

A Study on the Current Situation and Characteristics of Fertility Intentions Among Female College Students in Sichuan Province

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Abstract: *This study focuses on the current status of fertility intentions among female university students in Sichuan Province, conducting a systematic investigation using a combination of literature review, questionnaire surveys, and semi-structured interviews. The authors surveyed female university students from the 2020 to 2023 classes at eight universities, including Sichuan University and Southwestern University of Finance and Economics. Quantitative data were collected using self-administered questionnaires, resulting in 1,067 valid questionnaires. Ten participants were also interviewed for qualitative data, and qualitative and quantitative analysis was combined to draw conclusions. The study found that female university students in Sichuan Province generally have low fertility intentions, exhibiting the following characteristics: First, both the ideal and planned number of children are low, and current conditions further reduce actual fertility intentions; second, childbearing is concentrated between the ages of 25 and 35, with a clear preference for later childbearing; third, overall gender preference for fertility is weakening, and the traditional concept of favoring sons over daughters is declining; fourth, fertility values are becoming increasingly personalized, and the influence of traditional fertility values is weakening; fifth, due to the belief that women are in a disadvantaged position in marriage and must pay a certain price for childbearing, most study participants express fear of marriage and childbearing; and sixth, study participants exhibit diverse perceptions of the relationship between marriage, family, and childbearing, demonstrating a diverse perspective on marriage and childbearing. This study reveals the complexity and contemporary nature of fertility intentions among female university students in Sichuan Province, reflecting the comprehensive considerations of personal values, current conditions, and the social environment among contemporary young women in their fertility choices.*

Keywords: Fertility intention, Female college students, Sichuan Province.

1. Introduction

As urbanization and modernization accelerate, my country is entering a period of low fertility. In 2022, my country's natural population growth rate turned negative for the first time; in 2023, the total population decreased by 2.08 million year-on-year, and the birth rate fell to 6.39%. Population aging and the continued decline in fertility have become key issues affecting social development. In response, the national government continues to optimize fertility policies. In 2021, the "Decision of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Optimizing Birth Policies to Promote Long-Term Balanced Population Development" proposed the three-child policy and supporting measures. In 2022, the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China included the "establishment of a fertility support policy system" for the first time. In 2023, the Central Economic Work Conference further clarified the need to "accelerate the improvement of the fertility support policy system," providing multi-faceted protection for families with fertility. Sichuan Province has also actively responded to national policies and launched local explorations in the field of fertility support. In 2021, Panzhihua City took the lead in providing a monthly childcare subsidy of 500 yuan to registered families with two or three children, until the child reaches the age of three. In 2023, the new version of the "Sichuan Province Birth Registration Service Management Measures" removed restrictions on marital status and birth numbers, further easing policy easing. Furthermore, on October 17, 2024, the China Population and Development Research Center announced it would launch a new round of sample surveys on population and family development to comprehensively analyze the factors that contribute to childbearing and fear. Against this

backdrop of policies, conducting research on fertility intentions is inherently significant.

At present, the academic community has conducted extensive research on fertility intentions. Relevant literature has clarified the connotations of fertility views and fertility intentions. It not only sorts out the current status of domestic college students' fertility views from the five dimensions of birth quantity, gender preference, time, motivation and influencing factors, but also often conducts comprehensive analysis in combination with issues such as marriage changes, female employment, and child care. However, the fertility intention research conducted on the student population of higher education institutions, a potential fertility group, is mainly based on different regions. A survey of 1,525 college students in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region showed that the fertility intention of undergraduates is relatively low, and the tendency of female students not to have children is more obvious. Only 15.7% of them have a gender preference [1]. A survey of 8 colleges and universities in Zhejiang Province found that the fertility intention of fresh graduates is low. The main reason is the pressure brought by the cost of childbirth, especially the economic expenditure and the possible opportunity cost; more than 95% of students have no intention of having three children [2]. An analysis of 1,300 questionnaires from 5 colleges and universities in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region showed that most students have a fertility intention, with no gender preference as the mainstream trend, and the ideal childbearing age is concentrated between 27 and 28 years old [3]. In addition, a small number of national surveys on college students' fertility intentions also show that contemporary college students' fertility intentions are generally low, the connection between

fertility and marriage is loosening, gender preferences are also weakening, and they pay more attention to the quality of their children's upbringing; at the same time, the stability of marriage and career is their primary condition for having children, while the pain of childbirth is the primary reason why women are afraid of having children, and the influence of the traditional concept of "raising children to provide for old age" is gradually weakening [4].

