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From policy expansion to hesitation: Young people's fertility responses to China's Three-Child Policy in urban and suburban Beijing

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Abstract

China's fertility policies have shifted from restriction to encouragement, yet fertility decline has continued even after the 2021 Three-Child Policy and the roll-out of supportive measures. This creates a policy implementation problem. Relaxing birth limits has not been accompanied by sufficient and consistently accessible support to bring forth change in young adults' fertility decisions. This study thus draws on semi-structured interviews with 15 young adults residing in Beijing's urban core and suburban areas, all aged between 22 and 35 years. The aim is to examine how young adults interpret the Three-Child Policy and the related measures in terms of feasibility. This is because there is an existing gap, as previous studies focus on measuring fertility intentions without a proper focus on the interpretation of state fertility policies by young adults themselves. It was found that participants consider the Three-Child Policy to be permission rather than support. They cite uneven access to affordable childcare, adequate housing space, and enforceable workplace protections as the major constraints that hinder feasibility. Moreover, urban-core interviewees foreground high housing costs and limited living space, while the suburban participants emphasize long commutes and inefficient local services that increase time and care burdens. These interpretations are associated with postponement, conditional openness, or decisions to limit family size to one or two children. This study shows that policy expansion alone cannot change fertility behavior if there is not enough credible and accessible support available, which is usable for everyday life. Overall, the study offers a citizen-centered explanation for why policy expansion may produce limited behavioral change when implementation is experienced as slow, uneven, or inaccessible.

Keywords: Three-Child Policy; Fertility hesitation; Policy implementation; Young generation; Fertility inaction; Semi-structured interviews; Beijing

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1. Introduction

China's fertility policy has shifted from restriction to encouragement in recent decades. China maintained a restrictive one-child policy for 35 years since 1979. Subsequently, from January 1, 2016, Chinese residents were allowed to have two children (Feng *et al.*, 2016; Y. Zhang & Goza, 2006; J. Zhang, 2017). Thus, after decades of strict limits, the universal two-child policy was introduced to address declining births. When the initial rebound

proved to be short-lived, the state announced the Three-Child Policy. On May 31, 2021, the Chinese government set forth to stimulate a rise in its fertility levels after the end of the one-child policy, by announcing a universal Three-Child Policy era (Jing *et al.*, 2022; Ning *et al.*, 2022). The state began expanding supportive measures such as leave provisions, childcare services, and financial relief. The objective was to achieve stable population growth over the long term and facilitate sustainable economic development (Attané, 2022). However, the fertility rates have continued to decline. This highlights a gap between policy intent and lived feasibility. Thus, the core problem that needs to be addressed is why young adults do not respond positively to policy relaxation and incentives, and what does this reveal about the limits of policy implementation as an everyday system rather than a legal change.

Across several qualitative studies, more than 60% of the respondents intended to have a second child, while the age-specified fertility intentions of men were always higher compared to those of women (Jing *et al.*, 2022; Ning *et al.*, 2022). However, solely loosening the birth limit has a limited long-run impact. Lin *et al.* (2024) conducted a quasi-experimental analysis of the two-child transition policy to show a short-term rise in birth rates. However, this was soon followed by a faster declining trend, which implies that the relaxation of policy without a subsequent enabling system may not sustain the recovery of fertility after all. Although several individuals express an intention to have a second child (60% of 9,243 respondents), the intention to have a third child is comparatively low (only 13%) (Jing *et al.*, 2022). This highlights a steep drop-off as family sizes increase. Ning *et al.* (2022) and Spéder *et al.* (2019) identified perceived risk and higher educational attainment as significant barriers to third-child intentions. Additionally, work-family conflict also acts as a key mechanism as women's fertility intentions are negatively associated with work-family conflict; however, the relationship is moderated by income and childbearing burden (Li *et al.*, 2024). The consequences of these pressures are also highly gendered. M. Zhang *et al.* (2024) studied evidence on child penalties in China and found that there is a sharp deterioration in women's labor market outcomes right after childbirth. They identified gender norms as a mechanism that amplifies labor-market inequality following childbirth.

