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# Reimagining Social Policies to Support Families in China: A Research Report

UNICEF China

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Family policies are the foundation for thriving communities and countries and are key to achieving the global ambitions set by the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In recognizing the crucial role of parents and caregivers in children’s upbringing, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) calls on states to “render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and ensure the development of institutions, facilities, and services for the care of children”.

Parents play a key role in creating a nurturing home environment that guarantees healthy growth and development for their children. To do so, they rely on governments to provide various forms of support. Family policies allow caregivers to achieve a healthy balance between work and home life, providing time, resources and services (Daly et al., 2015; Filgueira & Rossel, 2020). They also ensure a strong early start

in life for children, which results in greater returns in human capital (Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020). These returns, and the importance of supporting families to bring up their children has long been stressed by scholars and international policymakers (Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020; ILO, 1981, 2000; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). Family policies provide governments with powerful ways to tackle poverty, improve employment opportunities and other goals that lay the foundation for a quality standard of living for future generations (Richardson, 2018).

With ‘family’ considered the main and preferred place for children’s growth and development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Guralnick, 2011; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), current research clearly points to the need to guarantee a comprehensive family policy package to all families in need – covering adequate family income, sufficient time for parenting, and quality care services – prioritizing vulnerable families and households (Chopra & Krishnan, 2019; Griswold & Palmquist, 2019; Jayasekaran et al., 2019; Kamerman

& Kahn, 1994, 1995; Kamernian & Kahn, 1994; Milovantseva et al., 2018; Samman & Lombardi, 2019). Although a substantial number of studies emphasize the importance of family policies, there seems to be a lack of knowledge and consensus on the impact of these policies, as very few studies have assessed their effectiveness, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

There is significant diversity in the configuration of family policies across countries. The different public policy instruments relate to demographic changes in family structures, and respond to the population's social, economic and cultural circumstances. For example, maternity, paternity, and parental leave are used as a pro-natal tool (Thomas et al., 2022), and a tool to correct gender imbalances (Chopra & Krishnan, 2019). Also, governments tend to spend more on childcare services when fertility rates are low (Filgueira & Rossel, 2020).

China's population has declining fertility and increased life expectancy, with a rising percentage of the total population aged 60 years and over. According to the 2020 census, it was 18.7 per cent, an increase of 5.4 percentage points over the 2010 census (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). While this demographic shift is being experienced globally, the pace of population ageing in China is rapidly increasing, bringing changes to family and household composition. The elderly in China live in multigeneration families and play important roles in childcare (Hu & Peng, 2015). Intergenerational parenting is a culturally appropriate unit of analysis for understanding in Chinese families (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010).

China's birth control policy has evolved from the one-child policy, upheld between 1980 to 2015, to the two-child policy during the period 2016 to 2020. A new three-child policy was issued in July 2021 to support and promote birth and demographic change (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2022). This fundamental policy shift is likely to result in demands for robust, universal parental leave and childcare services, along with a wide range of corresponding policy amendments.

Population mobility is another factor driving changes in the family structure and socio-economic conditions of households in China. Rural-urban migration is a prominent feature of Chinese economic reform. During the period 2010–2021, China's urban population increased by 236.42 million whereas the rural population decreased by 164.36 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). This has resulted in a large 'floating' population – people living in places other than their household registration areas, which is estimated at 492.76 million, or 35 per cent of the total population in 2020. This represented an increase of 88.5 per cent from 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). The household registration system determines citizens' access to housing, education and public services. Only urban Hukou (household registration document) holders have access to urban social benefits or public services, even though some of these benefits and services have been expanded to 'temporary residents' without Hukou. Lacking urban Hukou is a cause of inequality because it affects the social and economic status of migrants in destination cities and towns (Pryce & Wang, 2021).

The co-existence of rural and urban poverty is also a problem (Wei & Su, 2021). Ensuring that families in urban and rural areas have strong social protection programmes is an important consideration. Migrant and left-behind children (children who migrate with their parents to urban regions or remain in rural regions while their parents leave to work in urban areas) are especially vulnerable. They have been known to face education (Xu & Wu, 2022) and health disparities (Zhang & Zheng, 2022) and have comparably worse psychological well-being (Wang et al., 2019), weaker basic public services and social protection. As urbanization continues, so does the need to ensure that social security provides adequate coverage for informal sector workers and ample safety nets for migrant children and their caregivers.

## 1.2 Objectives

Family policy, like other areas of public policy, is dynamic and evolves with changing economic and social circumstances. A broad range of legislation, benefits, services and programmes are used by governments to improve the economic conditions, well-being and functioning of families with children. China can enhance the scope of support provided to families by learning from the challenges and solutions in other countries. This report highlights relevant case studies that can be potentially adapted and incorporated into Chinese family policy. The report identifies lessons learned in design and implementation that could be used to inform future policy innovation in China, with targeted

recommendations. The case studies draw from a broad global synthesis of family policies. Cases have been selected for comparability with the Chinese context based on case selection criteria presented in Section 3.

## 1.3 Scope

### 1.3.1 Family policies

In this report we define family policy as: statutory policies and government-led programmes that support and aim to improve conditions for adult family members – particularly parents/carers – caring for and bringing up children (up to the age of 18) (Waidler et al., 2021). While other policy areas may indirectly assist families (e.g., access to justice and land rights), to provide more specific and clear recommendations for policy action, we focus exclusively on policies that directly help families bring up children. This excludes child protection policies that aim to protect children from violence and harm. Table 1 outlines the policy interventions included in the report that are considered for broader global synthesis. These interventions align with the time-related, finance-related and service-related family policy types used in other UNICEF publications, such as *Linking Family-friendly Policies to Women's Economic Empowerment* (Chopra & Krishnan, 2019), *Family-friendly Policies in South Asia* (Waidler et al., 2021), and *Family-friendly Policies in the Workplace* (United Nations Children's Fund (China Office) & China Population Association, 2022).

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

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

### 1.3.2 Outcomes

The broader global synthesis and this report focus on a wide range of social and economic outcomes that are considered direct results of family policies or programmes, with particular attention to gender-differentiated impact and other

equity aspects (Cochrane Methods Equity, 2017). Relevant outcomes extracted and adapted from the synthesis report *Key Findings on Families, Family Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals* (Richardson, 2018) are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2 Family policy outcomes covered in the global evidence synthesis**

Outcomes	
Domain	Sub-domain
<b>Living conditions</b>	Household income (monetary poverty)
	Household welfare (non-monetary deprivation, food security, housing arrangements)
	Household economic production (e.g., agricultural, enterprise)
	Household savings and investment (e.g., investment in childcare and education)
<b>Family functioning</b>	Parental well-being (e.g., stress, mental health, quality of life, work-life balance)
	Time allocation (e.g., leisure time, time off work, domestic work distribution)
	Family relations and interactions (e.g., parent-child interactions, time and quality interaction, family cohesion, intimate partner violence)
	Skills and education (e.g., parenting skills, life and vocational skills)
<b>Employment</b>	Equality and gender empowerment (e.g., intra-household equality, gender equality, female empowerment)
	Access and attachment to the labour market (e.g., return to job market after leave, labour supply and participation, intensive/extensive margin)
	Employment conditions (e.g., working overtime/long hours, insurance, earning increments, career development and opportunities, equal pay and employment opportunities)



# 2. THE FAMILY POLICY LANDSCAPE IN CHINA

## 2.1 Contextual overview

This section looks at the socio-demographic changes in China over the past few decades to examine some of the key contextual factors that may have influenced the country's recent efforts to strengthen family policies. Six aspects are highlighted because they are critical in assessing the necessities of revisiting current family policies in the country and initiating new policy approaches. These are: declining fertility rates and an ageing population; reversal of the one-child policy; the presence of three-generation households; gender inequality; internal (rural-urban) migration; and informal sector work.