While existing research covers multiple regions and population groups, research specifically on female university students in Sichuan Province remains insufficient. As a populous province with abundant university resources, the fertility intentions of female university students in Sichuan may reflect both common characteristics across youth groups and unique characteristics due to regional cultural and economic development differences. Based on this, this study focuses on the current characteristics of fertility intentions among female university students in Sichuan Province. Through literature review, questionnaire surveys, and semi-structured interviews, this study presents the actual fertility intentions of this group within the current demographic and policy environment, providing a reference for understanding the contemporary characteristics of fertility intentions among young women at the regional level.

2. Research Methods and Sample Overview

2.1 Research Methods

2.1.1 Documentation

Relevant research literature for this study was searched through online resources such as CNKI, VIP, the campus library, Society magazine, Sociological Research, Google Scholar, and Baidu, collecting relevant papers, policies, media reports, statistical data, and other textual materials. Furthermore, relevant books were collected and consulted through the university library to enrich the research reference base.

2.1.2 Questionnaire survey method

This study employed a questionnaire survey to deeply analyze the current status and characteristics of fertility intentions among female university students in Sichuan Province. The authors first designed a questionnaire that collected basic personal information, including information on the subjects' fertility intentions, influencing factors, and related cognitions. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely share their thoughts and opinions on fertility, providing a richer perspective for the research.

Secondly, sample acquisition was carried out. This questionnaire survey was conducted in a combination of online and offline methods. Taking into account the level of universities and professional preferences, the author selected eight universities as research sites, including Sichuan University, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Sichuan Agricultural University, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Chengdu University of Technology, Sichuan Normal University, Xihua University

and Yibin College, and collected questionnaires through the Wenjuxing platform. Due to the limited time and energy of the researchers, this study used all female college students in these eight sampled universities as the sampling frame. At the same time, considering that the survey period was in the stage of class change, the freshmen of the class of 2024 were not representative of the college student population, so the grade of the research subjects was limited to female college students from the classes of 2023 to 2020.

Finally, this survey used SPSS statistical analysis tools to conduct data analysis. Specifically, this study will first collect statistics on the various quantitative indicators and distribution of female college students' fertility intentions in Sichuan Province, and then analyze and explain the fertility intentions of this group based on the statistical results.

2.1.3 Semi-structured interview method

This study employed a semi-structured interview method, aiming to provide valuable firsthand data for understanding the current fertility intentions of young women through in-depth interviews, thereby providing a scientific basis for relevant policymaking. Based on questionnaire survey data, the authors used judgmental sampling to select one or two participants from each of the aforementioned universities who responded well to the questionnaire and demonstrated a strong willingness to cooperate. This group of interviewees varied widely in terms of ethnicity, household income, place of residence, age, major, and fertility intentions. These included a female university student from an ethnic minority, as well as women with varying degrees of fertility intentions (both negative and positive).

In the initial interview design, the author developed an interview outline based on the research direction and content, and designed semi-open-ended questions based on the interviewees' responses to the questionnaire. During the interviews, the author guided the interviewees to share their personal experiences and genuine opinions, while also safeguarding their privacy and voluntary participation throughout the process to ensure the authenticity and reliability of the information. After the interviews, the author transcribed the recordings verbatim and systematically analyzed the interview content using content analysis and other methods, thereby identifying common and specific factors influencing fertility intentions among female university students in Sichuan Province.