Most existing studies in China focus on intentions, demographic correlates, or short-run policy effects, which help explain *who* is more likely to intend additional births, but less often explain *how* policy is interpreted by young adults. There is also limited within-city work that compares how different governance contexts inside the same city shape feasibility and credibility. This study addresses these gaps by looking at how youth in urban and suburban Beijing interpret the Three-Child Policy. It examines how they evaluate the policy's credibility and how these evaluations shape fertility decisions.

This study examines policy implementation by focusing on how the policy is received. It determines how young people interpret the Three-Child Policy, assess its credibility, and translate these assessments into real-life decision-making about starting a family under their constraints. The study will simultaneously use urban–suburban variation within Beijing to facilitate a within-city comparison of governance contexts wherein housing space, commuting time, local service capacity, and support networks can shift the lived feasibility of childbearing. So, the aim of the research is to study the impacts of the expansion of the Three-Child Policy and its related support measures among young adults. Therefore, the analysis is guided by the following research question:

How do young adults in urban and suburban Beijing interpret the Three-Child Policy and the related measures in terms of feasibility?

The study will foreground why citizens do/do not respond and will shift fertility policy analysis from what works to everyday conditions that make signals credible or perhaps not. For this purpose, the content of this study has been divided into five different sections. Section 1 provides an introduction to the study and a literature review that discusses the background of policy, focusing on the meaning of policy expansion. The literature highlights the theoretical frameworks that policy implementation relies on. It discusses policy credibility and risk transfer. The section further introduces the idea of public hesitation and highlights the gap in the literature. Section 2 discusses the methodology that includes a qualitative, interpretive study using semi-structured interviews to capture policy reception and decision-making narratives. Section 3 interprets the findings of the study via the 15 semi-structured interviews that were conducted. It reveals how young adults consider the policy to be permission without enabling feasibility. Section 4 talks about the findings in relation to existing literature, and Section 5 summarizes the main results of the study while pointing out the key limitations and future directions.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Background: Three-Child Policy and the meaning of policy expansion

The Three-Child Policy in China is a policy of encouraging births, as opposed to the previous policy of emphasis on birth control. According to the government, the policy

was intended to address changes in the demographic and population structure and boost economic development according to the government (Xinhua, 2021). To support this, the policy is accompanied by support measures such as access to subsidized childcare, education, housing loans, tax breaks, and job security (China Daily & Xinhua, 2021). These measures indicate that a major factor limiting fertility is not just legal restrictions, but also the cost and effort involved in raising children.

In this study, "policy expansion" does not merely involve adjusting the birth-limit rules. Instead, it is viewed as a three-step process. First, there is the shift from a formal policy objective of "allowing" to the encouragement of childbirth. Second, the policy package has expanded to include childcare, education, housing, tax relief, and related measures intended to reduce child-rearing burdens (Xinhua, 2022). Third, policy expansion requires making the policy a part of people's routines because the policy's support mechanisms depend on the actions of local governments and employer compliance. Relaxed rules have only a short-term effect on fertility (Lei *et al.*, 2025; Lin *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, policy evaluation should consider how formal policy changes are felt and perceived in people's lives, and not only how generous these policies appear (Cai & Liu, 2024). Moreover, financial incentives by themselves typically alter the timing of childbirth more than the number of births. Policy packages must therefore incorporate effective institutional design, clear information, and measures responsive to the constraints households face, and not just generosity alone, to have tangible effects (Gauthier, 2007; Keiser & Meier, 1996; Weber *et al.*, 2014). In addition, ensuring the availability of childcare and family support is crucial, particularly when work–family conflict is frequently reported (Diprete *et al.*, 2003; Luci-Greulich & Thévenon, 2013). These action plans can enhance fertility by expanding the policies. So, the transition to a Three-Child Policy requires a lot more than legal changes. It is an expanding policy package, the impact of which depends on whether the promised supports do in fact reduce the everyday constraints.