### 2.1.1 Declining fertility rates and an ageing population

China has experienced a significant decline in fertility rates over the past several decades. The total fertility rate (TFR) was 6.5 in 1970 but declined to 1.5 by

2020 (World Bank, 2021a). This decline was accompanied by an increase in life expectancy, resulting in China having one of the fastest growing ageing populations in the world. In 2020, the number of people 65 years and above was 190.64 million (13.50 per cent) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020; Wang & Chen, 2022). Declining fertility and an ageing population result in a smaller working-age population to support the elderly, increasing pressure on the pension and care systems. This has important implications for social and family policy and suggests that family policies that protect labour supply and participation along with social protection mechanisms may be important for China in the future.

### 2.1.2 Reversal of the one-child policy

China implemented a so-called 'one-child' policy in 1979 to control population growth. However, due to concerns about the ageing population and declining fertility, the policy was changed in 2015 to allow

couples to have two children if one of the parents was an only child. The one-child policy was relaxed further in 2021, allowing couples to have three children. This was in response to national demographic changes and a desire to support couples who wanted to have larger families. This significant change in direction may require corresponding changes in family policy at the political level to encourage more sufficient and diverse provision to support families to bring up their children.

### 2.1.3 The presence of three-generation households

Three-generation households are relatively common in China, where grandparents, parents and children all live together in daily life or share economic burdens. This is frequently driven by cultural and economic factors, such as high living costs and a lack of affordable housing and childcare options. In 2020, around 13 per cent of households were registered as three-generation households, compared to 17 per cent in 2010 and 18 per cent in 2000 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020). The percentage of three-generation households that live together may exceed the registered figure, as young couples, (whether they live with their parents or not), tend to register separately as an independent household when they marry. Expanded households with three or more generations are more dominant in rural areas (Hu & Peng, 2015).

The living modality of three-generation households can have both positive and negative implications. They may provide a source of support for childcare and elderly care, allowing parents to work

and contribute to the economic well-being of the family. However, they may also lead to intergenerational conflicts and may limit the independence and autonomy of individual members. Due to the long-standing one-child policy, many three-generation households have a '4-2-1' structure, in which a single child is responsible for the care of two parents and four grandparents when the child grows up. The '4-2-1' household structure places a heavy care burden (financially as well as time and energy) on the single child. The single child, perhaps as the only family caregiver, may face more challenges when making trade-offs between providing caregiving and engaging in paid employment. A recent study confirmed that, for men and women, labour force participation was inversely related to the intensity of caregiving (Chai et al., 2021). This underlines the potential importance of policies that assist family caregivers to maintain a balance between their caregiving and labour market activities.

### 2.1.4 Gender inequality

China has made significant strides toward gender equality over the past several decades (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Gender inequality, however, remains a major issue, with women frequently facing discrimination and barriers to employment, and leadership roles. According to data from the World Bank, the gender gap in education has been closing in China in recent decades. In 2020, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for primary education was 97.7 per cent for girls and 97.6 per cent for boys, indicating that there was little difference in enrolment rates between the two genders. Similarly,

the GER for secondary education was 94.1 per cent for girls and 93.4 per cent for boys (World Bank, 2021b). In terms of the gender gap in employment, in 2021, the female labour force participation rate was 62 per cent, compared to 74 per cent for men. In 2010, the female labour force participation rate was 64 per cent, compared to 78 per cent for men (World Bank, 2021c). In 2019, China was reported to rank 106th in the global gender gap rankings of 153 countries, slipping from 63rd position in 2006 (Brussevich et al., 2021). Moreover, the long-standing one-child policy has objectively exacerbated the traditional Chinese family concept of a preference for sons over daughters, resulting in a long-term imbalance in the gender ratio of newborns. The gender ratio at birth (male birth per female birth) in China has been above 1.1 since 1990s (World Bank, 2022h). In addition, the three-child policy may exacerbate women's disadvantaged position within the family, such as being under pressure to have children in order to have a boy, which may also increase discrimination in the workplace against married women or women with childbearing plans. This suggests that paying attention to gender sensitivity when designing family policies may help close gender gaps. For example, policies can eliminate traditional gender attitudes and value women's empowerment, set the framework for equality in domestic work and caregiving arrangements and encourage women to participate in the labour market.

### 2.1.5 Internal (rural-urban) migration

China has experienced significant internal migration in recent decades, with millions of people moving from rural areas to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. Internal migration has contributed to rapid urbanization; the urbanization rate (the percentage of the population living in urban areas) increased from 26 per cent in 1990 to 63 per cent in 2021 (World Bank, 2021d).

Due to the Hukou (household registration) system, many domestic migrant workers have settled in cities and are counted among the urban population. However, in many situations, they have difficulty gaining equal access to urban public services without having an urban Hukou. The percentage of internal migrants with social insurance coverage has increased in recent years, but still lags behind the coverage rate for urban residents (Bairoliya & Miller, 2021).

The number of rural migrant workers covered by the urban employee pension plan in 2017 was estimated at just 62 million, or about 22 per cent of the total migrant worker population at the time. At the end of 2020, there were 285 million migrant workers in China, accounting for about 36.8 per cent of the employed population – but most were not included in urban employee pension plans or were only part of medical insurance schemes for urban and rural residents (China Labour Bulletin, 2021). Using labour market regulations to enhance agricultural and non-agricultural employment opportunities in rural areas is perhaps a less conventional aspect of family policy that could be explored. Family policies

should be explored in a direction that can further support these migrant families by mitigating the institutional and financial barriers that prevent them from keeping their children with them in the city while gaining equal access to urban public goods.

### 2.1.6 Informal sector work

Using the participation in basic pension insurance for urban workers as a criterion for formalized employment, the share of informal urban workers in China decreased from 57.66 per cent in 1999, to 44.06 per cent in 2010, and to 28.99 per cent in 2020. The degree of formalization of China's urban workforce is steadily increasing (Chen, 2022). Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the Chinese workforce is engaged in informal economic activities. The informal economy includes self-employment and informal waged employment activities. Informal workers include street vendors, motorcycle drivers, construction workers, babysitters, deliverymen and temporary workers (Huang et al., 2022). Those working in the informal sector often face challenges such as low pay, poor working conditions, and limited access to social protections. These workers tend to have lower levels of education and are often more vulnerable to poverty and insecurity.

## 2.2 Policy mapping

The overarching strategic direction for family policies in China in the coming years is outlined in two key policy documents issued by the central government:

(1) *Decision on Optimizing Fertility Policy and Promoting Long-Term Balanced*

*Population Development* ('the Decision') (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and State Council, 2021); and (2) *Guidance on the Further Improvement and Implementation of Active Reproductive Support Measures* (State Council, 2022a) ('the Guidance'). Both documents, along with the recently amended National Population and Family Planning Law (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2021), give a thorough understanding of central government mandates, as well as how regional and local governments are required to implement them to help families better raise their children and increase the birth rate in the long term. We relied heavily on these key documents to conduct the mapping that follows.

### 2.2.1 Workplace policies

The central government mandates that all regions review and optimize their birth and parental leave policies. They must also improve the cost-sharing mechanism of leave policies, protect employees' leave entitlements, and improve maternity insurance and other related social insurance systems. The newly revised National Population and Family Planning Law also stipulates that the state supports the establishment of ongoing leave. Accordingly, 30 of the 31 provinces amended their provincial population and family planning regulations in the past two years, with maternity leave generally extended to 158 days and above, and spousal paternity leave generally at about 15 days. The length of maternity leave varies depending on the number of children a woman has given birth to.



Ongoing leave has also been introduced, ranging from five to 20 days for parents with children under 3 years old in most provinces.

