

Maternity Leave Policy for Woman Workforces in Thailand's Formal Sector

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Abstract

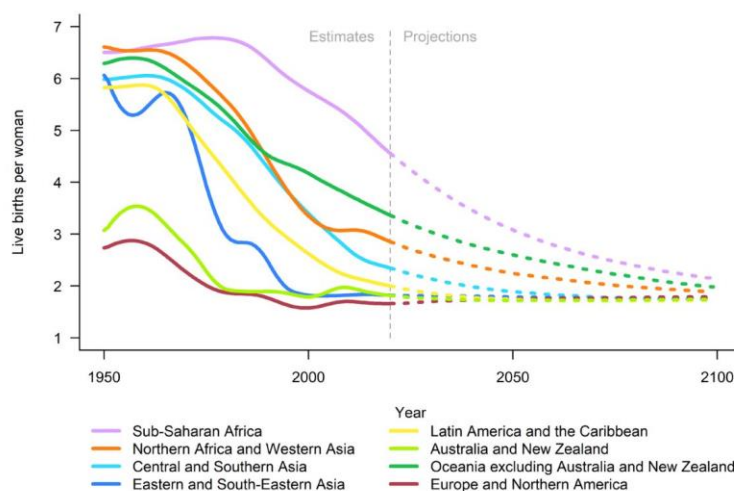
Thailand's total fertility rate has been below the replacement level since the 1990s. The Thai women's workforce, in the formal sectors, faces challenges finding a balance between employment and bearing children. Employers also tend to have unfavorable attitudes toward women who have children, because this affects them financially. The maternity leave policy remains ineffective, which results in the total fertility rate continuing to decline. Policymakers might consider also giving parental leave to the fathers of newborn babies. Maternity leave should be divided into three parts: pre-natal, maternity, and post-maternity leave, during which time women should still continue to be paid so that the expenses of rearing children can be offset. In addition, breastfeeding facilities should be introduced at workplaces to facilitate women's ability to rear their children at work. Finally, having children should not serve as an obstacle to women's career progression.

Keywords: *Fertility, formal female workforce, maternity leave policy*

Background, Global and Thai Fertility, and Thailand's Population Structure

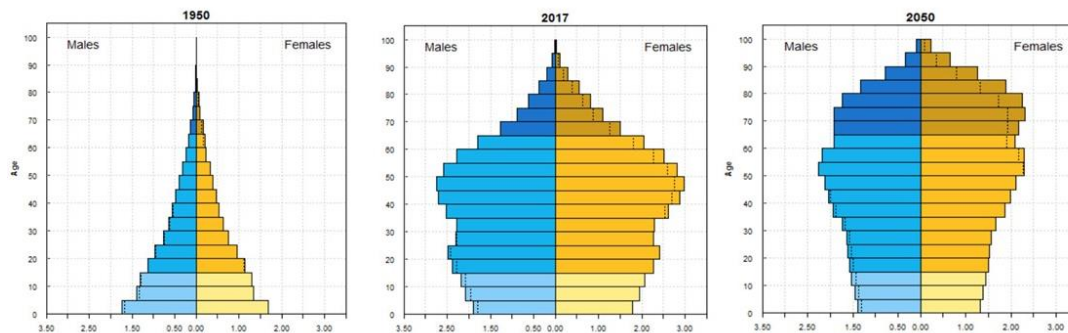
The decline in total fertility has become a trend in many countries, except in southern Africa (United Nations, 2017). Total fertility rates in every region across the globe have experienced downward trends, which are projected to continue until the year 2100. There are no exceptions to such trends, even in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the total fertility rate has been the highest when compared with other regions. Even there, the total fertility rate fell from 6.3 births per woman in 1990 to 4.6 in 2019. Fertility on the global level decreased from 3.2 births per woman in 1990 to 2.5 in 2019. It must be noted that the replacement level is at 2.1 births per woman (United Nations, 2020). The total fertility trend in each region is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Total Fertility Rate by Region, Estimates, and Projections, 1950–2100 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020)



Thailand's total fertility declined dramatically from 6.1 children per woman in 1966 to 1.5 children per woman in 2017 (World Bank, 2018). The decline in total fertility is reflected in the country's population pyramid. The United Nations (2017) report on the past, the present, and the nation's future population demographic pyramid is illustrated in Figure 2. According to this report, Thailand's demographic structure was in a pyramid shape in 1950, signifying a larger young population while the older population was contracted. It is suggested that the pyramid shape graph may have resulted from Thailand's high fertility rate, and also its high mortality rate during that period.

