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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FAMILY POLICY TO FERTILITY IN THAILAND AND FRANCE

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Abstract

Thailand has encountered persisting low fertility than the replacement rate for more than two decades. Family policy is considered the potential tool to tackle the problems and France is the forerunner in implementing the mix-tool of this policy successfully. This study aims to comparatively examine the patterns of the French family policy mix and Thailand's policy's pattern to understand the differences and the policy gap. Based on Thévenon's family policy model, the family policy can be classified into in-cash, in-kind, and in-time. The analysis shows that France and Thailand differ in welfare regimes and the perspectives of state duty on children and family. France has implemented varieties of mixed tools on a wide range of policy targets as well as their needs while Thailand has relatively much fewer interventions applied with residual models. France has motivated positive fertility decisions by enhancing governance and trust, however, Thailand still has a lot of room for this opportunity. Thus, Thailand should adopt the concept of family policy and extend the interventions to wider targets as well as meet the varied needs more universally. On top of that, the governance and trust in government are needed to be improved to sustain the fertility rate.

Keywords: Family Policy, Low Fertility, France, Thailand

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Introduction

The low fertility rate has become one of the challenging global issues in the 21st century. Several developed and developing countries have had a low birth rate trend leading them to aging societies rapidly (United Nations, 2019a). Furthermore, their fertility rate has dropped below the sustainable degree at 2.1 lives birth per woman defined by (United Nations, 2019b) as a replacement fertility level. Asian countries like Japan and South Korea have encountered this issue and become the group of the lowest birth country in the world. Meanwhile, a high middle-income country like Thailand is moving to the lowest fertility group with a fertility rate at 1.53 lives birth per woman lower than the average of the high-income, high-middle income, and East Asian countries (See Figure 1).

Since the low birth rate might cause some negative impacts on the economy and society (Adserà, 2004; McDonald, 2008; Chi-Jen, Hsiao-Ming & Chien-Jen, 2020), many developed countries such as OECD members having this problem for several decades the group of leaders to handle this issue. One of the potential tools to raise the fertility rate is the “family policy”, the policy to balance work-life parents and support family wellbeing (Buttner & Lutz, 1990; Whittington, Alm & Peters, 1990; Georgellis & Wall, 1992; Brouillette, Felteau & Lefebvre, 1993; Blanchet & Ekert-Jaffé, 1994; Gauthier & Hatzius, 1997; Castles, 2003; Neyer, 2003; Luci-Greulich & Thévenon, 2013; Kolk, 2021). Among OECD countries, France is one of the forerunners of family policy implementation. Furthermore, even though some OECD members cannot maintain their fertility, France can achieve to steadily raise the birth rate and become one of the highest fertility rate countries in the OECD (See Figure 1).

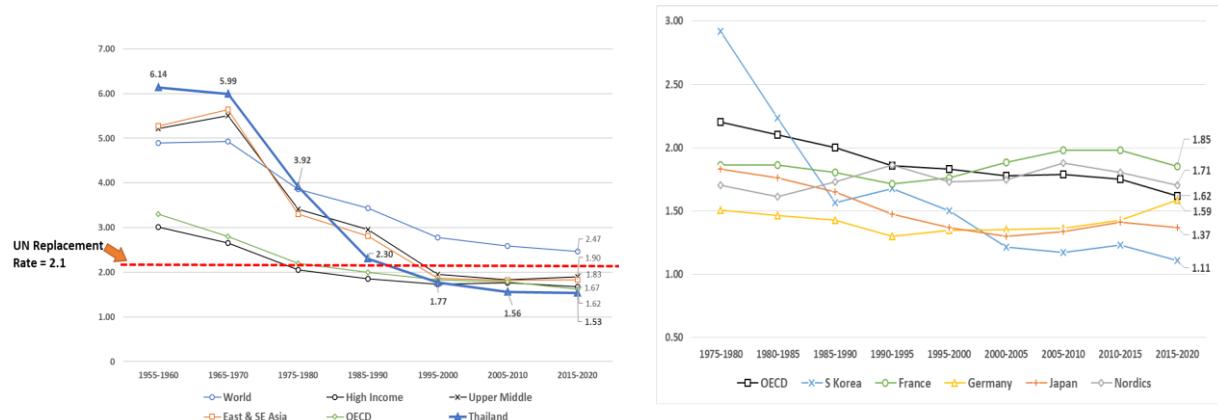


Figure 1 Global Trend of Total Fertility Rate (including France and Thailand)

Source: United Nations (2019b); OECD Family Database (2020)

Due to the continuous low birth trend in Thailand and the success of fertility increase in France, it will be beneficial to study the French experiences on family policy development. Thus, this study aims to comparatively analyze the family policy implemented between France and Thailand to examine the different patterns of public policy to support fertility and family by employing the guideline of family policy characteristics presented by Thévenon (2011) to obtain a feasible tool to enhance Thailand's family policy to fertility. This paper is structured as follows; The first session will discuss the overviews of family policy development in both countries. Then, the comparative study of family policy will be examined with the results and policy recommendations as well as the research conclusion.