In terms of maternity insurance, the Guidance required that “the central government shall standardize and improve maternity insurance and maternity benefits payment policies and protect the safety of maternity insurance funds” (State Council, 2022a). Currently, maternity insurance policies vary across provinces, in terms of the coverage rate, the level of benefits, the eligibility, and so on. Furthermore, the central government requires localities that have the means, to explore the option of allowing workers in the informal sectors enrolling in the Urban Employee Basic Medical Insurance Scheme to also participate in maternity insurance. The Guidance also stipulates that unemployed women shall enjoy coverage of maternity medical treatment by participating in the Urban and Rural Residents Basic Medical Insurance Scheme.

In addition to these main workplace policies, the Guidance also orders local governments to promote vocational training services for female workers, especially women who give birth and are re-employed, and to carry out investigations of gender discrimination infringements at work. However, leave policies and maternity insurance do not always cover employees in informal sectors, who are more likely to be low-income, low-educated, and domestic migrants. The number of leave days and benefit levels also vary across different provinces.

For policies that support breastfeeding at work, the Guidance encourages flexible working methods and requires employers with many female workers to establish maternity lounges and breastfeeding rooms equipped with the necessary facilities to better meet the needs of female workers during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. In addition, the National Breastfeeding Promotion Plan is a national policy that aims to increase the rate of breastfeeding in China and improve the health of infants and young children (National Health Commission, 2021). However, no further details or legally binding regulations at the local level have been released. Employees working in the formal sectors (such as public agencies, large and medium-sized companies, and state-owned companies) tend to benefit from these rights.

While flexible working arrangements are becoming more common in China, they are not yet widespread and are not always available. Employers may be hesitant to offer flexible working arrangements due to concerns about productivity and supervision, and there may be practical or legal barriers to their implementation. Working overtime in many sectors is normal, and young people are frustrated with the ‘996’ working culture – referring to the practice of working from 9am to 9pm, six days per week. This practice is common in some industries in China, particularly in the technology sector, and has been criticized for its negative impact on employees’ well-being and work-life balance. The ‘996’ phenomenon has also been suggested as a contributing factor to the declining birth rate. Many young people, particularly those in high-stress

industries, may feel that they do not have the time or energy to devote to parenting and may choose to delay or forgo having children altogether.

### 2.2.2 Parental or child benefits

Tax breaks and benefits are one of the first-round policies that were introduced in the past few years to support families with children. Based on *Provisional Measures for Special Additional Deduction for Personal Income Tax* (State Council, 2018) and *Notice on the Establishment of Special Additional Deduction for Personal Income Tax for the Care of Infants and Children Under the Age of 3 in 2022* (State Council, 2022b), taxpayers who have children under the age of 3 years, as well as those who are in preschool or full-time education, can deduct a flat amount of RMB1,000 (approximately US\$140) per month per child before calculating their personal income tax payments. In terms of specific deductions, parents can choose to have one parent claim 100 per cent of the deduction or both parents can each claim 50 per cent. All parents can enjoy this tax deduction for their children until the child graduates from the university, regardless of age. This policy applies the same level of benefits to all parents, without taking into consideration disparities in economic burden among households across the country. In addition, most provinces have recently begun to encourage local governments to implement a childcare subsidy system, and/or pilot child grants for families who have a second child or additional children. This is expected to create significant variances nationally in coverage rates, the level of benefits, eligibility, and so on.

Currently, children in China enjoy free compulsory education for nine years. According to the *Notice on the In-Depth Implementation of the Nutrition Improvement Plan for Rural Compulsory Student Education* (State Council, 2021), the national basic standard of nutritional meal allowance for rural compulsory education students was increased from RMB4 to RMB5 per student per day, from the Autumn semester of 2021. This is the main school-related subsidy policy targeting rural students.

### 2.2.3 Care services

The Guidance requires each province, city and county to have at least one government-run, standardized maternal and child health care facility with adequate pre- and postnatal services. It also calls for increased supply of inclusive childcare services, with reduced operating costs and improved service quality. Along with the *Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Development of Care Services for Infants and Toddlers under the Age of 3* (State Council, 2019), governments at each level are required to design actionable measures to increase the supply of inclusive childcare services. This includes: setting fee caps for public childcare institutions; supporting eligible employers to provide childcare services for employees; accelerating the development of family childcare points; universal preschool education; and supporting qualified kindergartens to enrol 2- to 3-year-olds.

To reduce cost, the Guidance encourages the central budget to subsidize the construction of childcare facilities and requests that local governments provide

preferential policies and use land, housing, financial resources, talent, and other policies to encourage local support for inclusive childcare institutions.

To improve the quality of childcare services, the Guidance planned to identify and reward a list of model cities to replicate their positive service experiences at scale. It also planned to implement a professional qualification system for childcare practitioners and encourage qualified vocational schools to open and expand childcare-related subjects to accelerate professional training.

As for other child-rearing services and policies, the Guidance made clear requests on housing, preschool education for 3- to 6-year-olds, primary and secondary care, as well as primary, secondary and post-secondary education, among others. It required localities to take measures to support intergenerational care, family “peer support” and other care models; to encourage the supply of housekeeping enterprises to provide home infant and childcare services; and to strengthen family and parenting education. It also

ordered the local governments to optimize the allocation of policies for public rental housing and give preference to families with young children, taking diverse household needs into account.

In general, there is a high demand for childcare services. In 2021, there were 294,800 kindergartens for children aged 3–6 years nationwide. The gross enrolment rate of preschool education reached 88 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, the lack of childcare for children aged 0–3 years has been identified as a major barrier to women’s labour force participation. Children aged 0–3 years can usually only be looked after at home by a hired babysitter or other carers (mostly grandparents). There is also a scarcity of public, low-cost childcare facilities for children aged 0–6 years. Kindergarten is significantly more expensive than university in China. The lack of inclusive childcare facilities also makes it more difficult for domestic migrants, who are more likely to work in urban informal sectors and come from low-income families.



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## 3. CASE STUDIES OF SELECTED COUNTRIES

### 3.1 Case selection

This report draws from an extensive global synthesis of 184 evaluative studies on the effectiveness of family policies.

In the following section we present 10 case studies of family policies selected from this broader evidence base. These cases provide a deeper understanding of the aims, implementation, and policy/programme effects. Where possible, we also attempt to explain how, why, and in what circumstances the results occurred. Each case begins with a short contextual summary to highlight the similarities or differences with China. While unadapted case-to-case transfer<sup>3</sup> is not advisable, lessons learned are generated from each case analysis, and this knowledge is used to inform recommendations to enhance family policy in China.

The following criteria were considered when selecting cases:

- (1) **Policy mapping.** Consideration was given to cases that addressed the gaps identified in the mapping (Section 2.2).
- (2) **Relevance of the studied population.** Policy interventions from papers that studied populations with characteristics similar to China’s social, economic and cultural circumstances – as described in the contextual overview (Section 2.1) – were given preference.
- (3) **Comparability of settings.** Family policies from countries with a similar socio-demographic profile as China (Section 2.1) and from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) region were also given preference. OECD countries in Europe have a long history of family policies, therefore, several cases were selected from this region.

<sup>3</sup> Case-to-case transfer involves applying an inquiry’s findings to a completely different group of people or setting (Polit & Beck, 2010).

(4) **Geographic spread.** Notwithstanding the focus on OECD countries, we also sought to provide insights from the diverse regions covered in the synthesis.

(5) **Body of evidence.** Emphasis was placed on policies or programmes which were included in multiple evaluative studies. However, we also include some cases with single evaluations because they were considered pedagogical.

### 3.2 Workplace policies – case studies

Three types of workplace policy interventions were examined in the included studies: maternity, paternity, and parental leave (n=40); flexible working (n=4); and other labour market regulations (n=5). Three cases are illustrated in this section.

