

# Maternity Policy in the United Kingdom: The Impact on Women's Status in Household Responsibility, Freedom of Movement, and Economic Autonomy

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**Abstract:** With the development of society and the rise of women's movements, women's status has been paid more and more attention. Women's status is a multi-dimensional concept, and there are many standards for measurement. This paper selects three of the earliest used and representative three dimensions, which are household responsibilities, freedom of movement, and economic autonomy. The concept of women's status is complex, and there are many factors that may affect female status. The maternity policy is one of the population policies and also one of the most important guarantees for the welfare of women. It is a broad concept covering family support measures, family mutual employment measures, reproductive health measures and maternity insurance, which are all to ensure the basic living needs of female workers when they give birth to children and maintain social stability. Therefore, the impact of maternity policy on the status of women is very huge. This paper explores how maternity policy affects the status of women as measured by the three dimensions mentioned above. By comparing with other European countries, explore what efforts have been made in the UK to improve the status of women, and which policies have been proved to have a positive impact on the promotion of gender equality. Moreover, based on the conclusions, this paper also puts forward implications on how to increase the fertility rate and improve the maternity policy in China.

**Keywords:** Maternity Policy, Women's Status, The United Kingdom

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Maternity Policy

For a long time, all countries in the world have regarded the women's rights protection and women's status advancement as important aspects of measuring social development. With the rise of the women's movement and the awakening of women's consciousness, European countries have formulated a maternity policy system aimed at improving the status of women in response to different situations [1]. These policies have both similarities and their own characteristics. Generally speaking, an increase in the status of women will cause a decline in fertility. However, in fact, a scientific and sound maternity policy will give women's rights and benefits they deserve, so that women can have no worries about childbirth. This paper takes the United

Kingdom as examples, and its maternity policies include: family support measures, family mutual employment measures, reproductive health measures and maternity insurance [2].

#### 1.1.1. Family Support

There are many types of family support measures currently implemented in European countries, mainly based on the economy, such as: family subsidies, child family tax benefits, housing subsidies, etc [3, 4].

The family subsidy system originated at the end of the 19th century and is a policy that associates worker wages with family burden. At present, this system exists widely in European countries. It is usually paid monthly by the government based on the number of children in the family. In most countries, family subsidies take into account family income, the purpose is to prevent the deterioration of family welfare when the number of

children increases. Most of the time, many European countries not only set up such systems for the purpose of equality, but also for stimulating purposes. Most believe that by giving families financial subsidies for additional children, they can promote couples having more children than they originally planned. According to the economic theory of fertility, the demand for children is affected by personal preferences and child costs. Therefore, government measures that help compensate for the cost of having children by providing parental income are likely to have a positive effect on the number of children. Although all countries in Europe have implemented a family subsidy system, there are differences and the amount of subsidies varies. According to the British government's 2019/2020 family subsidy policy, each only child or first child under the age of 16 can receive a weekly subsidy of 20.7 pounds (about 190 yuan), and other children can receive 13.7 pounds (about 125 yuan).

Child family tax benefits developed after World War II, in part to compensate parents for the loss of income they suffered during the birth and care of young children. There are two forms of child family tax benefits: tax allowances and tax credits. Tax allowances refer to the deduction of a certain amount from the taxable income base before calculating the tax payable [3]. In some European countries, household-related expenses can be deducted from taxable income. Tax credits refer to deductions from tax payable after assessing tax liability. The size of this benefit depends on family size, composition and marital status. Tax credits can be returned to benefit families whose income is below the taxable income level.

In addition to financial stimulus to improve the ability of families to cope with children's expenditures, families with children also need other ways of material help. For example, the government provides large and convenient housing at reasonable prices. High house prices have a definite time impact on the couple's decision to have babies. When house prices are higher, women are more likely to delay the establishment of a family. In addition, as far as women aged 20-24 are concerned, such high prices prevent them from having a second child. If there is a relationship between house prices and fertility, then the government has the opportunity to influence fertility behavior through housing policies [3]. For example, some governments include renting and buying houses in their budgets, which are mainly aimed at families with children. Other measures include low-cost house purchases, renovation loans, and rental subsidies. In the United Kingdom, housing subsidies are mainly for families with children who rent or buy houses for the first time. The amount of subsidies depends on the family size, structure and cost of the family's income.