In addition, the interview outlines were divided into two categories: one for the author to ask questions, and the other for the interviewees to familiarize themselves with the scope of the questions. Both were designed with consistent logic, differing only in the details of the content. This ensured comprehensive coverage of the research objectives while allowing the interviewees room for free expression. During the actual interviews, the outlines were individually adjusted based on the interviewees' questionnaire responses. The outlines primarily encompassed four key areas: first, in-depth inquiry into the interviewees' fertility intentions and the reasons behind them; second, focusing on the interviewees, understanding the fertility intentions of their peers, the factors influencing them, and the interviewees' related perspectives;

third, drawing on social concerns, gradually exploring the social support needed by the interviewees and women of childbearing age; and fourth, building on the previous question, allowing the interviewees to discuss possible policies from the perspective of decision-makers and engage in open-ended discussions on suggestions.

Finally, the study employed an inductive analysis of the interview data. Specifically, the primary interview materials were first converted from speech to text to maximize the recovery of the textual content. Inductive analysis was then used to extract core insights relevant to the research from the actual interview content.

2.2 Sample Overview

A total of 1,200 questionnaires were distributed, of which 1,067 were valid, achieving an efficiency rate of 88.9%. Sample distribution revealed a relatively balanced distribution of subjects across age groups and their permanent residence (excluding time spent in school). The age group primarily ranged from 19 to 22 years old, with the largest number of 20-year-olds, whose average age was 20.29. The proportion of permanent residence in five regions, from first-tier cities to emerging first-tier cities to rural areas, ranged from 19.4% to 22.9%, demonstrating a balanced and representative distribution. Han students comprised the largest group, accounting for 93.9%. Among the remaining ethnic minorities, Yi, Manchu, Tibetan, and Hui ethnic groups were relatively prominent. The subjects' monthly family incomes were primarily below 10,000 yuan, primarily in the 5,000 to 10,000 yuan range, accounting for 37.1% of the total. Families with more than one child were relatively common, accounting for over 60%. The survey's subject population exhibited diverse characteristics across multiple dimensions.

3. Current Status and Characteristics of Fertility Intentions Among Female College Students in Sichuan Province

Based on the definition of fertility intention, this study measured the fertility intentions of female university students in Sichuan Province across three dimensions: number of children, timing of childbearing, and gender preference. Combined with analysis of qualitative interviews, the author categorizes the current status of fertility intentions among female university students in Sichuan Province into the following dimensions.

3.1 Birth Rate

This study contrasted the ideal number of children (without considering realistic constraints) with the planned number (with considering realistic constraints) to highlight the extent to which realistic constraints hinder the subjects' fertility desires. The survey results showed that, under ideal circumstances, 53.4% of the female college students did not want to have children, consistent with the current low fertility rate and trend. However, when realistic constraints were taken into account, the proportion of female college students unwilling to have children rose to 67.9%, an increase of over ten percentage points. The proportion of female college students who ideally planned to have one or two children

decreased after accounting for realistic constraints. In particular, the proportion of female college students planning to have two children plummeted from 20.1% under ideal circumstances to 7.5%. Furthermore, the group expressing a desire for a third child was extremely small, comprising only 0.7% of the sample. However, it is noteworthy that the number of children planned by female college students who ideally planned to have three children was virtually unaffected by realistic constraints.

In summary, based on this survey data, female university students in Sichuan Province generally have low fertility intentions. When factoring in the constraints of real-world conditions, their reluctance to have children is further exacerbated, and their desire to have a second child fluctuates significantly with these real-world factors. However, the family planning intentions of the very small group who desire a third child remain largely unaffected by these real-world factors.

3.2 Childbirth Time

Targeting female college students who wish to have children, the author learned in detail about their family planning time.