**Case 1:** California Paid Family Leave (CA-PFL)

**Country:** The United States of America (OECD)

**Policy sub-domain:** Maternity, paternity, and parental leave after childbirth

**Implementation level:** Sub-national (State level)

**Context:** Compared to the United States of America (US), China's demographics are characterized by a lower percentage of the population aged 65 and above, and a somewhat lower fertility rate. China and the US share an upward trend in relation to multigenerational households. Based on the Gini Index of income inequality, China currently has a comparatively similar rate of female participation in the labour market and lower income inequality than the US.

In 2021, the US had a population of 331.9 million people (World Bank, 2022j). Of these, nearly 17 per cent were aged 65 or above, compared to 12 per cent in China (World Bank, 2022j). Sharing a similar upward trend with China starting from the 1970s, 18 per cent of the US population was living in multigenerational households in 2021 (Pew Research Centre, 2022). In China, at least 25 per cent of couples share a household with their parents, with even higher proportions registered in rural areas (Zhou et al., 2022). In 1950, the US fertility rate was almost 50 per cent lower compared to China. However, the progressive decline observed in China led to its fertility rate falling from the early 1990s. In contrast, the US birth rate was relatively steady over the decades until 2007 when it began to fall continuously, reaching 1.6 births per woman in 2020, compared to 1.3 in China (World Bank, 2022j).

The Gini Index for the US has been on the rise since 2010 – unlike the progressive downward trend observed for China for the same year – reaching 41.5 per cent in 2019, compared to 38.2 per cent for China (World Bank, 2022j). The two countries currently share a similar rate of female labour force participation registered for 2021, although following different trends. Starting from 2010, the number of women participating in the labour force in the US declined slightly, followed by an increase

in 2016, standing at 46.2 per cent in 2021. In China, the percentage of women in the labour force has been growing steadily since 2010, reaching 45.1 per cent of the total labour force in 2019, when it started to fall to reach 44.8 per cent in 2021 (World Bank, 2022j).

At present, the US does not have a national law guaranteeing paid parental leave for new mothers and fathers. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 provides 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected parental leave, however, eligibility restrictions by company size, job tenure, and work hours result in low FMLA coverage among workers – generally around 60 per cent (Stanczyk, 2019). California is one of the four states implementing a paid family leave policy to address coverage gaps. A recent evaluation of CA-PFL found that access to leave increased fertility by 2.8 per cent, driven by higher-order births to mothers in their 30s, as well as Hispanic mothers and those with a high school diploma (Golightly & Meyerhofer, 2022).

**Policy description:** Implemented in July 2004, the state of California introduced paid family leave (CA-PFL), which offers eligible workers up to six weeks of leave – paid at 60 per cent or 70 per cent of pre-leave wages – to: 1) bond with a new baby, recently placed foster or adoptive child; or 2) care for a seriously ill family member. Individuals are eligible to receive benefits if they are working or actively looking for work at the beginning of the leave period, while earning at least US\$300 during the year prior to leave. There are no job tenure or work hour requirements. Job protection during the period away from work is not covered unless the individual is eligible for and simultaneously uses FMLA leave. The law covers private and some public sector workers. CA-PFL applies equally to mothers and fathers. Financing is through payroll taxes levied on employees, without employer payments.

#### Policy effects:

- The evidence indicates that salary support provided by CA-PFL allowed mothers to increase the length of their maternity leave. This was significant for disadvantaged low-income mothers. However, because CA-PFL increased employers' costs (if they need to hire backup temporary workers to replace women on maternity leave), female labour force participation was negatively affected in some instances, as employers sought to offset the potential of these costs by hiring men instead of women.
- Since CA-PFL could be taken by either the mother or father, when fathers increased their uptake of parental leave, job continuity among mothers with relatively weak labour force attachments was strengthened (Baum & Ruhm, 2016).
- For older workers with caregiving responsibilities for a spouse or parent, CA-PFL payments may have reduced the opportunity cost of working, by allowing such workers to take short periods of time off with pay when needed (Bartel et al., 2021).

- Receiving CA-PFL benefits provided financial protection to smooth household earnings after childbirth, thereby affecting household food security. Stronger effects were experienced among low-income households, and with parents younger than 30 years old, as well as families with more than one child (Kang, 2020; Lenhart, 2021). Income from the CA-PFL 12-month bonding leave reduced the risk of poverty for mothers with children less than 1 year old. Economic security was more pronounced for less educated and low-income, single mothers (Stanczyk, 2019).
- The protected family time offered by the availability of CA-PFL created opportunities for bonding and a focus on the needs of the new family. This reduced stress and contributed to parents' psychological well-being, including a reduction in symptoms of postpartum depression, among mothers (Doran et al., 2020).

#### Lessons learned:

- Family leave designed in a gender-neutral manner (each parent provided with an individual right to claim the benefit) can allow the families to optimize their personal household leave-taking decisions.
- Paid family leave is a critical resource contributing to the economic and psychological well-being of households.
- Receiving paid family leave benefits provided financial protection to smooth household earnings after childbirth, especially for low-income households and young parents who experience greater material pressure and an urgent need to secure their careers.

#### Case 2: Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP)

**Country:** Canada (OECD)

**Policy sub-domain:** Maternity, paternity, and parental leave after childbirth

**Implementation level:** Sub-national (Province)

**Context:** China has a similar trend in fertility change and population ageing to Canada but has a higher Gini Index and a larger gender gap in the employment rate. In addition, the employment rate for women in Canada has been increasing in recent decades, in contrast to the situation in China.

The total fertility rate in Canada has generally declined since the 1960s, from 3.6 in 1960 to 1.5 in 2000, followed by a brief increase to 1.7 in 2009, and then declining to

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1.4 in 2020 (World Bank, 2022a). However, the share of the population aged 65 and over increased from 8 per cent in 1970 to 19 per cent in 2021. China has followed a similar trajectory of declining fertility and ageing since the 1990s. The fertility rate continues to fall, from 2.5 in 1990 to 1.6 in 2000 and further to 1.3 in 2020, which is even lower than the Canadian level. The ageing rate (percentage of the population aged 65 and over) in China has risen steadily since the 1970s, from 4 per cent in 1970 to 7 per cent in 2000 and 13 per cent in 2020. The Gini Index for Canada has been relatively stable in recent years, hovering around 0.32 (World Bank, 2022a). Compared to Canada, China's Gini Index has remained higher than 0.38 over the past decade, although on a declining trend (World Bank, 2022a).

Compared to Canada, there has been no improvement in the gender gap in China's employment rate. The employment rate for women in Canada has been on an increasing trend, rising from 53.8 per cent in 1990 to 58.2 per cent in 2019. The employment rate for men in Canada is in a fluctuating downward trend, although always higher than the employment rate for women, falling from 69.9 per cent in 1990 to 65.9 per cent in 2019. However, the gender gap in the employment rate is narrowing, from 16.1 per cent in 1990 to 7.7 per cent in 2019. The employment rate for men in China has been declining steadily since the 1990s, from 81 per cent in 1991 to 77 per cent in 2005 and 71 per cent in 2019. The employment rate for women in China has followed a similar downward trend since the 1990s, from 71 per cent in 1991 to 65 per cent in 2005 and 61 per cent in 2019. However, the gender gap in the employment rate remains at around 10 per cent (World Bank, 2022a).

**Policy description:** In January 2006, the province of Quebec implemented the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, a reform of parental leave benefits that aimed to promote gender equality, reduce barriers to parents' use of parental leave, and address gendered attitudes towards parental leave. The reform included lower eligibility criteria, increased income replacement, and five weeks of 'use it or lose it' reserved paternity leave (or three weeks with higher wage replacement), in addition to existing shared parental leave time. Eligibility was lowered to C\$2,000 (approximately US\$1,490) of earnings, which represents 200 hours at C\$10 per hour. Self-employed parents were also automatically included in the programme.