#### **1.1.2. Family Mutual Employment**

This measure involves all policies aimed at enabling families to coordinate economic activities and parenthood [3]. In practice, most of these policies focus on balancing work and childbirth, mainly including: maternity leave, breastfeeding leave, childcare leave, and women's employment security measures, such as flexible work system.

Maternity leave refers to separation due to childbirth. Today, maternity leave has become the basic legal provision of labor protection. Breastfeeding leave refers to the stage after maternity leave and also allows the father to use a longer vacation. Childcare leave is an extended period of leave for childcare after maternity and breastfeeding leave. Maternity leave has a long history, dating back to the end of the 19th century. Breastfeeding leave and childcare leave started in recent decades. Since the 1960s, with the increase in women's participation in labor and employment, maternity leave and breastfeeding leave have become the main form of state support for families. In the past ten years, maternity leave and breastfeeding leave and their benefits have increased significantly. All European countries provide a period of maternity leave prescribed by law, which has become a universal right for working women. Its purpose is to allow mothers to rest in late pregnancy, recover after childbirth, breastfeed, and form a stable relationship with their children before returning to work. Different countries and different periods have different lengths of maternity leave and breastfeeding leave. The maternity leave policy in the UK is that women can take up to one year of maternity leave, receiving 90% of wages for the first six weeks, up to 112.75 pounds per week for the next 33 weeks, and no wages for the last 13 weeks.

In European countries, the employment rate of the female labor force has risen widely since the 1980s. In addition to maternity leave, breastfeeding leave, and childcare leave, there are also employment security measures for women: a. Provide shorter and more flexible working hours for women with young children; b. Guarantee the right to re-employment in the same job or the same job after maternity leave, and at the same time guarantee the rights of promotion, social security and other benefits.

#### **1.1.3. Reproductive Health**

Reproductive health measures often focus on preventing unwanted children through abortion, birth control, or sterilization. It also include the medical care for pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum provided by hospitals, medical practitioners or qualified midwives for working women or wives of male employees, as well as the necessary hospitalization. In some European countries, the Social Security Department provides women during pregnancy with health services [4]. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Social Welfare Department regularly conducts home visits to pregnant women, provides pregnant women with health advice during pregnancy, and offers child care guidance during the year after birth.

#### **1.1.4. Maternity Insurance**

Europe is the birthplace of the global social insurance system, and maternity insurance was first implemented in these welfare states [5]. The maternity insurance system is a social insurance system provided by the state and society for women workers who temporarily lose their ability to work due to childbirth and lose their normal source of income from wages. It is the general term for the decrees, regulations,

various regulations and specific measures promulgated by the state to ensure the basic living needs of female workers when they give birth to children and maintain social stability. The maternity insurance system is the legal norm for maternity insurance behavior. The scope, object, project content and protection level of maternity insurance in a country or region in a certain period are all embodied through the maternity insurance system.

The United Kingdom's first legislation on maternity insurance was enacted in 1911 and has since been revised several times to improve it. For example, the National Health Service Act was promulgated in 1977; comprehensive social security legislation was promulgated in 1992; the bill on disability benefits was promulgated in 1994; and the bill on welfare reform and pensions was promulgated in 1999. The United Kingdom adopts a maternity insurance system that combines social security cash assistance and universal health care. Since maternity and sickness treatment are short-term social insurance programs, and both are closely related to medical services, the maternity insurance system and medical insurance system in most countries are combined. Therefore, some of the legislation on maternity insurance, insurance coverage and fund sources in this paper are related to medical insurance. Different countries provide different maternity leave and maternity benefits, but most countries will provide a relatively complete medical care system. In general, it can provide good maternity services, including prenatal, intranatal and postpartum health care and medical care.

The maternity policies discussed in this paper mainly includes the above family support measures, family mutual employment measures, reproductive health measures and maternity insurance. From the formulation to the implementation, these maternity policies work together on the status of women in the United Kingdom.