The Overviews of Family Policy Development in France and Thailand

France has robustly developed the family policy after World War II which is the compromise between the conservatives such as the Catholic Church and the liberals who prioritize social equity. The implemented policies were utilized to define the place between the private and work life of French women and relate to the employment policy (Collombet, 2021). In addition, the annual family conference consisting of all stakeholders such as family movement institutions, social safeguard organizations, labor unions, other related agencies as well as experts is established to find a harmonious solution based on the fundamental that the government is the main actor to be responsible for children and prioritize the importance of family beyond the political conflicts.

The development of French family policy can be categorized into 3 phases. The first period occurred during the 1930s-1960s which focused on the pro-birth campaign supporting mothers to be the main children's carers. A stay-at-home allowance is developed for supporting mothers staying at home to raise their children. Then, during the 1980s, French mothers were influenced by both conservative concepts (stay at home) and the need for a female labor force. Thus, the policy initially supported mothers to be in the labor market by implementing some family aid for children under 3 years old. Even though mothers could have more opportunities to balance work and family, they were still expected by society to have the main responsibility for child raising. Since the European Union (EU) established the European council resolution on balanced gender participation in professional and family life in 2000, French family policy has moved to the third stage by implementing the Social Security Financing Act in 2002 to enhance gender equality and the role of the father in the form of parental leave (Pailhé, Rossier & Toulemon, 2008).

Unlike France, the role of the Thai government in welfare management is less than other social institutions such as community, religion, family, and other charity agencies (Wasikasin, Nontapattamadul & Wasinarom, 2014). Therefore, Thailand has a few comprehensive family policy developments. The policies concentrate on a specific issue relating to children and families based on residual models. Additionally, the social welfare development has been fluctuating depending on the origins of government. The welfare usually increases in the election government period and decreased in the non-election government period.

Muthuta (2021) classified the development of the Thai family and fertility policy into 3 periods. The first one during the 1930s-1960 was the Pronatalist subjected to nationalism. Under the authoritative regime believing more citizens would secure the power of the nation, several tools were employed to support marriage and increase the number of children. The second period during 1961-2001 was Family Planning which is consistent with the global trend, The Declaration on Population. The policy at that time targeted controlling the birth rate by several means such as health and tax incentives. The third period 2002-present is the challenging stage because Thailand has been moving into an aging society along with a continuously slow birth rate. Hence, the National Reproductive Health Development Policy (NRHDP) has been formulated including adopting the concept of labor rights from the International Labor Organization (ILO) supporting 98 days of maternal leave (Heebkaew & Sarapong, 2018). Other measurements are also implemented including low-income family allowance, childbearing and health support. However, gender equality has not been taken into consideration in the family policy formulation.

The Comparative Analysis

Given that France has long experience in family policy development and can achieve an increase the fertility, Thailand has recently confronted the low birth rate and attempted to alleviate this issue. Thus, it will be advantageous to comparatively study the current family policy between the two nations to obtain solid approaches for Thailand. This study utilizes

Thévenon (2011)'s family policy model recommending that there are six main targets of family-support policies consisting of (1) Poverty reduction and income maintenance (2) Direct compensation for the economic cost of children (3) Fostering employment (4) Improving gender equity (5) Support for early childhood development and (6) Raising birth rates. Consequently, there are several combination patterns of family policy derived from the six above concepts. To broadly clarify, Thévenon summarized patterns into three dimensions containing (1) *In-cash* such as cash benefits or fiscal transfer; (2) *In-kind* such as child care or housing support; and (3) *In-time* such as leaves related to childbirth or childbearing. (See Figure 2)