#### Policy effects:

- QPIP was introduced with gender equality goals, which were realized over the period of its implementation. The 'use it or lose it' parental leave policy increased fathers' time accessibility and led to an increase in fathers' responsibility for children. A spillover effect was realized, with an increased likelihood of mothers being in the labour force or working full time (Dunatchik & Ozcan, 2021).

- Although mothers exposed to the policy were likely to dedicate more time to paid work, there was no evidence that this translated into an increase in maternal income (Haeck et al., 2019).
- Findings suggest that mothers' time investment in their children (number of days spent with the newborn, as well as breastfeeding time) improved because of the policy. The increase in breastfeeding time was modest and the mechanism of this effect was unexplored.

#### Lessons learned:

- Non-transferable leave periods reserved for fathers can help to reduce gender disparities by encouraging more equal divisions of labour within the household.

### Case 3: UK Flexible Working Act

**Country:** United Kingdom (OECD)

**Policy sub-domain:** Flexible working

**Implementation level:** National

**Context:** The United Kingdom (UK) and China share a similar curve of increasing population ageing, but the UK has had a relatively stable and higher fertility rate since 2000, with an increasing rate of female employment.

The fertility rate in the UK has been stable but slightly declining, from 1.9 in 1980 to 1.6 in 2000, then rising to 1.9 in 2008, and declining again since 2012 from 1.9 to 1.6 in 2020. The percentage of the population aged 65 and over has increased from 12 per cent in 1960 to 19 per cent in 2020. China has followed a similar curve of increasing population ageing since the 1990s, with a declining fertility rate from 2.5 in 1990 to 1.6 in 2000 and further to 1.3 in 2020. The fertility rate in both countries fell to a similar level in 2000, but the rate in China continues to fall, while the rate in the UK remains stable with a short period of increase (World Bank, 2022i).

The female employment rate in the UK increased from 48 per cent in 1991 to 53 per cent in 2005 and to 56 per cent in 2019. In contrast, the rate in China, although higher than in the UK, has fallen from 71 per cent in 1991 to 65 per cent in 2005 and 61 per cent in 2019. The employment rate for men in the UK has remained in a stable range of 63–66 per cent since the 1990s. As the female employment rate has risen, the gender gap has narrowed to a level similar to China's, around 10 per cent (World Bank, 2022i). Nevertheless, the UK is ranked among the top 30 countries in the world in terms of gender equality (United Nations, 2022).

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**Policy description:** The Flexible Working Act, introduced in 2003 and amended in 2007 and 2014, provides all employees in the UK with the legal right to request flexible working patterns. This policy first focused on employees with children under 6 years old, or children with a disability under 18 years. It was amended to cover employees with any type of caregiving responsibilities, and further amended to cover all employees. Employees must have worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks to be eligible. Types of flexible working include: job sharing; working from home; part-time work; compressed hours (working full-time hours but over fewer days); flexitime (the employee chooses when to start and end work (within agreed limits); annualized hours (the employee has to work a certain number of hours over the year but they have some flexibility about when they work); staggered hours (different start, finish and break times from other workers); phased retirement (workers can choose when they want to retire. This means they can reduce their hours or work part time). The law does not oblige employers to grant requests, but to consider the employee's request in a reasonable manner.

#### Policy effects:

- The law created the framework to support flexible work, however, because the decision to grant requests is left to employers, there was no direct translation into increased uptake of flexible working arrangements. Limited avenues for appeal when requests were not granted may have contributed to this result.
- Positive results were achieved among working mothers, albeit a small group, whose employers did not offer work flexibility prior to the reform, but there was little change among working women who were already exposed to pre-reform flexible working opportunities (Avendano & Panico, 2018).

#### Lessons learned:

- Attitudes of supervisors and employers towards flexible work is crucial to increase uptake of flexible working conditions. A supporting regulatory framework by itself is insufficient to change attitudes. Interventions to promote a change in organizational culture may be required.
- For incentives for employers and employees to succeed, they may need to be accompanied by policies to promote work flexibility.

### 3.3 Parental or child benefits – case studies

A total of 79 studies examined the effectiveness of various types of parental or child benefits. Of these studies: 54 assessed the impact of non-contributory cash transfer programmes for children, pregnant and lactating women, or families with children (the most studied family policy intervention in this review); 12 studies assessed a range of tax breaks and benefits for families with children; three focused on policies and programmes providing school-related payments,

subsidies or meals; three studies evaluated the impact of birth grants or in-kind benefits; two looked into other forms of benefits supporting families (e.g., old-age pension); and five investigated policies combining different types of parental or child benefits – e.g., non-contributory cash transfer programmes and birth grants and in-kind benefits (n=2); non-contributory cash transfer programmes and other benefits supporting families (n=2); non-contributory cash transfer programmes and school-related payments/subsidies/meals (n=1). Three cases are shown in this section.

#### Case 4: Colombian Familias en Acción

**Country:** Colombia (OECD)

**Programme sub-domain:** Non-contributory cash transfer for children, pregnant and lactating women, and families with children

**Implementation level:** National

**Context:** China's population has a higher percentage of people aged 65 and over compared to Colombia but has a similar pattern of multigenerational homes. Compared to Colombia, China has lower income inequality based on the Gini Index and a comparable history of a high percentage of informal workers.

Colombia is a country in the Latin America and Caribbean region with a population of more than 51 million (World Bank, 2022b). In line with the global trend, the Colombian population aged 65 and above grew substantially in the last 50 years, accounting for 9 per cent in 2019 compared to 13 per cent registered in China (World Bank, 2022e). As in China, Colombian demography has a high prevalence of multigenerational households, with 46.8 per cent of all elders co-residing with adult children (aged above 20 years) in 2019 (UNDESA, 2019). Starting from 2010, the Gini Index in both countries followed a downward trend, which continued to fall in China, reaching 38.2 per cent in 2019. The opposite occurred in Colombia, with the index resuming its increase in 2017 – returning to nearly the same level as in 2010 – to reach 54.2 per cent in 2020 (World Bank, 2022c).

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A long history of high rates of informal employment is another shared trend between China and Colombia, accounting for 54.4 per cent and more than 60 per cent of vulnerable workers in 2018, respectively (ILO, 2018). Workers in vulnerable employment have the least probability of formal work arrangements, social protection, and safety nets against economic shocks and therefore are more likely to fall into poverty. At the beginning of the century, nearly 21 per cent of the Colombian population lived on less than US\$2.15 a day (World Bank, 2022g).

**Programme description:** In 2001, the Government of Colombia implemented the 'Familias en Acción' programme, with the aim of tackling intergenerational poverty and inequality among the most vulnerable households with children aged 0–17 years. Initially designed to target disadvantaged populations in rural municipalities with less than 100,000 inhabitants, the programme was subsequently scaled to reach eligible households with children in all rural areas and small towns. Today, Familias en Acción represents the key component of the country's social protection system, with nationwide coverage. Transfers are paid twice a month to mothers and are conditional on the fulfilment of health and educational commitments. One part of the transfer is provided on the condition that children under the age of 7 years are vaccinated and undergo regular health and nutrition check-ups. Another component relates to education and is provided for every child aged between 7 and 17 years, enrolled in school and who attended at least 80 per cent of classes during the school year (except for primary school-aged children in large cities). In addition, mothers must attend informational sessions on health, nutrition, and contraception (Saavedra-Caballero & Ospina Londoño, 2018). In 2016, more than 2.5 million eligible households received financial incentives for health and education under the programme, approximately 1.2 million children below the age of 7 years attended medical checks, and 3.1 million benefited from the education system (Martínez & Maia, 2018).

#### Programme effects:

- Familias en Acción substantially increased labour force participation rates among beneficiary families with one adult and children aged 0–6 years in urban areas, of which one-third were households headed by a woman (Barrientos & Villa, 2015).
- The programme decreased the probability of informal employment for the urban female population (Barrientos A & Villa J M, 2015).
- Cash incentives increased the likelihood of workers enrolling in social security, but only in the short term. This fostered informality among beneficiaries by increasing the probability of being a non-salaried unskilled worker in the short term, and almost doubled it in the medium/long term.