## 1.2. Women's Status

Women's status refers to their ability and freedom to determine the allocation of family resources and choose their personal lifestyle. It is a multidimensional concept. However, there are two different methods in specific measurement. One is a single indicator, which is measured by a unilateral single variable, such as only using education variables to measure [6]. The other is multiple indicators, which are measured by multivariate variables.

Women's status is a multidimensional concept. Its

constituent elements include economy, politics, education, health, marriage, and family. Among them, household responsibility is the earliest indicator used to measure the social status of women, and it is also the most common dimension to measure the social status of women [7]. The main measurement methods include women's decision-making on the purchase and entertainment of household daily necessities, as well as some important decisions about events, such as medical and education decisions for yourself and your family, as well as family planning and child marriage decisions [8]. Another commonly used measure of women's social status is women's freedom of movement [9]. The specific measure is the scope of women's independent decision-making activities, such as going to nearby markets, movie theaters, outpatient clinics, and areas outside the usual social field [10, 11]. In addition to the use of family choice and mobility to measure women's social status, some articles also include indicators such as women's control of family resources and political awareness [12]. Other measurement dimensions such as education, economic autonomy, and the right to speak in marriage are also reflected in different papers [13, 14]. In addition, the use of relevant variables such as the social characteristics of the population as indicators to measure the social status of women is also reflected in different articles. For example, women's education level, employment status, and family economic status are used as direct indicators to study women's status. Or use women's education level as a direct indicator of women's status, and use their economic status and background characteristics as control variables [15].

Although scholars measure women's social status from various angles, there are few papers that can cover everything. Most of them choose a certain angle, and the scientificity and objectivity of the existing variables that measure women's social status have yet to be considered. Different papers use different variables to study fertility behavior, and the results obtained are obviously different, as it is impossible to rule out the impact of differences in the measurement of female social status. This paper chooses three dimensions to define the women status, including discrimination in the family, restricted access to productive and financial resources and restricted civil liberties. Based on this, choose the data of household responsibility, freedom of movement as well as economic autonomy to further compare.

*Table 1. Women's status dimension - household responsibility & literature.*

Measurement Dimension	Representative literature
Status of opinions expressed	Sathar et al (1997)
Visit friends or relatives	Hindin (2000)
Whether you have the right to decide your family and your own medical treatment	Kohan et al (2014)
Whether it can decide the education and marriage of children	Woldemicael (2009)
Whether women can go out to work	Steele et al (1998)
The right to participate in household purchase decisions	Shimamoto (2015)
Formulating family planning	Hogan et al (1999)
Can buy clothes or jewelry for yourself	Blumberg (2015)

### 1.2.2. Freedom of Movement

**Table 2.** Women's status dimension - freedom of movement & literature.

Measurement Dimension	Representative literature
Can travel alone	Jejeebhoy (1991)
Whether travel permission is required	Kohan et al (2014)
Can participate in social gatherings	Al-Riyami et al (2003a, 2003b)
Can participate in religious gatherings	Steele et al (1998)
Can participate in various clubs and social welfare organizations	Steele et al (1998)
Can go to the cinema, clinic, market, etc. alone	Steele et al (1998)
Autonomy to visit relatives and friends	Woldemicael (2009)

### 1.2.3. Economic Autonomy

**Table 3.** Women's status dimension - economic autonomy & literature.

Measurement Dimension	Representative literature
Whether you have a personal bank account or private money	Jatrana et al (2015)
Whether you have financial resources to go out to work	Phan (2015)
Individual contribution rate to family economy	Phan (2016)
Self-determination of consumption	Blumberg (2015)
Whether to control family budget expenditure	Sathar et al (1997)
Whether you can survive independently without leaving your husband	Liu (1996)
Ownership of assets	Kiani et al (2016)

As it can be seen in *Table 1*, whether the woman can buy clothes or jewelry for herself or not is one of measurement dimensions of household responsibility, while whether this can be achieved is also based on economic autonomy. Similarly, household responsibility also depends on the women's individual contribution rate to family economy and whether to control family budget expenditure. At the same time, economic autonomy is also the foundation of female freedom of movement. It can be seen from this, household responsibility, freedom of movement, and economic autonomy are three dimensions which are related to each other, affect each other, and are even based on each other to some extent. As a result, it is hard to compare every single detail dimension and draw conclusions. In view of their complex relation, this paper only compares and analyzes the influence of above three large dimensions on the status of women.

