

The Mechanism Through Which Gender Roles Influence Childbearing Decisions Among Working Women

Guangxia Bao

Nanjing Normal University

Ruojing Wang

1367647086@qq.com

Nanjing Normal University

Article

Keywords: gender roles, women's childbearing decisions, work–family conflict, mediating effect

Posted Date: September 1st, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10411797/v1>

License: © ⓘ This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

The Mechanism Through Which Gender Roles Influence Childbearing Decisions Among Working Women —An Analysis of the Mediating Effect of Work – Family Conflict

Abstract : Against the backdrop of sustained negative population growth and accelerated population aging, the reluctance of urban working women to bear children has become a critical bottleneck constraining China's long-term balanced population development. Drawing on the gender role perspective and employing a mediation effect model, this study systematically examines the influence pathways of gender roles on women's childbearing decisions and tests the mediating role of work – family conflict, based on self-administered questionnaire data from 1,407 women with work experience. The results show that gender roles not only exert a significant direct effect on women's childbearing decisions but also generate a significant indirect effect through work – family conflict. Among the three dimensions of work – family conflict, stress conflict exhibits the strongest inhibitory effect on childbearing decisions, followed by behavioral conflict, whereas time conflict significantly suppresses only future fertility intentions and shows no significant effect on actual childbearing behavior. This study suggests that traditional gender role norms constitute a core mechanism suppressing fertility intentions by intensifying women's work – family conflict. Promoting gender equality and alleviating work – family conflict represent key leverage points for enhancing women's fertility motivation and fostering long-term balanced population development. This conclusion resonates with recent scholarly arguments calling for the urgent development of more comprehensive and gender-sensitive fertility support policy frameworks in light of the new demographic realities (Zheng, 2023).

Keywords: gender roles; women's childbearing decisions; work – family conflict; mediating effect

Introduction

In 2025, China's birth population dropped to 7.92 million, and the crude birth rate fell to 5.63‰, the lowest level since 1949; the total fertility rate was approximately

1.09, far below the replacement level of 2.1. Meanwhile, population aging continues to intensify, with the national population reaching 1.405 billion by the end of 2025, marking four consecutive years of negative growth. The sharp decline in births and accelerating aging jointly constitute a dual pressure, with increasingly prominent issues such as shrinking labor supply and escalating social old-age support burdens. Against this backdrop, many countries worldwide have implemented measures such as fertility subsidies and expanded childcare services to encourage childbearing. Although China has successively introduced the selective two-child policy, the universal two-child policy, and the three-child policy, the policy effects have gradually waned, and birth numbers continue to decline, indicating that China has fallen into a low-fertility trap. The persistently low fertility intentions among the reproductive-age population have become a critical factor affecting long-term balanced population development, bringing childbearing decisions back to the forefront of demographic research.

Regarding the determinants of childbearing decisions, Becker's seminal work established the cost – benefit analytical framework, positing that fertility behavior is a rational choice by households to maximize utility under resource constraints (Becker, 1960). Subsequently, Becker further focused on the maternal role, simplifying fertility decisions to the choice of the number of children (Becker, 1965). This economic-rationality perspective has provided an important foundation for subsequent research. At the economic level, childbearing costs significantly constrain fertility intentions; at the social support level, the availability of care resources (Zhang & Song, 2024) and the intensity of intergenerational support (Feng, 2018) also play crucial roles. Beyond economic and social support factors, individual characteristics also constitute an important dimension affecting childbearing decisions. In terms of career development, highly educated and high-income women tend to delay childbearing or reduce the number of children to preserve career advancement opportunities, and women's employment status and work intensity are also closely associated with their childbearing decisions (Zhang & Song, 2024). International comparative research supports this finding, with Goldin (2014) pointing out that women in high-skilled industries are more likely to delay childbearing or have fewer children. At the policy-environment level, McDonald's (2000) gender equity framework suggests that institutional gender equality helps raise fertility levels, yet the relationship between the degree of gender equality and fertility rates is complex (McDonald, 2000). However, it is worth noting that existing studies exhibit systematic deficiencies in analytical

perspectives. Begall and Mills (2011) found that work – family conflict may paradoxically increase the second-child fertility intentions of women who already have one child. This finding, which contradicts most studies, suggests that the mechanisms underlying childbearing decisions are complex and vary across sociocultural contexts. More fundamentally, the “absence” of women as decision-making agents in discussions on fertility decline is not unique to China, resulting in the long-term neglect of women's agency in childbearing decisions.

Although existing literature has extensively explored the determinants of childbearing decisions, most studies have focused on economic and institutional dimensions, with relatively few systematically uncovering the deep-seated mechanisms of women's childbearing decisions from the cultural perspective of gender roles. Against the backdrop of social transformation and accelerating progress toward gender equality, women's labor force participation and educational attainment have continued to rise, yet a significant time lag persists between the cultural inertia of gender roles and institutional change. Crucially, while women increasingly pursue career development and self-fulfillment in the workplace, they remain bound by traditional gender role expectations—internalized by society, families, and even themselves—and continue to bear the primary responsibility for household care and childrearing. This inherent tension between the dual identities of “career striver” and “family manager” has made the contradiction between traditional gender role expectations and modern career development increasingly salient. It has been demonstrated that gender role attitudes exert a significant influence on women's labor market engagement and their allocation of time and energy to family duties (Qing, 2017). The persistent tug-of-war between these two roles directly gives rise to and continually exacerbates women's work – family conflict: work and family compete for women's limited time; the emotional exhaustion and energy depletion from role switching accumulate; and the incompatibility between the assertiveness and efficiency demanded in the workplace and the warmth and attentiveness expected in the family becomes increasingly pronounced. This multidimensional conflict is not static but intensifies dynamically as women advance through career stages and approach the window of fertility, profoundly shaping their childbearing choices—transforming “when to have children and how many” from a family planning issue into a difficult trade-off between career risk and identity.

In view of this, this study adopts the perspective of childbearing decision research

and approaches the issue through gender roles, drawing on primary self-collected data from the 2025 survey “On the Dilemma of Women's Employment and Childbearing and Support Policies.” The sample covers 15 major cities across China's seven geographical regions (North China, East China, South China, Central China, Southwest, Northwest, and Northeast), with 1,407 valid questionnaires collected, all from urban women with work experience. In terms of variable design, work – family conflict is specified as a mediating variable, and a mediation effect model is employed to systematically analyze the mechanism through which gender roles influence women's childbearing decisions. This study aims to enrich the social-psychological explanation of childbearing decisions and to provide empirical evidence and theoretical support for promoting gender equality and building a fertility-friendly policy system.

Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses

Theoretical Framework

1. Social Role Theory

Social role theory was systematically proposed by American sociologists George Herbert Mead and Jacob L. Moreno et al. in the 1930s and was subsequently refined by Linton (1936). The theory posits that an individual's position within the social structure determines a corresponding set of rights, obligations, and behavioral patterns, i.e., social roles. Roles are not spontaneously generated by individuals but are products of sociocultural norms. Both socioeconomic standing and the broader context of gender inequality at the societal level serve as critical determinants in the formation of individuals' gender role attitudes (Wang & Wu, 2019). Linton distinguished three core concepts: “role expectations” (society's behavioral expectations for occupants of a given position), “role performance” (the actual behavior enacted by the individual), and “role conflict” (the contradictory state arising when an individual simultaneously assumes multiple incompatible roles) (Linton, 1936). The core insight of social role theory lies in revealing how social structure shapes individual behavior through role mechanisms. In gender research, Eagly's social role theory argues that gender stereotypes originate from observations of the distribution of men and women across social roles, and these stereotypes in turn reinforce gendered role divisions (Eagly, 1987).

In this study, social role theory provides the core explanatory mechanism for understanding how gender roles influence women's childbearing decisions.

Specifically, the traditional societal and familial expectation of women as “virtuous wives and good mothers” constitutes external pressure on women's childbearing, subjecting them to others' expectations during decision-making; modern women simultaneously assume the dual roles of “career striver” and “family manager,” and the behavioral requirements of these two roles inherently conflict in terms of time, energy, and behavioral patterns, with this inter-role tension directly affecting women's childbearing choices; implicit norms such as “women should bear primary responsibility for childrearing” define the boundaries of women's responsibilities, compelling them to prioritize caregiving burdens in childbearing decisions; and the degree of an individual's identification with her gender identity determines her acceptance of role expectations and the intensity of role conflict she experiences.

2. Work – Family Border Theory

Work – family border theory was systematically proposed by Clark (2000). The theory holds that work and family are two relatively independent yet mutually influential domains, with a certain border existing between them. Borders possess two core attributes: permeability, referring to the degree to which role requirements from one domain can enter the other; and flexibility, referring to the degree to which the border can be adjusted according to individual needs. Clark noted that individuals, as “border-crossers,” must constantly switch roles between the work and family domains, while border-keepers (e.g.(employers and family members) influence border attributes by setting rules. The core contribution of border theory lies in revealing the structural roots of work – family conflict: when border permeability is too high or flexibility too low, individuals face difficulties in role transitions between the two domains, thereby generating work – family conflict.

In this study, work – family border theory provides a key explanation for understanding the formation mechanisms of work – family conflict and its impact on childbearing decisions. Specifically, when the permeability of the work – family border is excessively high, the encroachment of work time on family time and the interference of family matters with work become intertwined, subjecting women to persistent time-allocation strain; the greater the disparity in role requirements between work and family, the stronger the psychological pressure border-crossers experience when switching roles, and the accumulation of such pressure to a certain level significantly affects women's childbearing decisions; and the differences in behavioral patterns between the assertiveness and efficiency demanded at work and the warmth and attentiveness

expected in the family create an incompatibility that raises adjustment costs across domains, thereby suppressing fertility intentions. Furthermore, border theory also suggests possible pathways for mitigating conflict: by enhancing border flexibility (e.g., flexible work arrangements) and optimizing border management strategies, the negative impact of work – family conflict on childbearing decisions can be alleviated to some extent.

3. Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory was first proposed by Hobfoll and is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in stress research (Hobfoll, 1989). The core assumption of the theory is that individuals have a tendency to acquire, maintain, and protect resources they value. Resources include object resources, condition resources, personal characteristics, and energy resources. It further posits that resource loss has a stronger and more rapid impact on individuals than resource gain, and that individuals adopt preventive measures to avoid further losses when facing threats of resource depletion (Hobfoll, 2001). COR theory is particularly applicable to explaining individuals' coping behaviors under the pressure of multiple roles. When individuals simultaneously assume role responsibilities in both work and family domains, their limited time, energy, and emotional resources are competitively consumed. Traditional gender role norms further skew resource-intensive activities such as childrearing and housework toward women, intensifying women's resource competition and depletion across the work – family interface.

In this study, the COR theory provides the motivational logic for understanding the mediating mechanism of work – family conflict. First, gender roles shape the allocation of women's responsibilities in the family domain, exposing them to continuous resource depletion across work and family roles; this depletion itself constitutes the substance of work – family conflict, which in turn triggers women's resource conservation motivation. Second, childbearing behavior significantly increases women's family role responsibilities, including physical depletion during pregnancy, the time cost of postpartum recovery, and energy investment in childrearing—all of which constitute irreversible resource losses. When women perceive that childbearing will entail significant resource depletion without adequate social support and policy compensation, they adopt conservative strategies—delaying childbearing, reducing the number of children, or even forgoing childbearing altogether. Finally, compared with time conflict and behavioral conflict, stress conflict involves

multifaceted depletion of emotional and psychological resources, and such depletion has a longer recovery cycle and higher compensation costs, thus exerting the strongest inhibitory effect on women's childbearing decisions. Based on the above theoretical integration, the conceptual framework of this study is illustrated in Figure 1 (placed here).

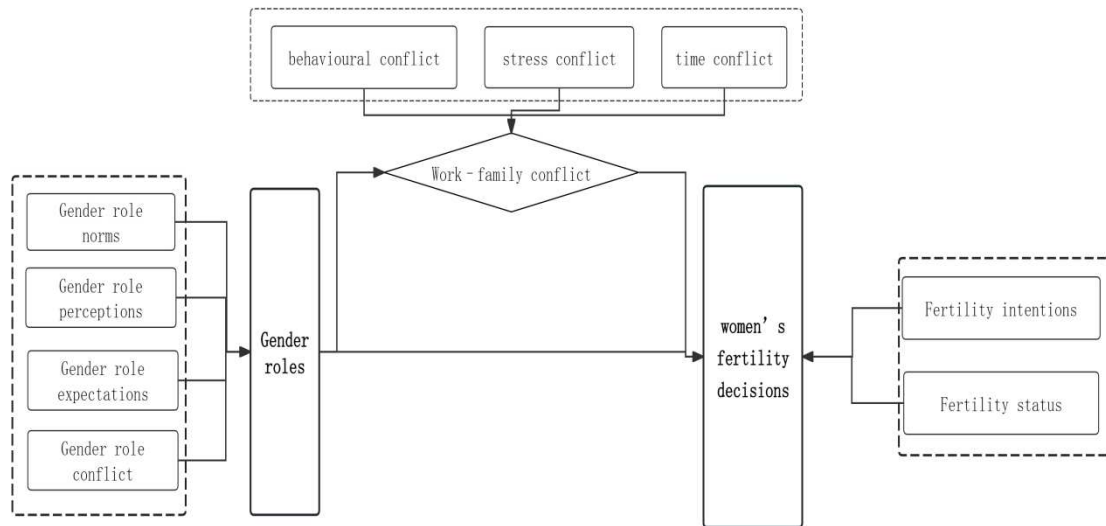


Figure 1 Conceptual Model of the Influence Mechanism

Research Hypotheses

1. Main-Effect Hypotheses on Gender Roles and Women's Childbearing Decisions

Existing research has fully confirmed the critical role of gender roles in childbearing decisions. From a traditional perspective, there is a clear association between traditional gender attitudes and women's fertility intentions. In sociocultural contexts where deeply entrenched beliefs such as “male superiority and female inferiority” and “men are breadwinners while women are homemakers” prevail, women's roles are confined to caregivers and childrears, and some women of childbearing age may, under this influence, unconsciously strengthen their fertility intentions. However, with social transformation, the traditional “women's place is in the home” role concept has come into sharp conflict with the “career woman” role pursued by modern women seeking career development and self-fulfillment, and this conflict has exerted profound and complex effects on women's childbearing decisions. Specifically, gender roles operate on childbearing decisions through multiple pathways.