Figure 2 *Thailand's Population Structure, Past, Present, and Future (United Nations, 2017)*



Following the striking 1950 pyramid population structure, a much changed demographic population structure was observed in 2017. As can be seen from the latter data, Thailand's young population was reduced significantly compared to the 1950 pyramid. It can be noted that both the middle and old-age groups expanded. Eventually, the oldest population group started to shrink. This is in line with a constrictive demographic structure, which is a sign of a lower fertility rate. Finally, the United Nations forecast that Thailand's population would decrease and finally stabilize in 2050. This follows since the fertility rate has been continuously low.

According to demographic transition theory, economic development is reflected in declines in both fertility and mortality. In Thailand in the past, public health services were not good; thus, the death rate was high. With such a high death rate, people had to have more children to replace the members of the family who had died. However, presently public health services have improved all over the world. This has resulted in reduced death rates. With lower death rates, people no longer exhibited high levels of fertility, as the need to replace those who died had been reduced. Eventually, such trends would result in shrinkage of the population (Lundquist et al., 2015). Thailand's present demographic structure is in line with the demographic transition assumption. Moreover, it could be anticipated that the size of the labor force entering the Thai labor market would also decline. Stevenson (2012) studied the level of labor supply and tax revenue in the United States, and suggested that there is a relationship between the labor force level and the level of federal tax revenue. Hence, it is possible that labor force shrinkage will challenge Thailand's future tax revenue in the coming years.

The effects of demographic changes also lead to economic growth or decline. Wongboonsin et al. (2005) suggested that high fertility leads to the entry of a greater labor force into the labor market; thus, there are opportunities for economic growth. The effects of labor forces on the growth of Asian economies, including Thailand, has been confirmed by Kajimura's (2020) work. She adopted growth accounting to study the phenomenon. She considered labor input, capital stock, and human capital to verify the relationship between economic growth and labor force related factors. It was suggested that the level of the labor supply rate had a positive effect on economic growth in Thailand and other regions. Hence, it could be concluded that a decline in Thailand's fertility has led to a lower level of labor supply to the labor market, which eventually will affect the country's economic growth.

In this paper, possible causes and effects on the nation's low fertility will be reviewed, especially the factors influencing participation of the female workforce in the formal sector. Possible policy recommendations will be offered at the end of the paper.

Possible Causes of Low Fertility with a Focus on Working Parents

Urbanization

The childbearing rate in rural areas is much higher than that in urban areas. This is due to the differences in the working styles between those who reside in each respective area. More specifically, urbanites tend to spend more of their time at their workplaces and less time at home. Those who are in rural areas are also more likely to participate in the agricultural sector. Thus, parents hope that they will gain benefits from having more children to help them carry out their work (Soriano, 1991). To date, no official study with an explicit focus on Thailand has been conducted regarding this matter. However, Feng and Andrew (2008) revealed that in the People's Republic of China in the year 2000, life expectancy of their rural population was six years less than that of people in urban areas. This statistic was reflected in the fertility rate. Xiaodong (2019) reported a significant gap in the fertility rate between people in rural and urban areas. For instance, the average Chinese fertility rate was estimated at two children per woman, but in most urbanized Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, the fertility rate was 0.7 children per woman.

There is, however, a lowering of the fertility rate in rural areas (Sasiwonsaroj et al., 2020). A possible cause of this is the transformation of family arrangements. Urbanization has played an essential role in leading to different family arrangements beginning to appear. Many Thai families have changed from being extended families to nuclear families; this is because the younger generation tends to migrate from their hometowns to work in urban areas. As a result, the elderly population is abandoned, and the younger generation raises their families elsewhere, resulting in smaller family sizes (Shoichiro, 1997).

Having children consumes a great deal of parents' time in order to care for them. Receiving family members' support, such as parents and grandparents, would influence fertility intentions (Snopkowski & Sear, 2013). For example, Luo and Mao (2014) found that women expressed the opinion that they would have higher fertility intentions if more help was available to mothers to take care of their children.