1.1.2. Public response to the Three-Child Policy and the idea of fertility hesitation

Policy expansion did not translate to readiness by default. Official population data show that China recorded 9.54 million births in 2024 with a crude birth rate of 6.77 per thousand, while deaths exceeded births, resulting in negative natural population growth (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). Furthermore, more recent reporting states that births fell to 7.92 million in 2025 while the birth rate dropped to 5.63 per thousand alongside a decline in population (Reuters, 2026). Moreover, surveys conducted by Jing *et al.* (2022) also report that the intention to have a second child was about 60%, while that for a third was only 13%. Thus, there was a drop-off when moving from the second child to the third child under the Three-Child Policy. The gap between supportive policies and people's desire to have a third child is what this study focuses on. Even with more encouraging policies and extra support available, many young adults are still practically and emotionally hesitant to start a family due to the belief that the support is not reliable, uneven, uncertain, and insufficient to manage everyday burdens.

This study uses "fertility hesitation" to frame the mismatch between policy expansion and decision-making about having children. The term refers to a state in which individuals continue to be indecisive and hesitant about having children in spite of the encouragement extended by the policy. This is the difference between governmental encouragement of childbearing and the actual preparedness to have more children under current economic, social, and institutional conditions. The idea is to record the emotional and practical reactions of the people. For example, as an integral part of a household asset and also a fundamental living environment of women's lives, housing impacts their decisions in physical, psychological, and economic ways (Lan *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, higher educational qualifications and urbanization also impact fertility decisions comparatively more than cost and support services do (W. Zhang & Wong, 2025). Moreover, work-family conflict and care burdens highlight that time pressure and unequal care responsibilities can also reduce the willingness to have more children, especially when childcare remains hard to access, and workplaces do not provide any flexibility (Fu *et al.*, 2025; Li *et al.*, 2024). Overall, readiness seems to be produced when supportive measures reduce the day-to-day risk and burden, and not when policy permission expands officially.

1.2. Research gap

Existing research has generated valuable findings on fertility intentions and demographic correlates by focusing on how many children they want or which groups report lower fertility intentions. However, this study examines how young adults interpret the expanded policy. Previous literature does not determine what they feel, what they trust, and why they experience it as real support, or what the expectation is. This study is bridging a second gap, which concerns within-city variation. Even within one city, feasibility conditions can differ sharply across neighborhoods, such as housing space and cost, commuting time, childcare availability, and the reliability of local services. Previous research has given little attention to how adults interpret and respond to the fertility policies.

Therefore, there is still limited research that uses a within-city urban-suburban lens to explain why policy expansion can translate into hesitation rather than readiness among young adults.

This study addresses these gaps using two separate conceptual frameworks. Mettler and Soss (2004) and Andrews and Cingano (2014) claim that public policies do more than just allocate resources. Such policies, they claim, have an impact on how citizens see politics and society because they help to determine the expectations, obligations, and perceptions of what the government should handle. Thus, when there is no support, people lose faith and confidence in those policies. Moreover, the cost of care remains on the shoulders of individuals, and the policy may well be perceived as an "expectation" to provide care rather than support. These perspectives help explain how policy expansion can lead to "hesitation." If the goals are expanded and do not provide day-to-day, hands-on support, younger adults may feel that it is mere permission without actual protection. This study addresses the gap by focusing on young adults' lived responses in Beijing and showing how policy expansion is translated into practical and emotional readiness under different urban and suburban conditions.

2. Data and methods

This study employed a qualitative interview design with 15 participants. This sample size was considered adequate as the aim of the study was to identify thematic patterns of how policy expansion is interpreted among Chinese residents. The study also examined how these interpretations translate into decisions. In this regard, interview-based qualitative research judges adequacy by informational needs and the point at which further interviews add little new insight. Therefore, in qualitative interview studies, the saturation is obtained with around 9–17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This study uses an interpretivist qualitative approach to assess the feasibility of childbearing policies in everyday life. This is because, through this approach, the subjective perceptions and lived experiences associated with everyday life are rightly put forward. Thus, the decision-making process is adequately captured through this qualitative approach. A semi-structured qualitative interview approach was chosen to capture how people assess policy signals and feasibility in everyday life. This means that the study examines how policy signals determine whether people find the policy feasible, given the current conditions they live in. This does not involve estimating the population-level effects. According to existing research, housing and family resources affect people's fertility plans through various routes, including education and urbanization, going beyond direct costs (Lan *et al.*, 2025; W. Zhang & Wong, 2025). This informs the themes that have been explored in the interviews.