The results show that the vast majority of study participants prefer to complete their childbearing plans between the ages of 25 and 35, with over 70% choosing this specific age range. This finding is highly consistent with national survey data released at the Third my country Population and Development Forum in February 2023. The forum data showed that the age of first childbearing for Chinese women has gradually increased from 22 in the 1980s to 27.2 in 2020. From a demographic and sociological perspective, this data reflects a significant shift in the marriage and childbearing attitudes of younger women. When planning childbearing, they prioritize balancing personal development and physical health, rather than simply following traditional norms. When formulating their childbearing plans, they consider a wide range of practical and developmental factors, including education, career development, and potential physiological factors. Education and career development are crucial factors in determining the timing of childbearing. With the increasing prevalence of higher education and the continued improvement in women's educational attainment, more and more women are choosing to postpone childbearing to pursue better academic and professional advancement. This change not only reflects individuals' emphasis on their own rights and interests, but also conforms to the overall fertility trend in today's society.

3.3 Gender Preference for Children

Survey data shows that over 60% of female college students choose "no gender preference" or "both male and female," indicating that most female college students do not have a clear preference for the sex of their children. However, when it comes to gender preferences, those who prefer female children are over 20% more likely to choose male children. This phenomenon breaks with the traditional preference for sons over daughters and demonstrates a significant shift in reproductive attitudes among the younger generation of women. This also aligns with the previously mentioned

survey results on fertility intentions among college students in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

From a sociocultural perspective, this change is closely linked to the fading of traditional fertility concepts. In recent years, the gender-neutral fertility concept of “it doesn’t matter whether you have a boy or a girl” has gradually become mainstream, and the phenomenon of “preferring girls” has also been reflected in some groups. Related research shows that college students’ preference for having girls is not simply due to emotional choices, but is influenced by many factors such as identity recognition, emotional value, and instrumental rationality [5]. In addition, as traditional concepts such as “continuing the family line” gradually fade away, coupled with the increasing cost of raising boys, female college students’ preference for girls has become more obvious.

3.4 Changes in Reproductive Values

The survey results reveal a significant shift in the values of female university students regarding childbearing. As many as 50% of the respondents believe that childbearing is meaningless, reflecting a profound rethinking and re-examination of traditional childbearing attitudes among the younger generation. Support for traditional notions of the significance of childbearing, such as continuing the family line, raising children to provide for old age, and conforming to established lifestyles, was around 10%, indicating a significant weakening of these traditional beliefs among contemporary female university students. Furthermore, nearly 40% of the respondents believe that the meaning of childbearing lies in satisfying one’s own emotional needs, reflecting the increasing emphasis on personal emotions and quality of life in modern childbearing attitudes.

According to research by Zhang Yutang et al., there is a significant correlation between college students’ fertility intentions and their fertility values. In college students’ fertility choices, the positive value of fertility values has the most significant impact on personal emotional values, followed by family values, and then traditional values [6]. Comparative analysis found that the data trends presented in this survey are consistent with the content analysis of the interviews.

In summary, female university students’ values regarding childbearing have undergone significant changes. While this shift reflects the positive impact of social development and ideological awakening, it also exposes numerous issues in current society regarding marriage, childbearing, and gender equality. To improve women’s desire to have children and promote sustainable population development, we can improve policies in many areas, such as strengthening gender equality education, improving childbearing support policies, increasing the dissemination of knowledge about marriage and childbearing, and improving the marriage and family environment.