Relevant studies further confirm that gender roles have significant effects on women's career development, marriage and family, and childbearing decisions. McDonald's (2000) gender equity framework emphasizes the complex relationship between institutional gender equality and fertility levels: when gender equality in the domestic sphere lags behind that in public spheres such as education and employment, fertility rates tend to remain low. Cinnamon and Rich (2002) further point out that women tend to value family roles more than men do, and this internalized role value significantly influences their childbearing decision-making processes. Zheng (2016) further emphasizes that China is now in an era of low fertility, and compared with the period of fertility transition from high to low, the determinants of fertility behavior are more complex, necessitating greater attention to studying low fertility from women's perspectives and to the crucial role of women's willingness to exchange their time, energy, and careers in childbearing decisions and income for the “round-the-clock work” of childrearing.

Notably, when there is disagreement on childbearing within the family, the final fertility intentions and behavior often depend on the wife, who tends to have lower fertility intentions, a phenomenon highlighting the central role of gender role norms in childbearing decisions. Therefore, establishing a comprehensive fertility support policy system is one of the key measures to raise fertility rates; when designing fertility support policies from a gender perspective, greater emphasis should be placed on promoting a balance between women's career development and family responsibilities.

Based on the above analysis, Hypothesis 1 is proposed:

H1: Gender roles have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

H1a: Gender role norms have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

H1b: Gender role conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

H1c: Gender role expectations have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

H1d: Gender role cognition has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

2. Hypotheses on Work – Family Conflict and Women's Childbearing Decisions

In the context of women's childbearing decisions, childbearing behavior significantly increases women's family role responsibilities, necessitating a

readjustment of the work – family boundary to accommodate the new role. When family borders are flexible and support is adequate, women find it easier to strike a balance between work and childrearing and exhibit stronger fertility intentions; when borders are rigid (e.g., lack of flexible work arrangements in the workplace or insufficient family support), women tend to delay or forgo childbearing due to concerns about balancing difficulties. In terms of the specific manifestations of conflict, the contradictions between work and family in time allocation, stress bearing, and behavioral norms are most prominent, directly constituting the core barriers to women's childbearing decisions. Existing research has extensively explored the association between work – family conflict and women's childbearing decisions. Most studies support the negative impact of conflict—for instance, Ji and Zheng (2018) point out that the conflict between family responsibilities and career development faced by working women is a major cause of fertility decline; Hu et al. (2023) confirm that work – family conflict significantly suppresses urban employees' second-child fertility intentions. From a gender-difference perspective, women are more prone than men to work – family conflict; the pressure of family responsibilities conferred by traditional roles reduces their job satisfaction, yet women are generally unwilling to sacrifice their careers to return to the family, and this independence also shapes their second-child fertility decisions to some extent (Xu & Qi, 2016). The international academic community has also maintained sustained attention to this issue. Hwang et al.'s (2021) study on dual-earner couples in South Korea reveals that husbands' time spent on childcare indirectly enhances wives' second-child fertility intentions by alleviating wives' work – family conflict and parenting stress. A finding that highlights the importance of adjusting the gender division of labor within the household.

Furthermore, relevant empirical studies further corroborate the logic of border theory. Against the backdrop of rising female labor force participation, a challenging employment environment, and inadequate fertility support policies, women tend to actively suppress fertility intentions to safeguard their professional standing. In terms of conflict manifestations, contradictions between work and family in stress distribution, time allocation, and behavioral norms are most salient and directly constitute barriers to childbearing decisions.

Based on the above analysis, Hypothesis 2 is proposed:

H2: Work – family conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

H2a: Work – family stress conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

H2b: Work – family time conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

H2c: Work – family behavioral conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.

3. Hypothesis on the Mediating Effect of Work – Family Conflict

Integrating role theory and border theory, it is evident that gender roles, as the core independent variable, not only exert a direct effect on women's childbearing decisions but also play an indirect role by shaping the formation and intensity of work – family conflict—that is, work – family conflict serves as a mediator between the two. Traditional gender role norms assign greater family responsibilities to women, creating an inherent contradiction with modern women's career aspirations, thereby triggering time conflict, stress conflict, and behavioral conflict; gender role expectations and cognitions further amplify this conflict, as societal expectations of “virtuous wives and good mothers” and women's perceptions of their own professional value become unbalanced, intensifying the experience of conflict. Empirical studies on mediating effects provide support for this hypothesis. Hu et al. (2023) confirm that time conflict between work and childrearing is a key obstacle to women's second-child fertility decisions; this conflict reduces women's fertility motivation while simultaneously weakening spouses' and parents' fertility expectations, creating a chain reaction. Milkie and Peltola (1999) found that marital discord and feelings of family sacrifice are major causes of women's work – family imbalance, and this imbalance further suppresses women's fertility intentions. Yang's (2006) study in the Chinese context shows that inequality in the division of housework significantly exacerbates married women's work – family conflict, and this conflict plays a critical mediating role in the process of childbearing decisions.

From a theoretical-mechanism perspective, the COR theory provides the motivational logic for understanding the mediating effect: when traditional gender roles compel women to continuously deplete limited resources across both work and family domains without adequate compensation, work – family conflict becomes the core manifestation of resource depletion, thereby triggering conservative choices in women's childbearing decisions. Gender role identity theory, in turn, explains the starting point of the mediating effect from a cognitive level: the deeper a woman's internalization of

traditional gender roles, the higher the intensity of conflict she experiences when facing dual work and family responsibilities. The integration of the two theories suggests that work – family conflict is the core transmission pathway through which gender roles influence women's childbearing decisions. In summary, gender roles exert an indirect effect on women's childbearing decisions through work – family conflict, and alleviating this conflict is a key entry point for enhancing fertility intentions.

Based on the above analysis, Hypothesis 3 is proposed:

H3: Work – family conflict mediates the relationship between gender roles and women's childbearing decisions.

Table 1 summarizes the research hypotheses.

Table 1 Summary of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Hypothesis Content
H1	Gender roles have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H1a	Gender role norms have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H1b	Gender role conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H1c	Gender role expectations have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H1d	Gender role cognition has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H2	Work – family conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H2a	Work – family stress conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H2b	Work – family time conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H2c	Work – family behavioral conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.
H3	Work – family conflict mediates the relationship between gender roles and women's childbearing decisions.