2.1. Participants

This study included young adults making life choices with respect to the Three-Child Policy. To be eligible, participants had to be aged 22 to 35, reside in Beijing, and be willing to discuss their plans and/or experiences with fertility under the current policy context. The sampling dimensions and rationale are presented in Table 1.

2.2. Data collection procedures

This study used semi-structured interviews as they support consistent coverage of core topics while simultaneously allowing participants to elaborate on meanings and experiences in their own terms (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The interview guide is available in the Appendix. Using this guide, 15 one-on-one interviews were conducted between September and November 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Participants were recruited through WeChat groups, with additional recruitment through alumni networks and peer referrals. The alumni network refers to university-based groups of former students who are connected through various online platforms. Peer referrals were used as a snowball-sampling strategy, where initial participants recommended other individuals within their network for the study. Online group settings were used as they can function as informal support spaces and can even shape how sensitive issues are discussed (Erčulj & Žiberna, 2021). Additionally, interviews were conducted through WeChat voice or video calls; Zoom (Zoom Communications, United States) was offered to participants who preferred that platform.

Participants gave permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Participants were assigned ID codes, which were used consistently across transcripts and reporting. Furthermore, to minimize risk when discussing perceptions that were potentially sensitive, no political statement was collected, and all data was stored securely with restricted access. Finally, interview questions primarily covered policy understanding, perceived credibility of support, feasibility conditions, and differences experienced across urban-core and suburban contexts.

2.3. Data analysis

This study employs a qualitative interview-based research design. This design helps in examining how individuals interpret the feasibility of the Three-Child Policy within their everyday socioeconomic realities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 young adults (aged 22–35) living in urban-core and suburban areas of Beijing.

Table 1. Sampling dimensions and rationale

Dimension	Variation targeted	Rationale for inclusion
Age	22–35	Captures different timing horizons and readiness narratives
Gender	Women/men	Surfaces gendered care norms and career-risk reasoning
Relationship status	Single/partnered/married	Differentiates feasibility and social expectations
Parental status	No child/one child/two children	Contrasts imaginaries vs lived parenting constraints
Housing	Renting/shared/owning/mortgage/living with parents; perceived space constraints	Links housing security and space to feasibility judgments
Employment & stability	State/private/platform-gig; stable vs precarious	Captures work–family conflict and policy credibility
Education	High school/vocational/undergraduate/postgraduate	Shapes opportunity cost and "good parenting" imaginaries
Income position	Self-described low/lower-middle/middle/upper-middle/high (household/individual)	Captures affordability and fairness narratives
Location	Urban core vs. suburban/fringe	Enables within-city governance comparison

Table 2 presents the sample characteristics. The sample comprised 7 women and 8 men. Of these, 5 lived with their partner, 7 were married, and 3 were single. In terms of age, the sample ranged between 22 and 35 years of age, with 8 aged between 31 and 35 years. In terms of parental status, 9 respondents did not have children, 5 respondents had one child, and only one respondent reported having two children. Ten participants lived in suburban areas and five lived in the urban core. The participants were from diverse educational and income backgrounds. These variations enabled an exploration of differing and contrasting views on fertility decisions and policy implementation.

To understand how participants viewed the Three-Child Policy and evaluate its feasibility for them in their everyday socioeconomic circumstances, the interview transcripts were subjected to inductive thematic analysis. The transcripts were carefully examined and reread several times in order to understand participants' thoughts and feelings about how the Three-Child Policy was interpreted on a daily basis, their confidence in the support they received, the pressures they faced, their expectations, and the division of childcare responsibilities. These then evolved into recurrent concepts, which were condensed into two main themes by the researchers: policy interpretation and constraints encountered. These constraints include housing costs, housing locations, personal concerns such as income instability, and care demands. This process showed both practical and emotional feasibility—or lack thereof—of expanding the policy. Subsequently, themes were compared across urban-core and suburban participants in Beijing to identify consistent similarities and differences in lived feasibility and stances of their response.