The innovation of this paper is that most of the literature often discusses the relation between the status of women and fertility. This paper intercepts three relatively important measurement dimensions of women's status and links it with maternity policy to discuss the impact of maternity policies on the status of women in the United Kingdom. It is generally believed that the increase in the status of women will lead to a decline in fertility, which is to say, it is not good for population policy. The contradiction is that the maternity policy is part of the population policy at the same time. The most important measure to resolve this contradiction is to slow down the aging process and increase fertility rate. What is special is that this paper believes that the two are compatible. The establishment of the welfare states can ensure the scientific maternity policy to protect women's rights and benefits, thus giving women more freedom of birth decision and also confidence to have more children.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. System

According to "Global Social Security System", the types of maternity insurance system in European countries can be divided into at least two.

#### 2.1.1. Social Insurance System

The main method of this system is to pass legislation to stipulate the financing ratio of individuals, employers, and governments for sickness or maternity insurance funds, and establish a unified fund, which will cover the maternity or medical expenses of the covered groups. This system generally covers all or part of the employees. Some countries have special regulations for special industries such as railways, banks, public officials, and self-employed persons. Most of the countries that adopt the social insurance system provide maternity allowances and medical treatment, but some countries only provide medical treatment and do not provide maternity allowances.

#### 2.1.2. Social Insurance and Universal System

The main feature of this system is that the medical care programs provided by the state are applicable to all residents in principle, that is, all permanent residents can enjoy medical care for free or with little expense, and all employees in the country can enjoy cash assistance for illness or childbirth. Persons receiving cash assistance for childbirth must have a certain period of insurance or employment records before giving birth, while those who enjoy medical care only require permanent residents of the country. Europe implements this system are all high-welfare countries, and the United Kingdom belongs to it.

## 2.2. Coverage

The coverage of maternity insurance in a country's population varies greatly from country to country. According to literatures, the coverage of medical or maternity insurance in European countries can be roughly divided into the following situations.

### 2.2.1. Cover Some Employees

The feature of this method is that most employees enjoy relevant treatment in accordance with the unified maternity insurance method, and implement special systems for personnel in special industries, such as government departments, educational institutions, railways, banks, etc. Such as agricultural workers, domestic service personnel, independent workers, etc. are not covered.

### 2.2.2. Cover All Residents

The characteristic of this coverage is that all employees, including employees' family members, can enjoy sickness and maternity benefits. All residents can enjoy medical treatment, but they must have national resident status or insured conditions, regardless of whether they have exhausted payment obligation or whether you have been employed. The United Kingdom stipulates that all citizens are eligible for the legal basic maternity allowance, and medical treatment covers all residents.

## 2.3. Qualification

All European countries can be divided into two categories in terms of eligibility for maternity insurance: a. There are no eligibility requirements. For example, in Finland, all domestic residents can enjoy maternity allowance and medical treatment; b. Eligibility requirements. For the qualification requirements, it can be divided into different situations. France has certain restrictions on the working hours of insured persons. The law stipulates that the conditions for maternity allowance are 200 hours of employment within the last 3 months. And the United Kingdom are eligible for maternity allowance and medical treatment in a variety of combinations, and the regulations are more flexible or detailed. This point has been introduced in detail in the previous.

## 2.4. Calculation

In general, the maternity policies of various countries are often related to their national population policies. In some under-populated countries in Europe, in order to encourage childbirth, the state adopts preferential policies with more births, more subsidies and longer holidays.

From the calculation method of maternity allowance, there are three main ways: a. Quota system, which is the maternity allowance is issued to the same amount according to the regulations regardless of the specific circumstances of the insured person. In the United Kingdom, the maternity allowance is paid about £100 per week. If the weekly income is less than 100 pounds, pay 90% of the average weekly income; b. Wage proportional system, which is the standard of maternity allowance is paid according to a certain percentage of the insured's prenatal salary. Most countries use this approach; c. Mixed system, which is the maternity allowance adopts the "basic subsidy" plus the "income-related subsidy". The "basic subsidy" adopts the quota system, and the "income-related subsidy" adopts the wage proportional system.