Research design

Sample

The data for this study come from the 2025 nationwide “Special Survey on Childbearing Decisions among Working Women,” targeting women aged 18 – 49 with formal work experience. To ensure national representativeness, a multistage stratified sampling method was adopted: first, regional stratification was conducted according to China's seven geographical regions (North China, East China, South China, Central China, Southwest, Northwest, and Northeast); then, 1 – 3 representative major cities were selected within each region (15 in total, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou,

Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Shenyang, Chengdu, Wuhan, and Xi'an) as primary sampling units; finally, quota sampling was performed within cities by industry and organization type. A total of 1,407 valid questionnaires were ultimately collected. This sampling design ensures that the sample adequately covers working women across varying levels of economic development, cultural environments, and policy implementation contexts.

Measures

1. Independent Variable

This study takes gender roles as the core independent variable. “Gender” was proposed by Gayle Rubin (1976), distinguished from biological sex, as a product of sociocultural construction. Joan Scott (1997) elevated gender to a central position in academic research. The academic community has not yet reached a consensus on the definition of gender roles. Drawing on existing definitions, this study conceptualizes gender roles as the gender identity formed by individuals after internalizing gender values, encompassing dimensions such as role cognition and expectations. In terms of measurement, the Sex Role Ideology Scale (SRIS) was revised and divided into four dimensions: role norms, role conflict, role expectations, and role cognition. Specifically, the gender role expectations dimension includes 9 items such as “a wife should be submissive to her husband”; role cognition includes 3 items such as “women may pursue their ideals even if it means giving up family”; role conflict includes 3 items such as “women who excel at work are considered unfeminine”; and role norms include 5 items such as “women's career success is largely due to luck.” A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Reliability analysis showed that Cronbach's α coefficients for each dimension ranged from 0.770 to 0.885, and the overall scale α coefficient was 0.910, all above 0.7, indicating good scale reliability and data dependability.

2. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is women's childbearing decisions. Childbearing decisions reflect the comparison of the costs and utilities of children in relation to income; when marginal utility exceeds marginal disutility, couples tend to continue childbearing. Leibenstein introduced a sociological perspective, pointing out that groups with higher social status have lower demand for children. Becker shifted the research focus to the maternal role (Becker, 1965), equating fertility decisions with the number of children. Further studies have found that there are essential differences in the measurement of

women's fertility intentions and fertility behaviors, and that childbearing decisions can reflect the discrepancy between fertility intentions and behaviors. Childbearing decisions represent individuals' expectations regarding the number of children and fertility intentions, reflecting women's childbearing status. Therefore, building on previous research, this study takes childbearing decisions as the dependent variable and, based on the concept of childbearing decisions, measures it in two dimensions: fertility intentions (whether to have (more) children in the future) and current childbearing status (number of children already born), i.e., fertility behavior. Responses for current childbearing status were coded as “0” = 1, “1” = 2, “2 or more” = 3; responses for future (continued) childbearing were coded as “no” = 0, “yes” = 1.

3. Mediating Variable

This study selects work – family conflict as the mediating variable. Work – family conflict refers to the role conflict experienced by individuals when fulfilling dual work and family roles, where constraints such as time and energy make it difficult to simultaneously satisfy the demands of both domains—that is, a phenomenon where engagement in one role significantly impedes performance in the other. In terms of measurement instruments, the work – family conflict scale developed by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) is highly authoritative and applicable, dividing conflict into three dimensions: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict. In light of the local research context, this study adapted the scale to the Chinese setting, using wording more congruent with Chinese cultural contexts for measurement. The scale comprises time conflict (3 items, e.g., “Having to spend time at work prevents me from sharing household chores”), strain conflict (9 items, e.g., “I am too exhausted after work to have energy for family activities”), and behavioral conflict (6 items, e.g., “Ways that are effective at home may backfire at work”). A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Reliability analysis showed that Cronbach's α coefficients for each dimension ranged from 0.852 to 0.870, and the overall scale α coefficient was 0.913, indicating high reliability and dependable data.

4. Control Variables

To ensure the reliability of the core hypothesis testing and following conventions in fertility research, five control variables were selected: age, reflecting physiological maturity and fertility cognition; educational attainment (middle school or below = 1, high school/vocational = 2, associate degree = 3, bachelor's degree = 4, master's degree

= 5, doctoral degree = 6), influencing career planning and fertility costs; marital status (unmarried = 0, married = 1), reflecting household structure differences; job rank (ordinary employee = 1, first-line management = 2, middle management = 3, senior management = 4, unclear = 5), reflecting work pressure and flexibility; and personal after-tax annual income over the past year (continuous variable), reflecting economic support capacity. These variables cover key confounding dimensions, including individual, family, and work domains, ensuring the scientific validity of the research conclusions. Table 2 presents the variable selection and coding scheme.

Table 2 Variable Selection and Coding

Variable Type	Variable Name	Dimension	Coding Description
Dependent Variable	Current childbearing status	Single dimension	“0” =1; “1” =2; “2 or more” =3
	Future fertility intentions	Single dimension	“No” = 0; “Yes” = 1
Independent variable	Gender roles	Gender role expectations	
		Gender role conflict	For each dimension: “strongly disagree” = 1; “disagree” = 2; “neutral” = 3;
		Gender role norms	“agree” = 4; “strongly agree” = 5
		Gender role cognition	
Mediating variables	Work – family conflict	Stress Conflict	
		Behavioural conflict	For each dimension: “strongly disagree” = 1; “disagree” = 2; “neutral” = 3; “agree” = 4; “strongly agree” = 5
		Time conflict	
Control variables	Age	Continuous variable	Actual age (years)
	After-tax annual income (past year)	Continuous variable	Actual income (10,000 RMB)
	Job rank	Categorical variable	“ Ordinary employee ” = 1; “ first-line management ” = 2; “ middle management ” = 3; “ senior management ” = 4; “ unclear ” = 5
	Marital status	Binary variable	“Single” =1; “Married” =2
	Educational attainment	Ordinal variable	“ Middle school or below ” = 1; “ high school/vocational/technical ” = 2; “ associate

Analytical Strategy

Following the mediation effect testing procedure of Wen et al. (2012) and integrating the research model design on work – family conflict and fertility intentions by Hu et al. (2023), this study constructs total-effect models and mediation-effect models, using hierarchical regression to test the impact of gender roles on women's childbearing decisions and the mediating role of work – family conflict.

1. Total-Effect Models

$$\text{Total-effect Model 1: Status}\{i\} = \alpha \{0\} + c\text{Gender}\{i\} + \sum \delta \{k\} \text{Control}\{ik\} + \varepsilon \{1i\} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Total-effect Model 2: Intention}\{i\} = \alpha \{1\} + c'\text{Gender}\{i\} + \sum \delta \{k\} \text{Control}\{ik\} + \varepsilon \{2i\} \quad (2)$$

Where Status{*i*} represents the current childbearing status of a woman, Intention{*i*} denotes the future fertility intention of a woman, Gender{*i*} is the core independent variable (gender roles), *c* and *c'* are the total-effect coefficients of gender roles on the dependent variables, Control{*ik*} denotes the control variables (age, after-tax annual income, job rank, marital status, and educational attainment), and $\varepsilon \{1i\}$ and $\varepsilon \{2i\}$ are random error terms.