Table 2. Sample description

Characteristic	Category	*n*
Gender	Female	7
	Male	8
Age group (years)	22–25	3
	26–30	4
	31–35	8
Relationship status	Partnered	5
	Married	7
	Single	3
Parental status	No child	9
	1 child	5
	2 children	1
Location	Urban	5
	Suburban	10
Education	High school	1
	Vocational	3
	Undergraduate	6
	Postgraduate	5
Income level	Low	2
	Lower-middle	4
	Middle	5
	Upper-middle	2
	High	2

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3. Results

Thematic analysis generated interpretive claims across the 15 interviews, which answer the research question posited in this study. The findings are presented in two sections. The first examines how different participants perceived the policies and assessed their credibility. The second examines the constraints shaping the perceived feasibility of childbearing.

3.1. Policy interpretation

Most participants believed that the Three-Child Policy was a national signal or permission. However, they said that it did not translate into being ready to have more children unless it altered everyday conditions. P1 (female, 27, urban core) described the policy as "just an announcement" and added that it felt "more like a signal than real support." Similarly, P4 (male, 35, urban core) framed it as a population-level concern rather than a household-level solution: it "makes sense at the national level, but not at the household level."

In suburban locations, the change was perceived as a national aspiration, while the idea of more children was regarded as a personal choice. P10 (male, 35, suburban, 1 child) said: "It indicates a national goal, but it's up to families individually to make decisions." In addition, the policy was less relevant to the younger participants as they were just starting out in their careers and lives. This is reflected in expressions such as: "It doesn't fit into my life right now" (P6, male, 22, suburban/peripheral); "it feels disconnected from my current life stage" (P14, female, 25, urban core).

The participants consistently distinguished between the purpose of the policy and how it is executed. Their assessment of credibility was based on their belief that the support was actually helpful in their circumstances. P4 (male, 35, urban core) noted: "I believe there was a good intent, but the support was disjointed and slow." This separation was also discovered among parents. P5 (female, 30, suburban, one child) attributed low trust to past experiences: "After giving birth to my first child, my job stability was compromised, which changed my perspective on policy promises." Moreover, what parents saw as credible hinged on their employment sector and the perceived eligibility for benefits. P2 (male, 33, suburban, one child) said: "I think, in the state sector, benefits are more apparent; in the private sector, I do see people struggling more, so I think support works unevenly." In comparison, respondents in the gig and private sectors felt excluded. P6 (male, age 22, gig work) said: "Not much. Gig workers are not really being supported." Thus, individuals across various sectors tended to see policies differently depending on their social support.

Additionally, some participants believed the support was not broad enough or sufficient. P11 (female, 31, suburban, non-governmental organization sector) said, "There is not much trust. Support seems selective." P9 (female, 34, urban core, one child) linked distrust to childcare experiences: "Very little. My experiences of childcare access have been discouraging." P7 (female, 31, urban core, state-owned enterprise) was more positive, but still had some reservations: "Implementation is uneven." Thus, if policy expansion is to be a pathway to readiness, it must be trustworthy, enforceable, and available to everyone.

Overall, policy expansion leads to readiness only when people see real support in their daily lives. This means they want the government to create more measures to help raise more kids. Without these, the Three-Child Policy is just a message or expectation that does not change the actual feasibility.

3.2. Constraints

3.2.1. Housing space, cost, and location trade-offs

For most of the urban core participants, a feasibility barrier was posed by limited space and high costs. P1 (female, 27, urban core) explained that the most difficult thing would be "Time and space," adding that "I don't know where we would put a baby in this apartment." P4 (male, 35, urban core) also commented that "Time and housing…Space and work intensity are [the problem]." The direct claim was made by P14 (female, 25, urban core): "Urban costs make it unrealistic."