Gender Roles in the Family

There is also an inverse relationship when it comes to the increase of individual participation in the labor market. More specifically, an increase in employment of married women has resulted in lower total fertility numbers compared with those applicable to wives who were not employed (Scanzoni, 1975; Soriano, 1991). Likewise, the latter tended to have more children than the former. Hakim (2003) categorized women into three groups: work-focused, home-focused, and combine-focused. She suggested that women who were work-focused—in other words, women who were in the workforce—tended to have lower fertility intentions than those who were home-focused or combine-focused. Besides Hakim (2003), McQuillan et al. (2015) also found that women employed in part-time jobs had lower fertility intentions. However, they did not find a relationship between women who were employed full-time and their fertility intentions. Eguchi et al. (2016) conducted a study in Japan. Their results revealed that the intentions for dual-earner couples to have additional children increased when the men were active in the labor market. However, no psychosocial factors were associated with women's intentions. A study in South Korea also affirmed that the gendered division of work influenced fertility intentions. Park and Cho (2011) revealed that women who were stay-at-home mothers had higher fertility intentions for a second child than women who had full-time employment.

Even though women's participation in labor markets is not a new phenomenon, there have been changes in the family institution. The trend has been away from male domination, with accompanying female subordination, to one featuring more female domination (Soriano, 1991). In the past, most

women had less participation in the labor market because they were responsible for domestic work and taking care of their children (Scanzoni, 1975). The increase in the number of women participating in the labor market has shown a direct correlation with the decline in total fertility in many countries such as Canada, the United States of America, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, and many more (Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000; Soriano, 1991; Van Den & Maertens, 2015). This is because women in the labor market are more likely to postpone motherhood than those who are not in the labor market (Davia & Legazpe, 2014). After a certain period, these women tend to feel that they are too old to have a child. Hence, they ultimately decide not to have offspring (Billingsley & Ferrarini, 2014; Fehr & Ujhelyiova, 2013). However, male labor force participation has had an opposite effect on fertility; that is, there would be a decline in fertility when male participation in the labor market was reduced (Raymo & Shibata, 2017).

When a couple is living together, they need to have an agreement on the division of labor at home. The division of labor in the family refers to the allocation of household chores between the husband and the wife, but this excludes paid work in companies where husband and wife are working formally. (Soriano, 1991). Like family support, the division of labor in the family is how family members share domestic tasks. Billingsley and Ferrarini (2014) also found that family support significantly affected fertility intentions across European countries. In addition to family members' support, the hours of shared housework between husband and wife played an essential role in the fertility decision. Thus, the decision to have a second child would be expected to increase according to the husband's shared housework and willingness to participate in childcare (Park et al., 2010).

Higher Education Attainment and the Delay in Childbearing

The educational level attained plays an important role when it comes to an individual's fertility intentions. In Thailand, Kaewbuadee and Pothisiri (2019) found that the woman's level of education had negative effects on the number of children born. Their finding is similar to the trends in most other countries. Those women who attained a higher level of education tended to be more modernized. In contrast, those who were unable to attain a high level of education tended to behave more traditionally. As a result, those women who attained a higher level of education were more likely to find it easier to access a fulfilling career path, which would result in higher economic benefits to society (Scanzoni, 1975; Soriano, 1991). Those holding higher educational level qualifications tend to have better incomes. Therefore, a population with a higher educational level might not have higher fertility intentions if they did not feel that having children was worthwhile. Evidence along these lines can be found in many European countries. Highly educated women are exposed to life-course paths that compete with childbearing, so they do not necessarily plan to have larger family sizes than less educated women (Hayford, 2009; Heiland et al., 2008; Mills et al., 2008). Some women in high-status occupations may intend to have fewer children from the beginning of their reproductive careers (Friedman et al., 1994), while others may decide later on to forgo having some of the children they had initially planned to have during their reproductive careers (Lacovou & Tavares, 2011). Additionally, better-educated women are more likely to postpone the idea of having children than less educated women (Heaton et al., 1999; Schoen et al., 1999). Consequently, they are more likely to have fewer children than they had initially intended.

In summary, the new Thai generation's living arrangement has shifted from the extended family to the nuclear family. The new generation is pursuing their careers mainly in urban areas. Thus, they migrate to the cities and have smaller families—the higher education attainments among women allows them to pursue higher career development aspirations. Women's participation in the labor market is not a new norm. The proportion of women who are working full-time keeps increasing over time. Gendered division of labor becomes an issue when two people are living together as a couple. A wife is less likely to plan for a high number of pregnancies if her husband does not have a role in the housework, for

raising a newborn baby consumes much time. The grandparents would have a role in supporting the new generation to take care of their children if they lived in an extended family arrangement. Unfortunately, this is not the case since living arrangements have changed. Hence, Thailand's total fertility rate keeps declining to below the replacement level.

