Massachusetts home visiting programme; <b>US:</b> Building Nebraska’s Families programme</p> <p><b>On living conditions:</b> <b>US:</b> Healthy Families Massachusetts home visiting programme</p> <p><b>On family functioning:</b> <b>Japan:</b> Provision of various childcare services in the early 2000s; <b>US:</b> Early Head Start programme for low-income Black families; <b>US:</b> Building Strong Families for low-income, unmarried parents; <b>US:</b> Healthy Families America home visiting services</p>

## Mixed policy packages

In this section we present the findings on multicomponent social policy packages from 11 studies.

Most mixed policy packages had positive or mixed effects on employment outcomes, with most cases recorded in OECD countries.

Mixed policy packages	Effects	Evidence
Parental or child benefits and childcare services	Positive	On employment: <b>Chile</b> : Solidario programme including non-contributory cash transfer with social support benefits and childcare services; <b>Netherlands</b> : A combination of tax credits and childcare subsidies
	Mixed	On family functioning: <b>Mali</b> : Cash transfer programme with training sessions for recipients
Workplace policies and childcare services	Positive	On employment: <b>Norway</b> and the <b>US</b> : Parental leave policies with childcare services
	Mixed	On employment: <b>Germany</b> : Universal childcare with parental leave
Workplace policies combined with parent or child benefits	Positive	On living conditions: <b>US</b> : Higher minimum wages and income tax credits
	Mixed	On employment: <b>Germany</b> : Universal payment with a father's leave quota; <b>Switzerland</b> : Tax incentives with parental leave

## V. Recommendations

**1** We suggest that a healthy, systematic, and comprehensive concept of family policy should be established, including setting clear overarching objectives for the transformation of family policy in China that is in step with the times and oriented towards modernization.

- The direct objective of family policy should be to support parents and families to raise the next generation in a healthier and more evidence-informed way, and to reduce the substantive cost and pressures of parenting, while ensuring that the ultimate aim is to improve the overall quality of life of the population.

- Family-related policies in China need to include both ends of the age spectrum – providing support to families from pre-birth and throughout childhood, while also helping elderly parents and caregivers.

**2** We recommend for further exploration across the three policy domains incorporating findings from the global evidence synthesis and lessons learned.

- Workplace policy should encourage employers to facilitate and support childcare services, with universal and equal coverage in the social security system, especially for those working in the informal employment sector. The provision of flexible working arrangements for employees,

especially for parents, needs to be institutionalized. Policies at institutional, legal, and social levels must fully protect women's rights, interests, and status in the workplace and in the household.

- Parental and child benefits policy must be inclusive, effective, and long-term oriented. The coverage of parental and child benefits could be expanded to workers in informal sectors and flexible employment, the self-employed, and the unemployed. Comprehensive safety nets should be provided to children affected by migration and their caregivers, with more inclusive and equal access to urban public services. A progressive tax relief system would be beneficial for families who need more childcare and elderly care.
- Childcare services policy must improve the quality and variety of childcare services to address the gap in provision for children aged 0–3 years, with more supportive policies for early childhood care providers. The integration of early childhood care and kindergartens, by establishing effective nationwide regulations, should be explored.
- In terms of fiscal support, a nationwide institutional family-friendly fiscal policy framework should be considered, with the central government determining guiding principles. Relevant ministries and local governments could coordinate implementation of adaptive measures that are tailored to local conditions. To help adjust fiscal policies, a monitoring platform could evaluate fiscal expenditures and policy implementation, track income, consumption and family structure, and so on.

The fact that many policies have had varying effects in different contexts indicates that there is no single, simple, and universally effective family policy tool. Almost all family policies have long-term positive effects on gender equality in the workplace, reducing the financial and psychological stress of parenthood for young parents, and improving

the provision of public childcare services. This is a change from judging the impact of family policies based only on fertility and population growth rates.

**3** Family policies must address the 'triple pressure' that young parents currently face, including: a) the economic pressure to raise children and take care of the elderly; b) the competitive pressure to develop their own careers and educate their children; and c) the notional pressure on marriage, family, and gender-based discrimination, which has not yet fully evolved with the times.

- We recommend considering potential adjustments in policies and institutions beyond family policy itself, to systematically address the triple pressure, including pensions, *hukou* household registration, labour protection and gender equality policies, the education system, marriage institutions, and other social institutions.

**4** A more tolerant, lenient, and relaxed parenting environment is needed for the new generation of parents, to ensure that they feel adequately supported. We recommend a more tolerant policy in protecting the rights of unmarried and single parents. No reverse discriminatory or even punitive measures should be introduced to target young people who are unwilling to have children.

**5** A national database could be established to systematically monitor and evaluate local family policy initiatives and adjustments to improve coordination and cooperation between ministries and provinces. Minimum requirements in each area of family policy should be set at the national level. Differences in family policies at the local level must not widen the income gap between regions, or between urban and rural populations.



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