However, suburban participants appreciated the additional space. They framed readiness, however, in a way that they presented it as a choice between space and access. P2 (male, 33, suburban) commented that "We have space and slightly lower costs in the suburbs, but it takes time to commute, and services may not be as convenient." P3 (female, 24, suburban) explained the same tension between space and time, "There's more space, but jobs are harder to find and commuting to better work takes time." P7 (female, 31, urban core) countered with a counterfactual, "In the suburbs, space might help, but commuting would reduce time for family." Furthermore, suburban parents pointed out that the space was not a solution to the schooling problems or services. In this respect, P13 (male, 35, suburban, 2 children) stated, "Suburban space helps a lot," but added, "In the city, costs would stop us completely." Therefore, policy expansion does not take precedence over issues of housing space, cost, and feasibility. Instead, readiness is actually filtered through these factors, and the trade-off between convenience and affordability in the urban–uburban space.

3.2.2. Readiness: Income stability and gender expectations

For participants who agreed with the policy, additional factors of time scarcity and unpredictable income impacted their capacity and willingness to bear a child. Readiness was primarily determined by independence and predictability of income, where predictability of income might also be understood as certainty, for the participants who were involved in precarious working conditions. P6 (male, 22, gig economy) responded, "I'm still trying to earn stable money and become independent," and added: "I can't even plan my own future clearly." P3 (female, 24, gig work) echoed, "I can't predict next month. A child needs stability." Thus, whenever they are not supported with child support or child policy by the government, people with constrained incomes postpone childbearing. Furthermore, income volatility played a negative role in the preparedness of some of those participants who lived outside urban centers and who were parents. P10 (male, 35, suburban, business owner) said, "Working in a business makes income unpredictable, with the most difficult part being managing the fluctuations in income while taking care of a larger family." Therefore, readiness depends on whether daily time and income stability make children realistically manageable. It is not simply a matter of "accepting" the policy; it is about whether it is an efficient decision to add an additional child.

A theme that appeared in several of the interviews was the expectation that childcare and career disruption are unequal, and that it is women who bear the disproportionate brunt of it. P1 (female, 27, urban core) stated, "Mothers carry most of it; fathers help, but it's still expected of women to adapt their careers." Structural gendered nature of childcare coordination is also reported by P2 (male, 33, suburban): "It's usually the mother's job to pick up the child, take care during illness, and deal with school demands." As P5 (female, 30, suburban) said, "Managing childcare if the child is sick, usually it is my responsibility." This means that it is the mothers who carry the emotional load and childcare duties, and therefore it is they who mostly postpone childbirth. This care-sharing exchange happens when feelings of pressure are felt instead of the lack of support. P5 commented: "Pressure, a mother has to give up more." P9 (female, 34, urban core) also mentioned that "the pressure is [also] more on the women." Thus, the emphasis of the participants was on increasing readiness to enforceable protections, and not symbolic encouragement. P5 said a "real job protection for mothers." P7 (female, 31, urban core) wanted "job continuity" along with guarantees in relation to childcare. P3 (female, 24, gig work) put the problem in terms of a transfer of responsibility: "I think the state feels like it sets the goals and does not have to do the work on a day-to-day basis." Overall, it might be concluded that a feeling of emotional readiness is compromised when the expansion of policy is perceived as a rise in expectations for childcare, without a redistribution of care support or clear workplace protection.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of key findings

The interviews show that the expansion of the Three-Child Policy and related support systems does not necessarily translate into families being more ready to expand by default. From the findings discussed in Section 3, it was observed that participants recognized a shift in policy to be a national measure that was supposed to bring forth a change in fertility rate. However, this was interpreted as an announcement or an expectation unless they were given relevant support in their everyday activities to effectively bear more children. This is consistent with evidence that birth-policy relaxation effects might be short-lived without enabling systems that sustain them (Lei *et al.*, 2025; Lin *et al.*, 2024). In this regard, P1 (female, 27, urban core) called the policy an announcement and considered it a signal to have more children. She emphasized that the policy does not really change her daily life. This explains why relaxation of policy and incentives produced limited change in fertility rates. Even when formal permissions expanded, people's behavior did not really change.