Women Labor Force Characteristics

During the first decade of the 21st century, the percentage of Thai women's participation in the labor market was steady. According to the International Labour Organization (2013), 60% to 62% of Thai women participated in Thailand's labor market. At the same time, Thai men's labor market participation was 20% higher on average. The trend of women's labor force participation in the formal sector compared to the informal sector has been changing slightly every year. For example, the data from Quarter 1 of the 2006 Thai labor force survey revealed that the ratio of women participating in the formal sector compared to the informal sector was 51:49 (National Statistical Office, 2006). The data from Quarter 1 of 2010 showed a ratio of 49:51 (National Statistical Office, 2010). Finally, in Quarter 4 of 2020, a ratio of 51:49 was reported when comparing women's labor force participating in the formal sector compared to the informal sector (National Statistical Office, 2020). Moreover, the overall working trend in Thailand's labor market has been moving away from the informal sector and toward the formal sector. In reflection of this trend, Buddhari and Rugpentum (2019) revealed that the proportion of the labor force who do not insure themselves under the Social Security scheme fell from 78% in 2002 to 69% in 2018.

Regarding the women labor force's educational attainments, their educational level has improved dramatically compared to the past. A comparison of women's labor force education attainment between 2006 and 2020 showed that the percentage of women labor force who had completed secondary school increased from 48.6% to 53.4%, while those who completed high school increased from 57.5% to 75.5% (National Statistical Office, 2006, 2020). Lastly, around 70% of the female labor force in the labor market is married (Digital Government Development Agency, 2017).

Maternity Leave Policy

Legislated Maternity/Parental Leave and Benefits

Maternity leave is a leave of absence given to pregnant mothers who will give birth, while parental leave is a leave of absence given to the father of a child. The Labor Protection Act. B.E. 2541 (1998), Chapter 3, Section 41 (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 1998) indicated that only female employees would be able to take maternity leave for a period not exceeding 90 days. However, this kind of leave did not apply to men who were fathers of newborn babies. In addition to leave time, the Labor Protection Act. B.E. 2541 (1998), Chapter 5, Section 59 (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 1998) states that "the mother is entitled to receive her full salary during her maternity leave for a period not exceeding forty-five days." In other words, all employees who are mothers of newborns are entitled to receive their maternity leave with pay for forty-five days, and an additional forty-five days without pay.

Parental leave is when the father of a child who will be born is given leave of absence. Parental leave is applicable to government officers only. Moreover, those government officers who are the fathers of a child are eligible to apply for leave for a period not exceeding fifteen consecutive days. This parental leave entitlement is stated in the Regulations of the Office of the Prime Minister on Government Officer Leave B.E. 2555 (2012), Chapter 3, Section 20. As a precaution, the person in authority may request evidence to approve such leave (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 2013).

According to Pattarakikusol and NaRanong (2020), the current policies on maternity leave and parental leave are not very effective. The leave would not augment the desire to have additional babies unless it is adjusted. In addition to maternity leave, post-maternity leave is also vital to creating fertility intentions, since mothers need to take care of their newborn babies. As previously mentioned,

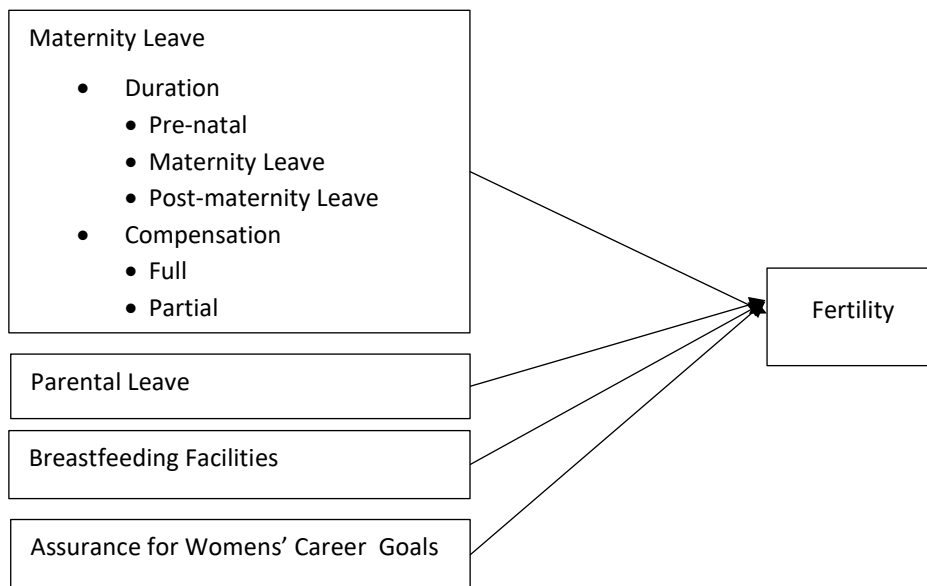
employers do not have a favorable attitude toward women's pregnancies since they raise the cost of employment. However, there are some efforts to provide childcare facilities within workplaces to maintain mothers' labor market participation. This has not been widely implemented across the nation. Although there is empirical evidence that making it easier for working mothers to raise their children in the workplace does not weaken their work performance, there are still issues in facilitating child rearing by working women in Thailand's workplaces (Yimyam et al., 2012).