## 2.5. Fund

### 2.5.1. Source

The fund in the UK is borne by the employer and the government. It requires employers to bear 8% and the government to bear 92% of the stipulated female maternity wages and stipulated male maternity wages, and the insured is not required to pay.

### 2.5.2. Management

- A. Combined the fund management of maternity insurance, pension, medical insurance, work injury insurance, and unemployment insurance, such as the United Kingdom.
- B. Combine the fund management of maternity insurance and medical insurance, and list the individual expenses for maternity subsidies.
- C. Combined the fund management of maternity insurance, medical insurance and work injury (disability) insurance.

*Table 4. Dataset: Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019 [16].*

	German	France	Italy	United Kingdom
Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019	15	11.1	13.5	17.5
Discrimination in the family	18.1	27.6	21.8	27.6
Restricted physical integrity	14.5	6	14.7	24.5
Restricted access to productive and financial resources	13.1	3.6	8	9.5
Restricted civil liberties	14.3	5.3	8.9	6.7

## 2.6. Women's Status

The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) is built on 27 innovative variables measuring discriminatory social institutions, which are grouped into 4 dimensions: discrimination in the family, restricted physical integrity, restricted access to productive and financial resources, and

restricted civil liberties. Lower values indicate lower levels of discrimination in social institutions: the SIGI ranges from 0% for no discrimination to 100% for very high discrimination. The SIGI covers four dimensions spanning major socio-economic areas that affect the life course of women and girls. As can be seen from the *Table 4*, of the four major European economies, British women enjoy more civil rights in society, but their status

in the family is not optimistic. This may be related to the British constitutional monarchy, historical and cultural origins. But this

at least proves that the British maternity policy is effective in improving the social status of women.

**Table 5.** *Gender, Institutions and Development Database 2019 [16].*

		German	France	Italy	United Kingdom
Household responsibilities	Law	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
	Attitudes	31.7	34.7		30.6
	Practice	1.51	1.61	2.82	1.83
Freedom of movement	Law	0	0	0	0
	Practice	55.3	58.5	59.2	55.8
	Law	0	0	0	0.25
Secure access to land assets	Practice	8.4	22.7	30.7	13.1
	Law	0	0	0.25	0
	Practice	50.8	49.3	50.1	50.5
Secure access to formal financial services	Law	0.75	0	0	0
	Attitudes	4	3	1	2
	Practice	29.2	33.4	27.5	36.2

The GID-DB is a database providing researchers and policymakers with key data on gender-based discrimination in social institutions. This data helps analyse women's empowerment and understand gender gaps in other key areas of development. Covering 180 countries and territories, the GID-DB contains comprehensive information on legal, cultural and traditional practices that discriminate against women and girls. As can be seen in *Table 5*, compared with women in other three countries, British women have more workplace rights, but the acquisition of land assets is slightly less. Obviously, the British government has also been aware of this problem and tried to improve the situation through legislation.

Further analysis of the reasons can be known, first, the United Kingdom both adopt social insurance and universal system, and the maternity insurance can cover all residents. While France adopt social insurance system and that only covers some employees. As a result, the status of women in the United Kingdom is higher. Second, though almost every economic European states have many subsidies related to maternity, the financial burden is heavy in the United Kingdom. As employers in other countries, such as Sweden, should afford all costs of maternity, while the government must share a majority costs in the United Kingdom. Last, legislation is a means of maternity policy, and it is also an important way to improve the status of women and reduce gender discrimination.