2. Mediation-Effect Models

$$\text{Mediation-Effect Model 3: WFC}\{i\} = \beta \{0\} + a\text{Gender}\{i\} + \sum \lambda \{k\} \text{Control}\{ik\} + \varepsilon \{3i\} \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Mediation-Effect Model 4: Time}\{i\} = \beta \{1\} + a\{1\} \text{Gender}\{i\} + \sum \lambda \{k\} \text{Control}\{ik\} + \varepsilon \{4i\} \quad (4)$$

$$\text{Mediation-Effect Model 5: Stress}\{i\} = \beta \{2\} + a\{2\} \text{Gender}\{i\} + \sum \lambda \{k\} \text{Control}\{ik\} + \varepsilon \{5i\} \quad (5)$$

$$\text{Mediation-effect Model 6: Behavior}\{i\} = \beta \{3\} + a\{3\} \text{Gender}\{i\} + \sum \lambda \{k\} \text{Control}\{ik\} + \varepsilon \{6i\} \quad (6)$$

Where WFC{*i*} denotes the total score of work – family conflict, Time{*i*} denotes time conflict, Stress{*i*} denotes strain conflict, Behavior{*i*} denotes behavioral conflict, and *a*, *a*{1}, *a*{2}, *a*{3} are the effect coefficients of gender roles on the mediating variables.

$$\text{Mediation-effect Model 7: Status}\{i\} = \gamma_{\{0\}} + c''\text{Gender}\{i\} + b_{\{1\}}\text{Time}\{i\} +$$

$$b_{\{2\}}\text{Stress}_{\{i\}} + b_{\{3\}}\text{Behavior}_{\{i\}} + \varepsilon_{\{7i\}}$$

(7)

$$\text{Mediation-effect Model 8: } \text{Intention}_{\{i\}} = \gamma_{\{0\}} + c''\text{Gender}_{\{i\}} + b_{\{1\}}\text{Time}_{\{i\}} + b_{\{2\}}\text{Stress}_{\{i\}} + b_{\{3\}}\text{Behavior}_{\{i\}} + \varepsilon_{\{7i\}}$$

(8)

Here,

$$c' \quad \text{and} \quad c' \quad \text{and} \quad c' \quad \text{and} \quad c'$$

are the direct effect coefficients of gender roles after controlling for the mediating variables, and $b_{\{1\}}$ to $b_{\{4\}}$ are the coefficients of family conflict dimensions on the dependent variables; if $c' \quad \text{and} \quad c' \quad \text{and} \quad c' \quad \text{and} \quad c'$

are not significant, full mediation is indicated; if significant but with reduced coefficients, partial mediation is indicated.

are not significant, full mediation is indicated; if significant but with reduced coefficients, partial mediation is indicated.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 3, work – family conflict and its dimensions are generally at moderate levels, with the overall work – family conflict score having a mean of 3.132 (SD = 0.679), ranging from 1.037 to 5.000, indicating that urban women in the sample generally experience a certain degree of work – family conflict. Across dimensions, time conflict has the highest mean (3.267, SD = 0.893), while strain conflict has the lowest mean (2.998, SD = 0.730), suggesting that time allocation tension is the primary type of work – family conflict faced by women. The overall mean of gender roles is 2.734 (SD = 0.641), at a moderately low level, indicating that the sampled women generally tend toward modern egalitarian gender role cognitions. Among its dimensions, gender role cognition has the highest mean (3.510, SD = 0.918), while gender role expectations have the lowest mean (1.966, SD = 0.682), reflecting that women hold relatively egalitarian cognitions of traditional role expectations for themselves and others.

Regarding control variables, the mean age is 28.954 years (SD = 6.241) with a median of 28, concentrating the sample in the young adult group, consistent with the core target population for childbearing decision research; the mean educational attainment is 3.701 (SD = 0.765) with a median of 4, indicating that the sample is predominantly bachelor's degree holders with relatively high overall education levels; the mean marital status is 1.537 (SD = 0.499) with a median of 2, indicating a higher proportion of married respondents; the mean after-tax annual income is 154,440 RMB (SD = 129,890), with considerable dispersion reflecting marked economic diversity within the sample; and the mean job rank is 3.017 (SD = 1.167), with a relatively even distribution across job levels. In summary, the sample distribution is reasonable, and

variable values align with research expectations, providing a solid foundation for subsequent empirical testing.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Median
Work – family conflict	1.037	5.000	3.132	0.679	3.204
Work-family time conflict	1.000	5.000	3.267	0.893	3.333
Work – family behavioural conflict	1.000	5.000	3.131	0.772	3.167
Work – family stress conflict	1.000	5.000	2.998	0.730	3.000
Gender roles	1.244	4.889	2.734	0.641	2.717
Gender role conflict	1.000	5.000	2.765	1.077	2.667
Gender role cognition	1.000	5.000	3.510	0.918	3.667
Gender role norms	1.000	5.000	2.693	0.585	2.600
Gender role expectations	1.000	4.556	1.966	0.682	1.889
Control variables					
Age	20.000	49.000	28.954	6.241	28.000
Educational attainment	1.000	6.000	3.701	0.765	4.000
Job rank	1.000	5.000	3.017	1,167	3.000
Marital status	1.000	2.000	1.537	0.499	2.000
After-tax annual income	0.000	150,000	15,444	12,989	12.000

In terms of current childbearing status, over half of the women are currently childless, and among those who have given birth, the majority have one child, with the proportion of those with two or more children being extremely low. Regarding future fertility intentions, more than half of the women explicitly stated that they will not have (more) children. The low fertility intentions of women not only concern family well-being but also have far-reaching implications for demographic structure, economic development, and cultural transmission. Enhancing women's fertility intentions requires concerted efforts from all sectors of society, addressing multiple dimensions such as improving fertility support policies, optimizing workplace environments, transforming traditional gender attitudes, and strengthening childcare service systems, so as to create more favorable conditions for women to balance childbearing, career development, and family responsibilities. Table 4 reports the detailed distribution of

current childbearing status and future fertility intentions.