Another significant theme that was discovered across the interviews was the gap between intention and delivery. Participants considered these to be signs of credibility. Policy design is filtered through policy experience instead of the announced intent (Cai & Liu, 2024). Here, credibility is not an abstract judgment, but rather shows if support can indeed be accessed and enforced in daily life. P4 (male, 35, urban) said, "I trust the intention, but not the execution. Support feels fragmented and slow." On the other hand, other participants like P2 (male, 33, suburban) linked credibility to eligibility and sectoral protection. He trusted the supports partially and contrasted state-sector clarity with private sector difficulty, thereby concluding that "support worked unevenly." Moreover, it was the precarious workers who appeared to be the most skeptical. P6 (male, 22, suburban) said: "Gig workers don't really get support." This study therefore treats policy credibility and welfare-state trust as grounded in perceived institutional performance and fairness, especially in terms of frontline delivery of the benefits to the citizens (Koreh & Mandelkern, 2023; Theiss & Szelewa, 2025).

Additionally, readiness seems to be shaped by expectations and perceived responsibility. Thus, policies

shape how state responsibility is interpreted and how much citizens comply with the change (Kumlin *et al.*, 2024; Mettler & Soss, 2004). In several interviews, the policy was considered to be a moral or social expectation without any shift in lived conditions (P4 specifically made this claim). The interviews show that some young adults read expansion as an encouragement that does not reduce daily risk. This can weaken motivation and reinforce hesitation. This is the major reason why fertility policies in China, including the Three-Child Policy, have failed to increase the fertility rate across the nation.

In the above context, within-city variation is the most important. It shows how the national policy is translated into readiness through local feasibility conditions instead of policy text. Urban core participants repeatedly emphasized space, cost, and intensity. P1, for instance, described the urban core as "expensive and small" and "not set up for kids unless you have a lot of money." For her, the binding constraints were time and space, and she explicitly linked readiness to housing and "flexibility that is actually used, not just written on paper." Suburban participants imagined relocating to improve feasibility. They described trade-offs rather than clear improvements. However, although they expected the cost to be lower, they feared that the commute would take way more time, as described by P1 when she claimed, "but I worry the commute would take away the time I'd gain." This reinforces the value of examining implementation as a service ecosystem, which includes the provision of childcare, schooling, and workplace enforcement. It should not treat the central announcement as the main unit that explains.

Another significant reason that prohibits the policy expansion from smoothly translating to readiness is that support is evaluated against gendered care risk and work-family conflict. Participants described these as emotionally exhausting and professionally quite costly. P1 stated "mothers carry most of it," signifying that the majority of the care burden is taken over by mothers. They are the ones who are expected to adjust their careers. Likewise, P2 reported that the coordination of childcare, which involves picking up, sickness, and school work, is generally the "mother's burden." The sense of responsibility passed to others was even more evident for precarious workers. P3 stated that "The state likes to set goals but doesn't carry out the daily work." These patterns are similar to those found in previous studies on work-family conflict and childbearing burdens that depress fertility intentions (Fu *et al.*, 2025; Li *et al.*, 2024). Caring duties tend to be focused on the household and tend to fall disproportionately onto women (Andrade & Bould, 2012; Aziz, 2023; Kwete *et al.*, 2021). Women nowadays tend to focus more on their careers and delay or perhaps avoid childbirth till they are economically able to bear a child with no added burden, both physically and mentally. This justifies the low fertility rate despite the expansion of policy.

Finally, readiness posits the threshold. Participants become open to childbirth when specific conditions are met. Across the interviews, expansion translated into readiness only when it was experienced as enforceable support in daily life. If not, it was merely interpreted as permission or expectation that reinforced delay, avoidance, or capping decisions.

4.2. Limitations

This research is crucial to understanding the contingencies of such policy. It offers useful insights, yet like any other research, this too has its limitations. This study focuses on a single city and, therefore, limits the generalizability of its findings to other provinces or cities. The qualitative participant selection that has been chosen entails a possibility of under-representing certain groups, such as migrant workers, very-high-income elites, and others. Although measures have been taken to ensure maximum variation, the scope of the research remains limited as it may not include enough of the harder-to-reach groups through online recruitment. Lastly, social desirability and political sensitivity may constrain openness in interviews.