It can be seen from this that within the scope of the maternity policy studied in this paper, the more detailed the insurance coverage, the higher the status of women in the welfare states. If the maternity insurance can cover all residents, such as the United Kingdom, then there will be more women in the audience, the overall female economic autonomy of the society will increase, and the women's social status will rise accordingly. The government's emphasis on fertility and capital investment will also affect women's social status. The fiscal budget covers all expenditures of the state's all political, economic and cultural activities. If the investment in women's welfare is reduced, the implementation of the maternity policy may be greatly reduced. Therefore, it is particularly important to establish a

system like the UK in which various parties bear the costs of the maternity policy is particularly important. When the government funds are insufficient, the employers can bear the remaining expenses, which is able to greatly reduce the economic pressure of the insured female individual and improve the welfare and status of the woman.

### 3. Conclusion

Women's social status is a multi-dimensional concept, and its constituent elements include economy, politics, education, health, marriage and family. This paper only selects 3 representative dimensions. Among them, the household responsibility and the freedom of movement are two of the earliest and most commonly used indicators for measuring women's status. The basic conclusion is that the British government hopes to promote the increase of fertility rate through various forms of subsidies covering the whole people, and hopes to protect women's rights and improve women's status through legislative means. But because of the limitation of government funds, the government can only make a balance, which means the UK can neither achieve the super high maternity benefits like France, nor can it achieve better gender equality like Italy.

#### 3.1. *The Effect of Maternity Policy on the Status of Women Is Influenced by Many Factors Including Politics, Economy and Society*

From the literature analysis, it can be clearly seen that in order to increase women's participation in the labor market, whether it is direct or indirect policy intervention, there are many different ways.

However, there are differences in the implementation effects of various maternity policies that achieve common goals through different intervention methods. This is because the differences in the political, social, and economic environments they implement affect their implementation effect. For example, France has long been concerned about the threat of low fertility levels to the national economy. Therefore, the French people have a more open attitude

towards the policy of maternity. This open attitude helps the effect of maternity policies on the increasing of investment in maternity welfare. The situation in the United Kingdom also shows that the political, social and economic environment is an important factor in determining the status of its women. Women's greater empowerment in the workplace also improves their social status in turn.

### 3.2. *The Impact of Maternity Policies on the Change in Women's Status Is a Long Process*

Although different maternity policies may affect the status of women, the realization of its impact will also be a long process. Generally speaking, the final realization of the policy effect has to go through five processes: a. Reaching political consistency; b. Unifying opinions into policy formulation; c. Policy implementation; d. Policy changing personal behavior; e. The effect of personal behavior change directly or indirectly achieves the policy objectives [17].

As far as maternity policy is concerned, some policies have a direct impact, such as abortion measures, but the impact of these policies is short-lived. It can be said that the impact of maternity policy on the status of women is not immediate but long-lived. At the same time, as a political stimulus, the uninterrupted women's movement has a certain role in promoting the consumption of political capital in maternity policies. In addition, the political tendency of economic pressure in social welfare has also affected the implementation effect of the maternity policies.

## 4. Limitations

As far as countries are concerned, even though the cultural backgrounds of European countries influence each other, due to differences in traditional customs, religious beliefs, and cultural backgrounds of various countries and nations, most studies have not conducted in-depth analysis of the results obtained. There is also a relatively small sample of countries for comparison with the UK. As far as research methods are concerned, while conducting horizontal static research, we should also pay attention to vertical dynamic research. Data comparison studies across time periods can better explain the role of changes in women's social status. In addition, most studies do not take into account endogenous issues. For example, the fertility rate can be affected by women's social status, and at the same time, it can also affect the social status of women. For the endogenous issues caused by the mutual causality between the two, most existing literature has not been discussed in depth.

## 5. Implications

This paper has important implications for understanding the decline fertility rate and the adjustment of maternity policies in China. For now, most of the explanations of existing studies on the trend of fertility rate change in China only focus on the change of policy, but with the gradual relaxation of China's fertility policy in recent years, the fertility rate has not

increased but declined. Research is not enough to explain the changing trend of China's fertility rate at this stage. Not only does strict maternity policy lead to a decline in fertility rate, but the promotion of women's status can also break through the constraints imposed by traditional customs and social factors [18]. In other words, the relationship between female status and fertility policy is particularly important. In view of the low fertility rate in China, the gradual relaxation of the fertility policy is only one aspect. The better key to solve the worries of women who have more children is to improve the supporting construction of childcare facilities and reduce sex discrimination at work.

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