- Familias en Acción also increased the probability of being a worker enrolled in the subsidized health system, another indicator of vulnerable employment (Saavedra-Caballero & Ospina Londoño, 2018).

#### Lessons learned:

- Familias en Acción seemed to have produced contradictory effects: increasing labour force participation of single-parent households with young children and boosting the propensity for informal employment.
- When designing and implementing large-scale cash incentives, it is crucial to consider the beneficiaries' household composition and employment types.
- In the context of the large informal work sector, particular attention should be given to the programme's potential spillover effects on employment conditions for vulnerable workers – such as non-salaried unskilled workers (e.g., independent or daily labourers, farm owners), workers not covered by social security, and workers enrolled in the subsidized health system – including the immediate and sustained effects of medium- to long-term benefits.

#### Case 5: Mexican PROSPERA

**Country:** Mexico (OECD)

**Programme sub-domain:** Non-contributory cash transfers for children, pregnant and lactating women, and families with children

**Implementation level:** National

**Context:** Compared to China, Mexico has somewhat higher births and a lower share of the population aged 65 and above. The employment sector of both countries is characterized by a similar pattern in terms of informality and the gender gap.

Mexico is a country in Latin America and the Caribbean with a population of over 126.7 million people (World Bank, 2022d). The fertility rate for Mexico has been declining over the past few decades, falling from 2.7 in 2000 to 1.9 in 2020 (World Bank, 2022d). As of 2020, the percentage of the Mexican population aged 65 and above was 8 per cent compared to 13 per cent for China (World Bank, 2022d).

Mexico has a relatively high Gini Index (among the highest across OECD countries), even though the coefficient has been declining in the last years, falling from 48.7 in 2014 to 45.4 in 2020, compared to 38.2 in 2019 registered for China (World Bank, 2022d). As for China, the country's employment rate has a gender gap, with 68.3

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per cent of men and 39.3 per cent of women participating in the labour market in 2021 (OECD, 2022). Another shared characteristic between Mexico's and China's economies is a high proportion of informal employment. The informal sector of Mexico accounts for a significant percentage of total employment, with nearly 60 per cent of the workforce participating in the informal sector in 2019 (OECD, 2019).

**Programme description:** In 1997, the Mexican Government implemented the PROGRESA conditional cash transfer programme for the most vulnerable families. Established to tackle poverty and invest in human capital, the programme aimed to improve the living conditions for beneficiary households' children through education, health and nutrition. Once enrolled, female heads of eligible families received benefits twice a month for three years, conditional on meeting requirements such as obtaining preventive medical care and spending more on quality nutrition. A second type of transfer consisted of educational scholarships conditional on children's school attendance being at least 85 per cent and not repeating a grade more than twice. The scholarships covered each child under the age of 18 years enrolled in school between the third grade of primary and the third grade (last) of junior high school. PROGRESA initially targeted 300,000 beneficiary families primarily in rural areas. The programme was later extended to reach a total of 2.4 million families in early 2012, among which were indigenous communities and new urban households. Later the same year, PROGRESA was renamed 'Programa de Desarrollo Humano – Oportunidades' (known as 'Oportunidades'), and its reach increased to 4.2 million households across all 32 states. In 2014, the programme was modified again to become the 'PROSPERA Social Inclusion Program' (PROSPERA) which allocated additional resources to reach households' nutritional goals including: eliminating child malnutrition; improving child weight and height indicators; increasing food production and incomes of farmers and small growers (Dubois & Rubio-Codina, 2012; Gertler et al., 2012; Saldivar-Frausto et al., 2022; Urbina, 2020).

#### Programme effects:

- By investing part of the cash transfer received through the programme in productive assets such as animals and land, poor rural Mexican households increased their agriculture-derived income and increased long-term consumption (Gertler et al., 2012).
- The PROSPERA programme reduced household food insecurity by increasing access to food and improving nutritional outcomes (Saldivar-Frausto et al., 2022).
- The programme additionally increased participation in childcare for mothers with children under the age of 3 and aged 12–17 years, while also reducing the probability of the first daughters being engaged in childcare activities, such as taking care of younger siblings (Dubois & Rubio-Codina, 2012).

- Although there is no evidence that the programme affected household decision-making, the receipt of the cash transfers had a positive effect on attitudinal measures to housework and female autonomy (Urbina, 2020).

#### Lessons learned:

- Cash transfers have the potential to improve the living conditions of beneficiary households, including food security, in the long term. New income streams generated by investing part of the transfer in productive assets permanently increase consumption, making it unlikely for families to revert to pre-programme poverty levels (Gertler et al., 2012).
- Cash transfers can empower the women and girls in households and can have a positive effect on women's sense of autonomy.

#### Case 6: US Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

**Country:** United States of America (OECD)

**Policy sub-domain:** Tax breaks and benefits

**Implementation level:** National and sub-national

**Context:** See Case 1

**Policy description:** The EITC was established in 1975 to aid low-income individuals and couples with children. Since its implementation, two main eligibility criteria were required: (i) taxpayers to have non-zero earned income from wages, salary, or self-employment; and (ii) unmarried and married taxpayers to have adjusted gross income below some threshold, which has varied over time and with the number of qualifying children. This federal benefit is fully refundable and is paid as a lump sum along with the annual tax return, based on pretax earnings, marital status, and number of dependents. Households with no tax liability are still eligible for the tax refund. After undergoing substantial expansion in the 1990s, including increases to the phase-in rate and expanded benefits for families with two or more children, the EITC has become the largest social welfare programme for poverty alleviation in the US. More than half of the states implemented their own EITCs, starting from 2016 (Adireksombat, 2010; Boyd-Swan et al., 2016; Cesur et al., 2022; Collin et al., 2021; Edmonds et al., 2022; Hoynes & Patel, 2018; Neumark & Shirley, 2020; Pilkauskas & Michelmore, 2019; Shirley, 2020).

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#### Policy effects:

- There is some evidence of the positive association between the increase of the EITC and improvements in housing arrangements of low-income multigenerational households. A US\$1,000 increase in the EITC translated into improved housing conditions by reducing housing cost burdens, doubling up (living with additional, non-nuclear family adults), and multigenerational co-residence.
- The programme decreased the incidence of sexual intimate partner violence for unmarried low-educated and black women, as well as the intensity of physical and sexual intimate partner violence.
- The EITC expansion decreased symptoms of depression, increased happiness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy among married mothers with children, but not for unmarried mothers.
- The tax benefit system has the potential to reduce poverty and increase maternal income and earnings. A US\$1,000 increment in the EITC increased single mothers' income. There were also positive effects on earnings and employment effects for unmarried women educated up to a high school diploma in the 12 months following their first/only child's birth.
- In relation to employment, the EITC increased the probability of labour force participation of unmarried women with two or more children, compared to women with no children and with one child, with effects concentrated among women with no college education. The programme also increased the average total annual hours worked of all unmarried women taken as a whole.

#### Lessons learned:

- Tax benefits can be an important safety net component that not only encourages work among low-income earners but has the potential to reduce lower-tail inequality, increase family income and move families out of poverty.
- Longer exposure to a more generous tax benefit has the potential to increase earnings for low-skilled, mainly single mothers in the longer term. This suggests that work incentives may generate positive long-term economic effects.
- By improving women's economic self-sufficiency, the tax credits can be an effective tool in reducing intimate partner violence, especially for unmarried and black women who are more likely to experience intimate partner violence.
- A generous tax credit may be needed to produce positive effects on mental health and health behaviours among beneficiary populations.