Table 4 Distribution of Current Childbearing Status

Item	Option	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Cumulative
				Percentage (%)
Current Childbearing Status	0	720	51.17	51.17
	1	593	42.15	93.32
	2 or more	94	6.68	100.00
Plan to Have (More) Children in the Future	Yes	601	42.71	57.29
	No	806	57.29	100.00
Total		1407	100.0	

Mediation Effect Model Design

Based on the foregoing theoretical analysis, this study hypothesizes that gender roles not only directly affect women's childbearing decisions but also exert an indirect effect through the mediating variable of work – family conflict. Traditional gender role norms tend to assign family care and childbearing responsibilities to women, and this cultural norm may both reinforce workplace constraints on women's career development and prompt women to self-limit their investments in both family and work. The work – family conflict thus engendered leads women, when simultaneously shouldering dual responsibilities and facing escalating contradictions, to tend to delay childbearing or reduce fertility intentions. Accordingly, this study constructs a theoretical model with work – family conflict as the mediating variable, with the core transmission pathway specified as: Gender Roles → Work – Family Conflict → Women's Childbearing Decisions.

Table 5 Mediation Pathways of Gender Roles Affecting Women's Childbearing Decisions

Variable	Total Effect		Mediating Effect				Direct Effect	
	Gender Roles →		Gender roles → work – family conflict				Gender roles, conflict →	
	childbearing decisions						childbearing decisions	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
	Childbearing status	Childbearing intentions	Total conflict score	Stress conflict	Time conflict	Behavioural conflict	Childbearing status	Childbearing intentions
Age	0.009*** (3.418)	-0.011** (-4.508)	-0.002 (-0.657)	-0.011 (0.007)	-0.018* (0.009)	-0.001 (0.008)	0.009*** (3.364)	-0.012*** (-4.840)
Educational Attainment	-0.011 (-0.548)	0.016 (0.927)	-0.023 (-0.992)	-0.021 (0.025)	-0.033 (0.032)	-0.000 (0.028)	-0.013 (-0.671)	0.012 (0.721)
Job Rank	-0.026 (-1.285)	-0.062** (-3.335)	0.085*** (3.361)	0.082** (0.027)	0.078* (0.033)	0.089** (0.029)	-0.013 (-0.625)	-0.044 (-1.435)
Marital status	0.471** (13.726)	-0.011 (-0.358)	-0.186*** (-4.386)	-0.060 (0.048)	-0.098 (0.060)	-0.069 (0.052)	0.444*** (13.057)	-0.046* (-2.561)
After-tax Annual Income	-0.000 (-0.072)	-0.002 (-1.732)	0.000 (0.065)	-0.000 (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.000 (-0.126)	-0.002 (-1.792)
Gender role expectations	-0.044 (-1.725)	-0.001 (-0.060)	0.038 (1.233)	0.065* (0.033)	0.034 (0.041)	0.002 (0.036)	-0.038 (-1.521)	0.007 (0.293)

Gender role conflict	-0.094** (-5.674)	-0.081** (-5.412)	0.127*** (6.202)	0.096*** (0.022)	0.116*** (0.027)	0.092*** (0.024)	-0.076*** (-4.578)	-0.059*** (-3.978)
Gender role norms	-0.070* (-2.338)	-0.034 (-1.257)	0.060 (1.640)	0.063 (0.039)	0.055 (0.049)	0.030 (0.042)	-0.061* (-2.067)	-0.023 (-0.864)
Gender role cognition	-0.031 (-1.591)	-0.028 (-1.619)	-0.011 (-0.457)	0.003 (0.025)	-0.027 (0.031)	-0.026 (0.027)	-0.032 (-1.678)	-0.029 (-1.737)
Work-family time conflict							-0.011 (-0.503)	-0.040* (-2.052)
Work-family stress conflict							-0.065* (-2.411)	-0.085*** (-3.535)
Work-family behavioural conflict							-0.079*** (-3.518)	-0.057** (-2.837)
N	1407	1407	1407	1407	1407	1407	1407	1407
R ²	0.281	0.080	0.098	0.127	0.092	0.083	0.305	0.133
F-value	60.618	13.470	16.916	16.91***	11.73***	10.53***	51.077	17.849

Note: The dependent variable is women's childbearing decisions (current childbearing status and future fertility intentions).

p<0.05**p<0.01p<0.001**

From the regression results in Table 5, it can be seen that, in terms of the overall transmission mechanism, gender roles have a significant negative effect on women's childbearing decisions, and this effect is realized through both the direct path and the mediating path of work – family conflict. Specifically, Models 1 and 2 examine the total effects of each dimension of gender roles on childbearing decisions: gender role conflict and gender role norms have significant negative effects on current childbearing status ($\beta_{_conflict} = -0.094, p < 0.001$; $\beta_{_norms} = -0.070, p < 0.05$), and gender role conflict has a significant negative effect on future fertility intentions ($\beta = -0.081, p < 0.001$), while the effects of gender role expectations and gender role cognition are not significant ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that the stronger the traditional gender role norms (especially role conflict and norms), the fewer children women have already borne and the lower their future fertility intentions. Models 3 through 6 analyze the effects of each dimension of gender roles on work – family conflict and its dimensions. The results show that gender role conflict has significant positive effects on the total work – family conflict score ($\beta = 0.127, p < 0.001$), strain conflict ($\beta = 0.096, p < 0.001$), behavioral conflict ($\beta = 0.092, p < 0.001$), and time conflict ($\beta = 0.116, p < 0.001$); gender role expectations have a significant positive effect only on strain conflict ($\beta = 0.065, p < 0.05$); the effects of the remaining dimensions are not significant. This suggests that gender role conflict is the core ideological factor exacerbating women's multidimensional work – family conflict. Models 7 and 8, after controlling for gender roles, further incorporate the dimensions of work – family conflict; the results show that strain conflict (childbearing status: $\beta = -0.065, p < 0.05$; fertility intentions: $\beta = -0.085, p < 0.001$) and behavioral conflict (childbearing status: $\beta = -0.079, p < 0.001$; fertility intentions: $\beta = -0.057, p < 0.01$) Both have significant negative effects on the two types of childbearing decisions, while time conflict has a significant negative effect only on future fertility intentions ($\beta = -0.040, p < 0.05$) and no significant effect on actual childbearing behavior ($\beta = -0.011, p > 0.05$). Comparing Models 1 and 2 with Models 7 and 8, after including the mediating variables, the absolute values of the direct effect coefficients of gender roles decrease (e.g., the coefficient of gender role conflict on fertility intentions decreases from -0.081 to -0.059) but remains significant, indicating that work – family conflict plays a partial mediating role between gender roles and women's childbearing decisions. Thus, traditional gender role norms, by intensifying women's role conflict between work and family, constitute the core transmission mechanism suppressing childbearing decisions.

In terms of the strength of the mediating effects of each dimension of work – family conflict, strain conflict exhibits the most prominent inhibitory effect. In Model 8, the regression coefficient of strain conflict on future fertility intentions reaches -0.085 ($p < 0.001$), the largest in absolute value among the three dimensions, indicating that energy depletion, emotional exhaustion, and psychological stress arising from dual work and family roles are the foremost concerns for working women in their childbearing choices. The mediating effect of behavioral conflict is secondary (childbearing status coefficient in Model 7: -0.079, $p < 0.001$; fertility intentions coefficient in Model 8: -0.057, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the incompatibility between the assertive, efficient behavioral patterns demanded in the workplace and the gentle, attentive role requirements expected in the family further exacerbates women's difficulties in role adaptation and reduces their fertility motivation. The mediating effect of time conflict is relatively weakest, significantly affecting only future fertility intentions (coefficient in Model 8: -0.040, $p < 0.05$) with no significant effect on actual childbearing behavior, suggesting that time allocation strain primarily affects women's planning decisions regarding “whether to have (more) children” rather than completed fertility outcomes.