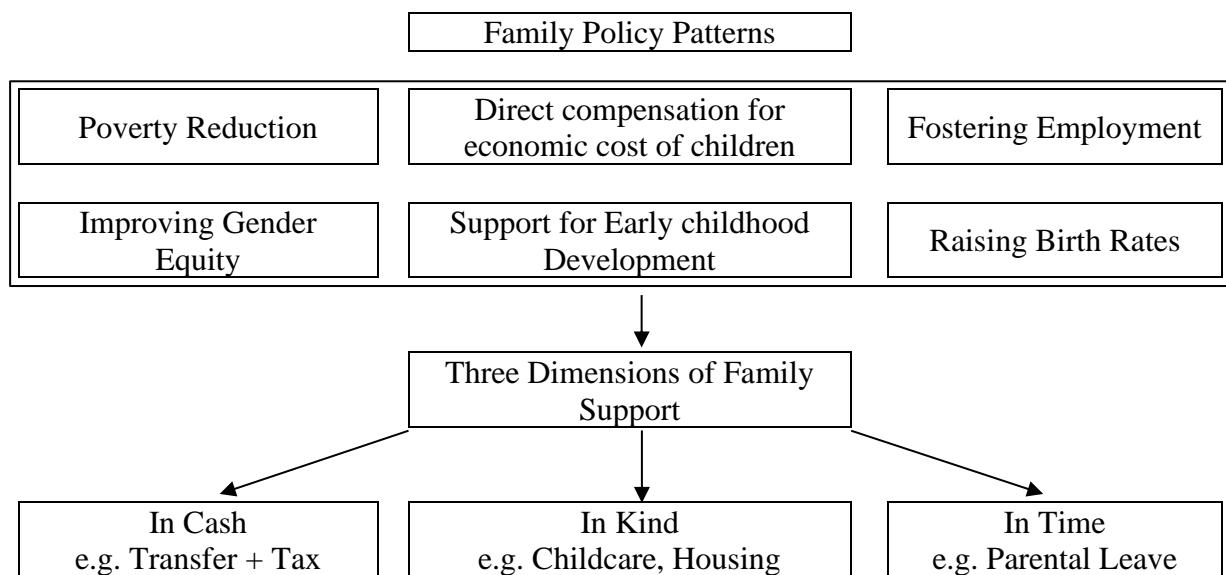


Figure 2 Family Policy Model

Source: Thévenon (2011)

All three dimension of family supports of France and Thailand are summarized as follows; (see Table 1)

1) In-Cash Dimension can be categorized into two types: Allowance and Taxation. According to Caisse nationale des Allocations familiales (2019) and European Commission (n.d.), France has implemented several allowance programs through Family Benefit Funds (Caisses d'allocations familiales or CAF) consisting of basic maintenance, birth, and early child benefits, and other related benefits for many groups of people including employees, self-employed workers, and all residents with children even if they are unemployed. the PAJE (Prestations d'accueil de jeune enfant), the benefits for all families expecting a baby or adopting a baby, has been established since 2004. The basic maintenance benefits are flexible and provide extra incentives for families with more children containing (1) child benefits based on household income and number of children; (2) flat rate allowance provides for the family has three children and more; (3) family income supplement is given to a family with three children and more by using the means-tested approach; and (4) family support allowance is the aid in the form of top-up for a family who receive low support and single parents whose child support is below the standard level. The French birth and early childhood benefits provide grants and basic allowance subject to a means-tests method. The objectives are to cover the family expenses relating to the birth or adoption of a child. The amount of €970.19 is granted for each birth as well as a means-tested basic monthly child allowance up to 3 years old including the child's maintenance and education expenses. Other benefits are for specific purposes such as education allowance for a disabled child and daily parental attendance allowance for taking care of disabled or long-term sick children.

The French tax incentives for the family is progressive reduction according to family size and composition. The main objective is to reduce the tax burden for large families and single-parent families. For example, the children will usually receive half of the tax reduction compared to the parents; however, the first child of a single-parent family and the third child and further of a normal family will obtain full tax reduction equal to their parents (Legal and Administrative Information Directorate, 2022).

Thailand provides child allowance to low-income families (income less than USD 2,700 a year) approximately USD 17 a month for children aged 0-6 years up to the third child (Department of Children and Youth, n.d.). Nevertheless, the child allowance is provided only for social security parents including lump sum childbearing. Also, the tax exemption has been double increased for the second child and more (The Revenue Department, 2020).