### 3.4 Care services – case studies

Three types of care service policy interventions were examined in 46 included studies: formal childcare (n=34); pre- and postnatal services (n=2); and other care services supporting child-rearing (n=9). In

addition, there is one study that examined interventions combining formal childcare and other care services. Four cases are detailed in this section.

#### Case 7: Canadian Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB)

**Country:** Canada (OECD)

**Policy sub-domain:** Formal childcare

**Implementation level:** National

**Context:** See Case 2

**Policy description:** In July 2006, the Federal Government introduced the UCCB, a benefit that provides a family with C\$100 per month per child under the age of 6 years. For two-parent families, the benefit is paid as a monthly transfer to the mother. In 2011, provisions were introduced to allow each parent in a shared custody arrangement to receive half of the benefit. In 2015, the Government of Canada expanded the benefit payment to C\$160 per month for each child aged 0–5 years and introduced a new payment of C\$60 per month for each child aged 6–17 years. Parents were automatically enrolled for the UCCB if they received the Canada Child Tax Benefit. Upon the birth of a child, parents are provided with relevant forms and information by hospital staff, and payments can easily be made retroactively for up to 11 months. Application costs are very low. The benefit is taxable, with the lower-income spouse in a family allowed to claim the UCCB income when filing their federal tax returns.

#### Policy effects:

- UCCB had negative effects on the labour supply of married individuals, particularly lower-educated mothers in two-parent families. Rather than spending the entire value of child-related benefits on goods and services for children, parents used the income to subsidize time away from work. It was unclear whether children benefited from the extra time parents spend away from the labour market (Schirle, 2015).
- The expansion of UCCB in 2015 had little effect on the work incentives of single and married women.
- While the policy goal was to help with childcare costs, benefits were paid

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based on the number and ages of children, rather than on actual or reported childcare spending. For married women, the 2015 expansion had a positive impact on total childcare spending. Instead, single women appear to have decreased their working time, or used the additional income to support other household necessities (Messacar, 2021).

#### Lessons learned:

- Direct child-related transfers are likely an effective policy tool for supporting families with the costs and challenges of raising children, but perhaps not as directly intended, if they are not linked to specific types of spending.
- Child benefits that are not directly tied to specific spending outcomes have the capacity to improve overall household welfare.
- Trade-offs and spillover effects are likely to occur. As was demonstrated in this case, providing transfers to help with childcare costs can negatively affect the labour supply of married adults, if they use the benefit as income to subsidize time away from paid work. Setting clear overarching objectives for family policy transformation in China should be the first undertaking.
- Family policies will require an iterative approach including action at the central level as well as locally targeted adaptive policies. For example, there were a variety of child-related benefit reforms in Canada, including the Canada Child Tax Benefit (CCTB), the National Child Benefit Supplement (NCBS), and Employment Insurance (EI), and so on. In line with this, all jurisdictions in Canada increased job protection provisions to allow for 52 weeks of paid or unpaid maternity or parental leave. Since 2016, the CCTB and UCCB have been replaced by the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), with a goal of reducing child poverty. This unifies provisions into a single benefit programme where benefits are non-taxable but are income tested. Likewise, China may have to experiment with various phases of policy reforms.

#### Case 8: German expansion of public childcare provision for children under 3 years old

**Country:** Germany (OECD)

**Policy sub-domain:** Formal childcare

**Implementation level:** National

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**Context:** From the 1960s to the 2000s, Germany followed the long-term trend of a declining fertility rate (from 2.4 in the 1960s to 1.4 in 2000) and an increasing ageing population (percentage of the population aged 65 and over) – 12 per cent in 1960 and 16 per cent in 2000. However, from the 2000s to the 2020s, we have seen a steady increase in the ageing population (from 16 per cent in 2000 to 22 per cent in 2020) but also an increase in the fertility rate (from 1.4 in 2000 to 1.6 in 2018). China follows a similar curve in terms of a decreasing fertility rate and increasing ageing population since the 1990s. The fertility rate continues to fall, from 2.5 in 1990 to 1.6 in 2000 and further to 1.3 in 2020, with no significant signs of an upward trend (World Bank, 2021a). Meanwhile, China's ageing population has been rising steadily since the 1970s, from 4 per cent in 1970 to 7 per cent in 2000 and 13 per cent in 2020 (World Bank, 2022f).

According to the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index (GII) – a composite measure of gender inequality across three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market – China's performance improved from 0.275 in 2000 to 0.192 in 2020 (the lower the score, the better the performance). However, there remains a large gap with Germany, whose score declined from 0.133 in 2000 to 0.040 in 2020. In addition, gender equality in employment has improved in Germany, as both the employment gap and the gender pay gap have narrowed since 2000 (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

As Germany has managed to make progress in gender equality in employment and fertility rates over the past two decades, there may be lessons to be learned from the family policies designed and implemented during this period. Faced with a similarly challenging situation, where China is grappling with a declining fertility rate and making efforts to further narrow the gender gap in the labour market, case studies will be used to examine best practices and why policies in Germany can make a difference, as well as to further discuss the extent to which German lessons are relevant to the Chinese context.

**Policy description:** Since 2005, several laws have been passed to increasingly subsidize childcare slots for children between the ages of 1 and 3 years. In 2005 and 2008, two federal laws were passed to increase county-level availability of low-cost, state-subsidized childcare, for children under 3 years old, to at least 35 per cent by 2013. In 2006, German federal states started to abolish day-care fees for preschoolers. In 2013, a legal claim was introduced for subsidized childcare for all children after their first birthday, based on the employment status or income of the parents.

**Policy effects:**

- All studies examining the German expansion of childcare provision showed its

positive impacts on maternal employment outcomes (Geyer et al., 2015; Huebener et al., 2020; Muller & Wrohlich, 2020; Zoch, 2020; Zoch & Hondralis, 2017; Zoch & Schober, 2018).

- The reforms increased the intensity of day-care use and working time for mothers. Stronger impacts were experienced by mothers who were single, those with young children, living in denser local labour markets, and those who were highly educated (Huebener et al., 2020).
- The overall increase in employment was explained by the rise in part-time employment, while there was no change in full-time employment (Muller & Wrohlich, 2020).

**Lessons learned:**

- Increased availability of low-cost, state-subsidized childcare for children aged under 3 years reduces mothers' employment interruptions, particularly after second childbirth, and increases their probability of returning to part-time or full-time employment.
- Special consideration needs to be taken for single mothers, mothers with young children who would benefit more from using the available and affordable day-care and other types of childcare provision.
- Universal childcare should be underpinned by legal entitlement to ensure its effectiveness.

**Case 9:** Mexican childcare programme to support working mothers (or PEI – its acronym in Spanish)

**Country:** Mexico

**Programme sub-domain:** Formal childcare

**Implementation level:** National

**Context:** See Case 5

**Programme description:**

The PEI programme, established in 2007, provides subsidized care and childcare services (up to US\$55 per child or US\$111 per child with disabilities) to mothers and single fathers who are working, seeking employment, or studying, thereby enabling them to enter or remain in the labour market or in education. The target population is low-income mothers, aged 14 or older with at least one child aged between 1

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and 3 years, or children aged between 1 and 5 years who experience disabilities for 11 months, for instance, due to an accident. The programme specifically targets households that lack access to childcare through public social security or other means. The programme also provides financial support to those willing to create and operate day-care centres to increase childcare availability for low-income families.

#### Programme effects:

- PEI effectively promotes the labour market participation of low-income women who have young children. The evaluation showed that mothers who benefited from the PEI increased their proportion of employment, short-term job tenure and hours worked per month (Angeles et al., 2014). The main short-term benefits were concentrated on mothers who did not work before entering the PEI programme.
- The PEI had no significant impacts on income – possibly because respondents under-reported their income for fear of losing the programme's benefits. And no significant effects were found on the mental health of beneficiary mothers (Angeles et al., 2014).
- Mothers who had worked before PEI had a higher level of empowerment, indicating improvements in self-esteem and personal recognition (Angeles et al., 2014).