3.5 Fear of Marriage and Childbearing

This survey also found that the majority of respondents

expressed a fear of marriage and childbearing. Analyzing these subjective attitudes, the authors broadly categorized these views into the following types: Some respondents believed that women are relatively disadvantaged in the current marriage model. They noted that in situations of domestic violence, women receive limited social support, the cost of divorce is high, and conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law can easily arise within stem families. After marriage, women’s roles are often confined to the domestic sphere. Another group of respondents believed that current policies, to a certain extent, overlook the consequences of childbearing for women, such as the physical burden, sacrifices in career and freedom, and the increased likelihood of male infidelity after childbearing. These realities make women more cautious about childbearing, and even reluctant to do so. Still another group attributed these fears to gender inequality. They believed that men hold an advantageous position in the workplace, marriage, and social psychology, while women face numerous unequal treatment and challenges. Therefore, women’s fear of marriage and childbearing is, to a certain extent, a byproduct of gender inequality and a reflection of women’s awakening and the progress of the times. In addition to those who held a neutral attitude, a small number of participants expressed concern about the role of media publicity and guidance, emphasizing the importance of popularizing knowledge about sex, marriage, and childbearing. They noted that due to a lack of scientific knowledge about marriage and childbearing, some young women are susceptible to media exaggeration and misleading, which in turn affects their understanding of marriage and childbearing.

3.6 Diversified Views on Marriage and Childbearing

In this survey, inspired by current academic research on changes in the relationship between marriage and fertility, the author incorporated marriage and fertility issues into questionnaires and interviews, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of female college students’ views on marriage, fertility, family, and the relationship between the three, thereby further concretizing the factors influencing their fertility intentions and providing first-hand research content support for academic research.

Through survey data and content analysis, the authors found that female college students’ views on marriage, family, and childbearing were diverse and could be categorized into four main perspectives. First, some interviewees believed that marriage was not a necessity or merely a form of family, a voluntary choice based on material security and emotional support, but the core of the relationship remained family. At the same time, they emphasized the quality of marriage and mutual responsibility, stating that childbearing must be based on a stable family relationship, but that childbearing is also possible without it. Second, another group of interviewees believed that marriage was necessary and an existing legal institution that protected both sexes from establishing a family. Furthermore, the decision to have childbearing not only required a careful examination of supporting conditions but also required it to occur within the context of marriage. This view implicitly assumed the stability of families within marriage. Third, some interviewees also considered love as a factor. They believed that love was the foundation of marriage,

or the first stage of the marital relationship, with family taking a secondary role, allowing for flexibility in choosing childbearing. However, the family also served an expansionary function, and childbearing within marriage expanded that function. Fourth, some interviewees expressed a critical attitude toward the current marriage system, believing that marriage was a product of patriarchy. To some extent, it oppresses women, including the requirement for them to have children. Therefore, marriage can be nonexistent or relegated to the last place. However, they prioritize family over others, believing that their original family has an irreplaceable function.

When further investigating and analyzing the relationship between female college students' marriage and their families, the author found that the research subjects showed a high demand for family economic support, while their perception of the degree to which their family influenced their fertility intentions indicated a low level of influence. At the same time, the research results conducted by Zhang Yutang showed that contemporary college students pay more attention to their own emotional experiences. They do not believe that having children is a necessary option in life, and their values differ from their parents' belief that having children is a family obligation [6]. The conclusions of his research are consistent with the results of this survey, reflecting the individualization trend of contemporary youth's fertility intentions and diversified marriage and childbearing concepts.

4. Research Summary, Reflection and Suggestions

4.1 Research Conclusions

The fertility intentions of female university students in Sichuan Province exhibit complex characteristics deeply intertwined with contemporary developments. First, the desire for a second or third child is significantly suppressed by current conditions. This group already has a low desire for a second or third child, and the combined effects of realities such as housing costs, a shortage of childcare resources, and career interruptions further weaken this motivation. Second, the timing of childbearing is trending toward later ages. Most female university students plan to have children between the ages of 25 and 30. This reflects both the need for further education and career advancement in the context of widespread higher education and a desire to balance personal development with physical health. Third, gender preferences for childbearing are becoming less traditional. Over 80% of the respondents had no clear preference or preferred a girl, reflecting the decline of traditional values favoring sons over daughters. Fourth, fertility values have shifted from traditional to modern. Nearly 50% of the respondents believed childbearing was meaningless, while nearly 40% attributed the meaning of childbearing to emotional fulfillment. Only 10% endorsed traditional notions such as "continuing the family line" and "raising children to provide for old age," reflecting social progress and the awakening of individual consciousness. Fifth, fear of marriage and childbearing has become a widespread phenomenon. Most research subjects expressed varying degrees of these views, including a perception of women's vulnerable position in marriage, an understanding of the costs of childbearing, and an experience