2) In-Kind Dimension: The in-kind supports aim to reduce the parent's cost of living and facilitate their parental lives. France provides three in-kind programs to support families consisting of (1) early childcare benefits that are quite flexible. The programs are given the free choice of childcare supplements to parents who use alternatives to the daycare center and partially supported the childcare expense up to 85% according to family income as well as the number and age of children; (2) daycare online service information provides a wide range of information for parents with children of all ages. This can help parents to have highly detailed information such as types, locations, and services on the daycare that is right for their family; (3) housing aid is paid to parents for many reasons such as keeping their home, preventing evictions and ensuring satisfactory living conditions. This also includes the moving and preparation cost for their new accommodation based on their income to families who have at least three dependent children (Caisse nationale des Allocations familiales, 2019; European Commission, n.d.).

Thailand's public childcare provisions have been mostly under local governments since 2002 in the forms of childcare and learning center for children aged 2.6-6 years. The government officers can partially receive the education aid for kindergarten (Department of Local Administration, 2017). Surprisingly, there is no public support for childcare services or other forms of subsidy for children aged 0-2.5 years.

3) In-Time Dimension: This dimension aims to promote the relationship between parents and their children as well as foster employment and enhance gender equality. French mothers can have paid maternal leave for 16 weeks. Pregnant women are obliged to take leave at least two weeks before delivery. Fathers can take 11 consecutive days of paternal paid leave. Other than parental paid leave, France also provides support to the parents who take more leave to raise their children. The shared child-rearing program provides an extra payment to allow a parent to stop working or change to a part-time job to take care of their children under age 3. Furthermore, a large family with at least three children and has one parent not working completely can ask for an additional allowance for one year more than the child benefit flat rate (OECD Family Database, 2020).

Thailand has a few in-time packages. Mothers have 98 days of maternal leave but obtain 90 days of paid leave. For paternal leave, only the government officers receive 15 days of paid leave within 30 days after child delivery (Heebkaew & Sarapong, 2018).

Table 1 Summary of All three dimension of family supports of France and Thailand

Policy Scheme	France	Thailand
<i>I. In Cash</i>	<p>1) Basic Maintenance Benefits (1) Child benefits based on household income or person with dependent children and number of children (2) Flat rate allowance for the family having \geq three children when one of the children reaches the age 20 and still lives at home having income \leq 982.48 Euro/month) (3) Family income supplement -based on a means-tested approach for a family having \geq three children (3-21 years old) -The income ceiling varies based on number of dependent children and parent earner. (4) Family supplement allowance for children to parents who are not receiving or are only receiving a portion of the child support they are owed by the other parent as well as single parent whose child support award is low.</p> <p>2) Birth Benefits such as birth grant and basic allowance (0-3 years) based on a means-tested approach</p> <p>3) Others such as education allowance for a disabled child, daily parental attendance allowance for taking care of disabled or long-term sick children</p>	<p>1) Child support grant for low-income family for children age \leq 3 2) Child allowance for social security parents up to 3rd child (0-6 years) 3) Tax exemption for prenatal care and child delivery as well as increase incentive for the 2nd child and beyond</p>
<i>II. In Kind</i>	<p>1) Early child care benefits - free choice of childcare supplement to parents who use alternatives to daycare centers - partial coverage of childcare expense up to 85% based on the number of children, age, and family income</p> <p>2) Daycare online service information which provides a wide range of information for parents with children of all ages. This also helps parents choose a daycare solution for their children by supplying highly detailed information on each type of daycare along with local information on what types of daycare services are available and where</p> <p>3) Housing aid to pay a part of housing and helping to keep it, preventing evictions, and ensuring decent living conditions.</p>	<p>1) Public child care provision for children aged 2.6-6 years. 2) Others: education aid kindergarten level for government officer</p>
<i>III. In Time</i>	<p>1) Parental leaves: 16 weeks paid leave for maternal leave and 11 days for paternal leave</p> <p>2) Shared child-rearing program provides extra allowance to support a parent who decide not working or part time job to raise their child.</p> <p>3) Others such as supporting aid for a large family with children with at least three children and has one parent not working</p>	<p>1) Maternal leaves: 98 days leave but receive 90 days paid leave 2) Paternal leaves 15 days for government officers</p>

Sources: Caisse nationale des Allocations familiales (2019); OECD Family Database (2020); Labour Protection Act 1998; Social Security Act (No. 4), 2015

Research Results

Comparing the family policy between the two countries, we found that France has a more practical and inclusive policy for all three dimensions. The French family-supporting programs provide several incentives for the families by lowering the parental burdens and cost of living to motivate them to have more children. This might be one of the main factors causing French fertility higher among several OECD members which is consistent with several works (Neyer, 2003; Toulemon, Pailhé & Rossier, 2008; Luci-Greulich & Thévenon, 2013; Greulich, Thévenon & Guergoat-Larivière, 2016; Reibstein, 2017). showing that family policy helps to enhance fertility. On the contrary, Thailand has a few incomprehensive family programs; for instance, in-kind patterns do not provide childcare service for 0-2.5 years, and for in-time patterns, there is 8-day of leave that mothers will not receive paid leave. The different aspects can be comparatively analyzed as follows.