#### Lessons learned:

- Effectiveness of childcare programmes can be improved with greater targeting of mothers who did not work before entering the programme.
- To improve financial viability, increasing either the level of government subsidies or parents' fees can be explored.
- When the childcare industry is highly regulated, it is necessary to diversify childcare services while considering the needs of parents with children of different age groups. This provides parents with more options for childcare arrangements, supports the childcare needs of minorities, and also helps to reduce long childcare waiting lists.
- An accompanying policy should also look at expanding childcare availability and enhancing the quality and variety of childcare services (Ito & Yamamoto, 2022).

**Case 10:** German Pro Kind programme

**Country:** Germany (OECD)

**Programme sub-domain:** Postnatal home visiting programme

**Implementation level:** Sub-national

**Context:** See Case 8

**Policy description:** Between 2006 and 2012, the German Federal Government funded the Pro Kind programme in 13 municipalities across three federal states, covering rural and urban areas as well as regions in Eastern and Western Germany. The Pro Kind intervention began between the 12th and 28th week of pregnancy and lasted until the child turned 2 years of age. Overall, 52 home visits with an average duration of 90 minutes were scheduled between pregnancy and the child's second birthday. The family midwife conducted most of the visits up to six months after birth, and the social pedagogue conducted most of the visits thereafter. While teaching materials and visit-by-visit guidelines structured the theme and aim of each visit, home visitors have the flexibility to adapt content to the mothers' needs and the familial situation.

The programme was restricted to financially and socially disadvantaged first-time mothers who had at least a basic command of the German language. Financial disadvantage is defined as the receipt of social welfare benefits, and social risk factors include low education, teenage pregnancy and health problems. All participants must be receiving social welfare or unemployment benefits, have an income that qualified them for social welfare benefits, or have excessive debt. All participants must also have one of the following social risk factors: a low educational level, teenage pregnancy, isolation, health problems, or have been a victim of violence.

#### Programme effects:

- The intervention decreased maternal employment, while improving life satisfaction and well-being and reducing stress. Positive effects seem to have been facilitated by the personal relationship between the participant and the home visitor, as well as the intensity of the programme. Results may not have been achieved with a less intensive intervention (Sandner, 2019; Sandner et al., 2018).
- The mental health effect could be related to the personal relationship between the mother and home visitor, substituting for the target group's lack of social support in a stressful life situation.

#### Lessons learned:

- Home visiting programmes with specific goals may be more effective than large programmes with multiple components. Some programme components, such as advice about preventative dental health, which appears to have been helpful, could possibly have been incorporated more effectively into routine pre- and postnatal check-ups, given that the participants were constantly in contact with the health care system.
- Home visiting targeted towards disadvantaged families has limited effectiveness on maternal health behaviours that are difficult to change – for example, smoking and breastfeeding. This seems particularly the case when the programme is embedded within a comprehensive public health insurance system which offers generally good access to health care by the target group.



## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the lessons learned from the global evidence synthesis and case studies from selected countries, and in light of the social realities in China, we formulated following recommendations to outline policy options on how to explore and implement family policies in China.

We present recommendations for further exploration in three policy domains: workplace policies, parental and child benefits policies, and childcare policies.

#### Workplace Policy:

- **The provision of flexible working arrangements** for employees, especially parents, needs to be institutionalized. Supportive policies should be explored to encourage employers to facilitate childcare services.
- **A national minimum standard for maternity insurance and leave policies**, in terms of benefits and eligibility, should be established and monitored systematically across provinces to allow for further adjustments. The establishment of a cost-sharing

mechanism for extension of maternity leave could be explored.

- **Universal and equal coverage in the social security system** should be secured with legal entitlements, especially for those working in the informal sector.
- **Women's rights and interests in the workplace and within the household be fully protected** at the institutional, legal, and social levels. Workplace policies should incorporate gender sensitivity and equality in every aspect to address gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Policies should empower female employees, protect the legal rights of child-rearing mothers, and set the legal framework to support a more equal distribution in domestic work and caregiving arrangements within households. We also recommend stricter policies in gender-based discrimination and violence in all forms.

**Parental and Child Benefits Policy:**

- **The coverage of parental and child benefits** should be expanded to workers in informal sectors, flexible employment, the self-employed and the unemployed.
- **Comprehensive safety nets** should be provided to migrant children and their caregivers, with more inclusive and equal access to urban public services.
- **Implementing a progressive tax relief system** which would be beneficial for families that have more burdens on childcare and elderly care.

**Childcare Service Policy:**

- **The availability, quality and variety of childcare services must be improved** to address the gap in provision for children aged 0–3 years, with more supportive policies for early childhood care providers in both urban and rural areas. All children, no matter where they are living, should have equal access to early childhood educational and developmental opportunities.
- **The integration of early childhood care and kindergartens** should be explored, including establishing effective nationwide regulations.
- **Local governments should be encouraged to explore supplementary options** to better target families in need, for instance ‘guest parent care’, including making grandparents eligible for subsidies, making them part of the formal childcare system.
- **Parents living in disadvantaged conditions should be further supported**

with more reliable, convenient, inclusive, and affordable options for childcare.

More strategically, a healthy, systematic, and comprehensive concept of family policy would help set clear short- and long-term objectives for the transformation of family policy in China.

The direct, short-term objective of family policy should be to support parents and families to raise the next generation in a healthier and more evidence-informed way, and to address the ‘triple pressures’ that young parents currently face, including: a) the economic pressure to raise children and take care of the elderly; b) the competitive pressure to develop their own careers and educate their children; and c) the notional pressure on marriage, family and gender-based discrimination, which has not yet fully evolved with the times. The ultimate, long-term aim of family policy should be to improve the overall quality of life of the population.

**We recommend that the exploration of new family policies should reflect comprehensiveness and sustainability.**

- **There is no single, simple, and universally effective family policy tool**, as the global evidence synthesis and selected country case studies indicated that most single policy instruments have varying positive and negative effects in different contexts. The choice of a single policy or the easiest policy to implement can be a waste of resources, can miss the opportunity window for policy reform, and can even lead to negative public opinion about whether the government

has a genuine will and ability to reform family policy.

- **Almost all family policies have broadly long-term positive effects, particularly in ensuring gender equality in the workplace, reducing the financial and psychological stress of parenthood for young parents, and improving the provision of public childcare services.** It is important to dispel the notion that long-term policy effects can be achieved through short-term policy instruments alone, or that systematic effects can be achieved through partial or one-off adjustments. This is also a change from judging the impact of family policies based only on fertility and population growth rates.

**We suggest considering potential adjustments in a series of policies and institutions beyond family policy** itself, to systematically address the triple pressure that young parents face, including pensions, Hukou household registration, labour protection and gender equality policies, the education system, marriage, and other social institutions.

- **It is important to ensure that family-related policies in China encompass both ends of the age spectrum** – providing support to families from pre-birth and throughout childhood, and at the same time support for elderly caregivers. The reality of the ‘extended family’ should be given greater importance in various family policy instruments. Parity of basic public services should be ensured so that any family member, especially grandparents who relocate to live with their children,

are not restricted in accessing public services by the Hukou system or by living in a different location than their original residence.

- **We recommend a more tolerant policy in protecting the rights of unmarried and single parents. No reverse discriminatory or punitive measures** should be introduced to target young people who are unwilling to have children. A more tolerant, lenient, and relaxed parenting environment is needed for the new generation of parents, to ensure that they feel adequately supported.
- **Differences in family policies at the local level must not widen the income gap between regions, or between urban and rural populations.** Minimum requirements in each area of family policy should be set at the national level. A national database could be established to systematically monitor and evaluate local family policy initiatives and adjustments to improve coordination and cooperation between ministries and provinces.



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