of the reality of gender inequality. Some of these views are related to a lack of knowledge about marriage and childbearing and biased media propaganda. Sixth, views on marriage and childbearing are becoming increasingly diverse. Female university students' understanding of the relationship between marriage, childbearing, and family has evolved beyond a single paradigm: some believe that marriage is not a necessary prerequisite for childbearing; some view marriage as a legal guarantee for childbearing; some emphasize the fundamental role of love in marriage; and still others are critical of the institution of marriage. This diversity reflects the independent choices made by individuals in a complex social environment.

4.2 Research Limitations

First, there are limitations to the research subjects and sample. This study focused exclusively on female undergraduates from public universities in Sichuan Province and did not include women from other educational backgrounds (e.g., vocational colleges, junior colleges, private undergraduate universities, and graduate schools) or male perspectives. As a highly educated group, female undergraduates may have different fertility intentions and influencing factors than other female groups, particularly those with lower education or married women. Furthermore, male fertility intentions and attitudes are equally important in influencing overall fertility. However, due to the author's personal limitations, time constraints, and funding, this study did not include male perspectives, which limits the comprehensiveness of the research content and results. Furthermore, although this study surveyed eight universities in Sichuan Province, the sample was primarily concentrated in urban areas, with relatively few female undergraduates in rural areas. Consequently, the research content is limited in its coverage of factors influencing urban-rural differences. Furthermore, given significant urban-rural disparities in fertility attitudes, economic conditions, and social support, the results may not fully represent the fertility intentions of all female undergraduates in Sichuan Province.

Second, there are limitations to the research methodology. This study primarily employed a combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. While this method provides a relatively comprehensive picture of female university students' fertility intentions and the factors influencing them, the depth and breadth of the quantitative analysis remain limited. In particular, the data analysis, limited by the sample size and the complexity of the statistical tools, may limit the generalizability and explanatory power of some conclusions. Furthermore, the sample size of this study's qualitative analysis was relatively small. While this provides in-depth case analysis, its generalizability is limited.

The third limitation is the temporal dimension. This study's data collection and analysis focused on a specific time period, failing to conduct long-term follow-up surveys. However, fertility intentions are a dynamic process, influenced by a variety of factors, including personal life experiences and changes in the social environment. Therefore, the results of this study may not fully reflect the long-term trends in fertility intentions among female college students.

4.3 Research Recommendations

First, expand the scope of research and increase sample diversity. Future research could broaden the scope of study subjects, such as encompassing women from diverse educational backgrounds (e.g., vocational colleges, technical colleges, private undergraduate institutions, graduate students, employed individuals), as well as men, particularly married men or those approaching marriage. By examining both genders, research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing fertility intentions and provide a more comprehensive basis for policymaking. Furthermore, cross-regional and cross-provincial comparative studies could be considered to analyze the impact of socioeconomic conditions, cultural backgrounds, and policy environments on fertility intentions in different regions. In particular, the sample size of female college students in rural areas could be increased to further explore the impact of urban-rural differences on fertility intentions.

Second, we should track the dynamics of fertility intentions and deepen research methods. Future research could incorporate long-term follow-up surveys, such as cohort studies, focusing on the evolution of fertility intentions among female college students as they transition from campus to work, and from single to married and already having children, integrating this into the study of individual life courses. By accumulating long-term data, we can analyze the impact of individual life experiences and changes in the social environment on fertility intentions, thereby providing a more comprehensive scientific basis for the formulation and optimization of fertility policies. Furthermore, we can further adopt more diverse research methods, such as incorporating big data analysis technologies and leveraging data from social media, online forums, and other platforms to analyze discussions and changing attitudes among young people on fertility issues, thereby comprehensively improving the comprehensiveness and authenticity of survey research.

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