1) Welfare regime and viewpoint of state's role of children: French welfare regime is considered the Conservative one that supports both men and women in the labor market (Oláh, 2015) and has officially employed family policy since 1938 (Letablier, 2003) so that the importance of family is contained in the national public policy. In contrast, Thailand utilizes the productivist welfare capitalism that promotes the citizen to take care of themselves with some government interventions (Saengkanokkul, 2021). France considers children an important issue for nation and state. (Letablier, 2003; Revillard, 2006) Thus, it is a mandate of the French government to invest in and provide aid for children and families considerably. Nonetheless, Thailand considers childbearing as a family issue (Jirawattananon, 2019). The Thai government employs the residual model like Japan and South Korea by focusing on low-income households and the tax exemption method. Recently, both Japan and South Korea have begun to change the welfare system from a residual model to a more universal/welfare state system since their fertility trend has still steadily declined (Muthuta & Laoswatchaikul, 2022). Consequently, Thailand should apply some parts of the state welfare system to generate more practical and comprehensive tools and prioritize the government to be the main actor to drive family policy other than social institutions.

2) Combination of tools that cover a variety of groups and choices: France has family policy patterns for in-cash, in-kind, and in-time that serve a wide range and specifically interested family groups including dual-earner, single-earner, single parent, large family, and low-income families. Furthermore, flexible childcare provision and parental leave can quickly respond the social needs and reduce the parental burdens. These provide several choices to French parents to be able to balance work and family life as well as motivate them to have more children. Unlike France, all three policy patterns are fewer than in Thailand and cannot serve all groups of families. Thus, the Thai government should overhaul the family support programs by providing a variety of tools which is modern and adaptable based on the current family needs to make Thai couples feel that they can tolerate when having new babies especially in-kind programs in a form of childcare provisions and pre-school education as the return of this investment worthwhile (Heckman, 2011).

3) Governance and Confidence: France pays attention to family issues and allows all stakeholders to participate in the intensive debate at the annual family conference making French family and related policies respected and participated by all related agencies including both employers and employees (Collombet, 2021). These methods can achieve good governance and help to reduce conflict among all stakeholders. Also, transparency and social participation will generate the trust in government and the confidence of parents such that when they have children, they will receive the continually support right to their needs (Thévenon, 2016). Nevertheless, Thai family policies lack of stakeholders' participation in policy process so they cannot provide enough confidence to the Thai family.

Conclusion

The low fertility challenge is one of the complex issues that Thailand has confronted at present. It also needs time to formulate feasible measurements to handle this issue. One of the promising methods utilized in several countries is the family policy which can be categorized by Thévenon (2011) into three patterns consisting of in-cash, in-kind, and in-time. Recently, France is one of the highest fertility developed countries and the frontrunner nation to utilize the family policy. Thus, it will be useful to compare the policy patterns of the two nations to understand the differences and policy gaps that Thailand can improve. The study shows that the concept of state welfare influence France government to be the main actor in taking care of children and formulate comprehensive policies to balance work and life with gender equality. Moreover, France can articulately blend the three patterns of family policy to serve a variety of interested groups and provide flexible choices to the family as well as encourage the participation of all related stakeholders that help to increase the parents' confidence in family policy and the need of having the new children. On the other hand, the Thai family policy still falls behind to French policy in the role of the children/policy regime, tools combination, and governance and confidence aspects. Thus, Thailand should change the perspectives on the government's role to children and give priority to the low fertility issue seriously as well as formulate more comprehensive tools with all related agencies' participation. As the low fertility problem is merely the tip of iceberg, to solve this complicated problem needs a lot of involvement of all the stakeholders. The national committee including public and private organizations, academics and NGOs should be established. In addition, public childcare services should be sufficiently provided to serve parents' needs as well as private childcare centers subsidy. Finally, parental leave should be promoted practically with the cooperation of government, employers, and employees. These will potentially help to increase fertility in Thailand efficiently and sustainability in the future.

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