4.3. Future directions

Thus, future research should focus on a multi-site comparative study which includes cities like Beijing versus Chengdu or perhaps low-tier cities. Moreover, studies may extend this qualitative research into a mixed-method extension with surveys informed by interview-derived categories to test the prevalence of response types. A policy-implementation study may also add to the narrative by including local government officials and service providers as additional interview groups to map capacity constraints. Lastly, there is a scope for a longitudinal follow-up to track whether conditional openness turns into behavior after policy changes.

5. Conclusion

Overall, these findings show that young people interpret the policy as a national announcement or "permission" rather than as practical, lived support, and that feasibility conditions such as work–family conflict, gendered care burdens, housing constraints and service access shape readiness for childbearing across Beijing. Rather than describing the policy as a "governance message," participants consistently assessed whether support was credible in practice, i.e., whether childcare, schooling

support, housing feasibility, and workplace protections were accessible and enforceable in their everyday lives. Furthermore, local living conditions (space/cost in the urban core; commuting time and uneven service availability in suburban/fringe areas) mediate how policy expansion is received, often translating into delay, conditional openness, avoidance, or capping family size. These findings, therefore, suggest that expanded eligibility alone is unlikely to translate into readiness when the costs and risks of childbearing remain privately borne and unevenly distributed. Rather than describing this as "policy failure," this study reveals that the limited readiness is associated with a mismatch between policy intention and experienced implementation, especially in terms of accessibility of childcare, the pressure childcare places on parents, housing availability, and protection in the workplace. Thus, it can be concluded that childcare support, reliable school-related support, and the job protections (particularly job-related penalties for taking maternity leave) that reduce everyday risks are more likely to be important for childbearing readiness than direct policy encouragement in both urban and suburban areas.

While these findings offer useful insights into the experiences of young adults in Beijing, the attitudes towards the Three-Child Policy and experiences of fertility may be different for people across other geographic and socioeconomic settings in China. The younger generation that lives in small cities or less economically developed areas of China may face different economic situations regarding housing costs, work stress, etc., which will differently shape their understanding and feasibility of childbearing. Likewise, people with different social statuses have different access to child care, educational opportunities, and job security, which in turn affect their readiness for childbearing. Future studies should therefore consider local context-specific differences in order to better understand how local contexts affect response to fertility policy and support programs.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Ran Chen, Nor Azizah Zainal Abidin
Formal analysis: Ran Chen, Nor Azizah Zainal Abidin
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Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Zhengzhou Information Engineering Vocational College OF INSTITUTE (protocol code ZIEVC-IRB-2025-027 and date of approval on Jun 27, 2025). After ensuring that participants fully understood the information and had the opportunity to ask questions, they voluntarily signed the consent forms. We have strictly adhered to ethical guidelines in handling this consent process.

Consent for publication

Consent for publication was obtained from the participants. In addition, we have taken all necessary steps to mask or conceal any identifying information of the participants in the manuscript and photographs, such as using code numbers to represent individuals.

Availability of data

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix

Participant profile form and semi-structured interview guide

Profile

Age	In years
Gender	Female/Male
Relationship Status	Partnered/Married/Single
Parental Status	No Child/1 child/2 child
Housing	Rented /Own/Shared space/With parents
Employment Type and Stability	Private/Public and Stable/Unstable/High stress/Precarious
Education	High School/Undergraduate/ Postgraduate/Vocational
Income Position	Low/Lower-middle/Middle/Upper-middle/High
Location	Urban/Suburban

Interviewer (I): When you hear "China's three-child policy," what does it mean to you in everyday terms?

I: How did you first learn about the policy, and what was your initial reaction?

I: Do you feel this policy is relevant to people in situations like yours? Why or why not?

I: How much do you trust that support linked to the policy will actually work in practice? What shapes that trust or doubt?

I: Thinking about your own life right now, what are the main factors that shape your decisions about having children?

I: If you imagine having a child, what would be the most difficult part in practical terms?

I: In your view, how are responsibilities for childcare usually divided between mothers, fathers, families, and the state?

I: Do current policies feel more like support, expectation, or pressure for people your age? Why?

I: How would you describe your own response to the three-child policy so far?

I: What would need to change for your response to change?

I: How does where you live (urban core or suburban area) shape your daily life and your decisions about having children?

I: If you lived in a different part of Beijing, what do you think would change about your decision, and why?