Overall, among the 1,407 women in the sample, over 57.29% explicitly stated that they would not have (more) children, and among those with higher work – family conflict scores, the proportion of women without fertility plans reached 71.3%. These descriptive results corroborate the above mediation analysis, fully demonstrating that the dual burden imposed by traditional gender roles is an important cause of the currently low fertility intentions among working women.

Table 6 Hypothesis Testing Results for Gender Roles and Work – Family Conflict on Women's Childbearing Decisions

Hypothesis	Hypothesis Content	Hypothesis Supported
H1	Gender roles have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	Yes
H1a	Gender role norms have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	Yes
H1b	Gender role conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	Yes

H1c	Gender role expectations have a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	No
H1d	Gender role cognition has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	No
H2	Work – family conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	Yes
H2a	Work – family strain conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	Yes
H2b	Work – family time conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	Yes
H2c	Work – family behavioral conflict has a significant impact on women's childbearing decisions.	Yes
H3	Work – family conflict mediates the relationship between gender roles and women's childbearing decisions.	Yes

Among the 10 hypotheses proposed in this study, all except H1c (gender role expectations) received empirical support (see Table 6). Overall, traditional gender roles suppress women's childbearing decisions through both the direct path and the “work – family conflict” mediating path, with strain conflict being the most critical transmission link. This conclusion suggests that the currently low fertility intentions among urban working women are not simply a matter of being “unwilling to have children,” but rather a rational avoidance choice made under the multiple pressures of gender-role constraints, workplace competition, and family care responsibilities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Synthesizing the above mediation analysis, this study, from the perspective of gender roles and using a sample of 1,407 urban women with work experience, systematically examines the mechanisms through which gender roles influence women's childbearing decisions and investigates the mediating role of work – family conflict. The main conclusions are as follows:

First, severely low fertility intentions are associated with conflict. Descriptive

statistics show that among the 1,407 women, 57.29% explicitly do not plan to have more children, 51.17% are currently childless, and among those with children, 42.15% have one child, while only 6.68% have two or more, indicating that the childbearing decisions of urban working women have taken on a pattern of “universal childlessness, one-child predominance, and two-child marginalization.” Among those with high work – family conflict, 71.3% have no fertility plans, and the higher the level of work – family conflict, the greater the proportion of women who forgo childbearing. This is not a simple correlation but reflects a “crowding-out effect” of conflict on childbearing: when women continuously experience role tug-of-war in their daily work, childbearing shifts from a “life option” to a “source of risk.” From a rational-choice perspective, women are not irrationally rejecting childbearing but are making risk-minimizing choices under multiple pressures: rather than losing full control amid conflict, they proactively forgo or reduce childbearing.

Second, the negative total effect of gender roles on childbearing decisions and the partial mediating role of work – family conflict. Gender roles have significant negative effects on childbearing status ($\beta = -0.094$ to -0.031) and fertility intentions ($\beta = -0.081$ to -0.028); gender roles have significant positive effects on total work – family conflict and its dimensions ($\beta = 0.038$ to 0.127); the strain conflict and behavioral conflict dimensions of work – family conflict have significant negative effects on both types of childbearing decisions, while time conflict significantly suppresses only future fertility intentions. After including the mediating variables, the absolute values of the direct effect coefficients of gender roles decrease but remain significant, confirming partial mediation. This implies that the suppression of childbearing decisions by traditional gender role norms does not rely entirely on the pathway of “evoking work – family conflict,” but involves additional pressure independent of conflict. This additional pressure may arise from two levels: first, anticipatory anxiety—even when current conflict levels are not high, women may suppress intentions in advance due to anticipated role strain from future childbearing; second, direct conflict at the identity level—the value hierarchy inherent in traditional norms that “women should prioritize family” directly conflicts with women's self-identity as career strivers, and this confrontation can affect childbearing decisions without mediation by daily conflict.

Third, the three dimensions of work – family conflict show significant differences in the strength of their inhibitory effects on childbearing decisions, with strain conflict

having the most pronounced negative effect. The inhibitory effect of strain conflict on fertility intentions ($\beta = -0.085$, $p < 0.001$) is significantly stronger than that of behavioral conflict ($\beta = -0.057$, $p < 0.01$) and time conflict ($\beta = -0.040$, $p < 0.05$). Time conflict has no significant effect on childbearing behavior (current childbearing status) ($\beta = -0.011$, $p > 0.05$) and only a negative effect on future fertility intentions. The underlying logic of this effect ranking lies in the differences among the three conflicts in terms of “compensability” and “irreversibility of depletion.” Time conflict is the most easily “externally compensated” — childcare services, domestic help, and flexible work can all substitute for time resources, and women who have already given birth have often already accomplished this substitution. Behavioral conflict involves switching role norms and can be partially compensated through organizational cultural tolerance and spousal negotiation of the division of labor. However, strain conflict touches on the irreversible depletion of psychological capital. Emotional exhaustion, energy depletion, and diminished self-worth—recovery from these states requires not only time but also structural support (e.g., psychological interventions, social recognition, and partner co-responsibility). When women anticipate that childbearing will trigger irreversible mental exhaustion, resource conservation motivation is strongly activated, and childbearing becomes the option most easily “sacrificed.”

Fourth, the four dimensions of gender roles show a clear differentiation in their effects on childbearing decisions. Gender role conflict has the most stable and strongest inhibitory effect (childbearing status: $\beta = -0.094$, $p < 0.001$; fertility intentions: $\beta = -0.081$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that women's inner conflict between the dual roles of “career striver” and “family manager” is the core ideological factor suppressing childbearing. Gender role cognition has no significant effect on either childbearing status or fertility intentions ($p > 0.05$). Gender role norms are significant only for childbearing status ($\beta = -0.070$, $p < 0.05$) and not for fertility intentions, suggesting that external stereotypical norms affect actual fertility outcomes more than future plans. Gender role expectations (e.g., “a wife should be submissive to her husband”) have no significant effect on childbearing decisions. For the highly urbanized, highly educated working women in this study, direct external expectations of “submission” have significantly waned; what truly constitutes pressure is no longer the external “what you should do” from family or society, but the internalized “how should I balance?” —this finding marks a shift in the form of gender pressure from “external

discipline” to “internal fragmentation.”

In summary, this study reveals the mechanism by which gender roles suppress women's childbearing decisions through both the direct path and the “work – family conflict” mediating path, with strain conflict being the most critical transmission link. This conclusion provides micro-level empirical evidence for understanding China's endogenous low-fertility predicament and identifies intervention priorities for building a gender-equal and fertility-friendly social support system.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Among the above findings, the non-significant results for gender role expectations and gender role cognition warrant further discussion. In traditional societies, external expectations such as “virtuous wife and good mother” and “assisting husband and educating children” have often been regarded as the primary forces constraining women. However, the findings from this study's sample—with a mean age of 28.95 years, predominantly bachelor's degrees or above, and concentrated in 15 major cities across China—suggest an alternative explanation: contemporary urban working women have grown up during a period of accelerating dissemination of gender-equality values, and their high educational levels and workplace participation have endowed them with a strong capacity for “cognitive desensitization” to direct traditional role expectations. In other words, external “you should” injunctions are no longer able to directly sway their decisions. However, desensitization does not equal liberation. When women endorse modern egalitarian gender values while simultaneously internalizing family care responsibilities, conflict transforms from “external demands” to “internal interrogation.” The highly significant coefficient for gender role conflict precisely reflects this: women are not distressed because of “what others want me to be,” but because of the pain of “I want to do well at work, be a good mother, and be myself—yet find I cannot balance all three.” This internal fragmentation is more consumptive than external pressure because it cannot be resolved through simple “rebellion” or “submission,” but rather requires painful trade-offs and compromises in every specific decision.

Many current fertility support policies focus on alleviating time conflict—such as extending maternity leave, promoting flexible work arrangements, and developing childcare services. While these measures are necessary, this study demonstrates that strain conflict is the strongest factor suppressing fertility intentions. This implies that the focus of policy intervention should shift from “giving women more time” to

“reducing women's psychological burden and emotional labor.” First, promote the dissemination of workplace mental health support systems (EAPs), providing professional counseling on stress management and role integration for working women, rather than merely stopping at the level of “no overtime.” Second, family policies need to reinforce the irreplaceability of male involvement in childcare—only when partners substantially share caregiving responsibilities can women be freed from the role of “isolated emotional laborer.” Third, public discourse and organizational culture should abandon the double standards of the “perfect mother” and the “perfect employee,” reducing women's self-blame arising from imperfect role performance. These measures aim to liberate women from a “fragmented existence” and return their childbearing decisions to a more autonomous and composed state.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional data make it difficult to rigorously infer causality—there may be bidirectional influences or self-selection bias among gender roles, work – family conflict, and childbearing decisions. Future research could employ panel data or natural experimental designs to enhance the credibility of causal identification. Second, this study's sample is concentrated on urban working women, and generalization of the conclusions to rural or informally employed women should be made with caution. The configurations of work – family conflict may differ qualitatively across different employment forms. Finally, a gap remains between fertility intentions and fertility behaviors; this study primarily explains the decision-making level, and future research could employ longitudinal tracking data to examine what key moderating factors (e.g., policy outreach, unplanned pregnancy, changes in partner attitudes) are involved in the transition from “unwilling to have children” to “ultimately not having children.” Clarifying these issues will provide further theoretical foundations for building more targeted and effective fertility support systems.

Data availability

The de-identified individual-level dataset, the complete variable coding scheme (including recoding rules for ordinal variables), and all analysis scripts have been submitted as supplementary materials alongside this manuscript. These files are accessible to the editors and reviewers through the journal’s submission system. No personally identifiable information is included, and access is unrestricted for academic research purposes; no special permission is required. After publication, the

supplementary materials will remain available with the published article. Researchers may also contact the corresponding author (email: guangxiabao2023@163.com) for any technical issues or alternative access.

References

- Becker, G. S. (1960). An economic analysis of fertility. In National Bureau Committee for Economic Research, *Demographic and Economic Change in Developed Countries* (pp. 209-240). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Becker, G. S. (1965). A theory of the allocation of time. *The Economic Journal*, 75(299), 493-517.
- Begall, K., & Mills, M. (2011). The impact of subjective work control, job strain and work-family conflict on fertility intentions: A European comparison. *European Journal of Population*, 27(4), 433-456.
- Cinamon, R. G., & Rich, Y. (2002). Gender differences in the importance of work and family roles: Implications for work-family conflict. *Sex Roles*, 47(11/12), 531-541.
- Clark, S. C. (2000). Work/family border theory: A new theory of work/family balance. *Human Relations*, 53(6), 747-770.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Feng, X. (2018). What is the real truth behind the second-child fertility intentions of the reproductive-age population? *Exploration and Free Views*, (10), 54-61.
- Goldin, C. (2014). A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter. *American Economic Review*, 104(4), 1091-1119.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review*, 10(1), 76-88.
- Hobfoll, S. E. (1989). Conservation of resources: A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513-524.
- Hobfoll, S. E. (2001). The influence of culture, community, and the nested-self in the stress process: Advancing conservation of resources theory. *Applied Psychology*, 50(3), 337-421.
- Hu, A., Yang, M., & Bao, Y. (2023). The impact of work-family conflict on urban employees' second-child fertility intentions: An analysis based on the theory of planned behavior. *Population and Development*, 29(3), 34-48.
- Hwang, W., & Kim, S. (2021). Husbands' childcare time and wives' second-birth intentions among dual-income couples: The mediating effects of work-family conflict

-
- and parenting stress. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 47(6), 850-859.
- Ji, Y., & Zheng, Z. (2018). China's low fertility rate from the perspective of gender and development. *Social Sciences in China*, (8), 143-161.
- Linton, R. (1936). *The study of man: An introduction*. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company.
- McDonald, P. (2000). Gender equity, social institutions and the future of fertility. *Journal of Population Research*, 17(1), 1-16.
- Milkie, M. A., & Peltola, P. (1999). Playing all the roles: Gender and the work-family balancing act. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 61(2), 476-490.
- Qing, S. (2017). Gender role attitudes, family responsibilities, and labor participation patterns. *Social Sciences*, (11), 91-100.
- Wang, P., & Wu, Y. (2019). Socioeconomic status, gender inequality, and gender role attitudes. *Sociological Review of China*, 7(2), 55-70.
- Wen, Z., Liu, H., & Hou, J. (2012). *Moderating and mediating effect analysis*. Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House.
- Xu, Q., & Qi, J. (2016). Work-family conflict, gender roles, and job satisfaction: An empirical study based on the Third Survey on Chinese Women's Social Status. *Society*, 36(3), 192-215.
- Yang, J. (2006). The gender boundary of private space from the perspective of housework division. *Collection of Women's Studies*, (5), 16-22.
- Zhang, X., & Song, J. (2024). The impact of work-family conflict on women's second-child fertility intentions and the role of family childcare support. *Chinese Journal of Population Science*, 38(3), 81-97.
- Zheng, Z. (2016). Fertility behavior and its determinants under low fertility. In *Institute of Population and Labor Economics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Ed.), 2016 China Population Yearbook*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Zheng, Z. (2023). Analyzing fertility support under the new demographic landscape from a gender perspective. *Collection of Women's Studies*, (2), 5-10.