There are trade-offs in providing maternity leave to the female labor force. Maternity leave is good for the economy. There is empirical evidence in Europe that maternity leave can function to keep women in the labor market, resulting in a lower unemployment rate (Ruhm, 1998). On the contrary, there are some extra costs incurred when female employees take maternity leave, such as hiring new temporary staff during the leave, and salary costs paid to the women during their leave. As a result, employers tend to have unfavorable attitudes toward female employees (Akhtar & Khan, 2020)

Not all females in the labor market benefit from maternity leave, but only the female labor force in the formal sector enjoy such benefits. A consequence of any extension of maternity leave length is that it improves women's fertility intentions. For example, a study in Switzerland revealed the positive impact of extending maternity leave length on fertility planning (Barbos & Milovanska-Farrington, 2019). In Australia, the number of planned children increased by 16% when an 18-week paid maternity leave policy was announced (Bassford & Fisher, 2020).

In Thailand, where the total fertility rate has continued to decrease annually, the maternity leave policy has not changed for decades. Figure 3 gives the framework for maternity leave, which relates to the female workforce in the formal sector. Improvements in the factors involved may ensure the fertility level among women workforces in the formal sector does not fall far behind the replacement level.

Figure 3 Framework for Maternity Leave Relates and Womens' Workforces in the Formal Sector



Maternity Leave and Compensation

At the present moment, the length of maternity leave is only 90 days. During this period, women will only be paid for a period of 45 days. This is an economic constraint that impacts womens' decisions to have children, making these decisions more difficult. Apart from the issue of paid salary during a woman's maternity leave, pre-natal and post-maternity leave periods are also important factors in

helping them to decide to have children. Women who are about to give birth may have to visit their doctors once a week or once every two weeks. Frequent leave may impact their career path and progression. Without pre-natal leave, it makes it more difficult for them to obtain permission to leave. There are some problems with post-maternity leave, which is leave that would occur after maternity leave (90 days). If the mother does not live in an extended family who can help her care for the child, there would be additional childcare expenses. In addition, during the first year of the child's life, there are numerous vaccines that the child has to receive at a hospital or clinic on a monthly basis. As a result, the mother will have to obtain leave from her work. Hence, if the mother has no access to such leaves, this may impact her finances as well as her future career path. Hence, the factors involving the duration of leave impact women's fertility intentions.

Parental Leave (Applicable to Males)

Urbanization results in changes in living arrangements. More of the younger generation move to live in the cities. Apart from the fact that the form of families has changed from extended to nuclear, there is less family support in terms of grandparents helping to rear newborns. Given the fact that there is no parental leave at the current moment (with the exception of 15 days for civil servants), this may lead to lower fertility intentions among women. Hence, the introduction of parental leave would mean that women would receive help in rearing the newborn child. This in turn would lead to higher fertility rates.

Breastfeeding Facilities

Even though studies have shown that rearing children at the workplace may not impact a woman's work performance, companies still do not tend to support the creation of breastfeeding facilities at work. There are various reasons for this. Companies may not be aware of the need or importance of such facilities. However, breastfeeding facilities may help reduce women's economic constraints, which is an important factor in women's fertility intentions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Thailand's total fertility rate is far behind the replacement level. This means that there is an expectation of shrinkage of the labor force in the labor market. It is possible that this decline in the labor force could lead to low or negative economic growth in the future, which would create issues with government revenues.

According to literature worldwide, fertility decline among working parents is influenced by various factors. Urbanization seems to be the starting point. Urbanization forces the younger generation to move to the city for work. As a result, the extended family arrangement is giving way to the nuclear family. This means that grandparents' support when the mother is giving birth is no longer readily available. The norm of a male dominator and female subordinate is also a factor in determining fertility rates, as husbands do not feel that they have to do any housework. The pressures of both a full-time job and housework impact the wife's fertility decision. The opportunities to access higher education among Thai women allow them to aim for a more fulfilling life, and this results in delays to becoming pregnant. In some cases, women remain single by choice because they feel that they do not need to be dependent on males.

The Thai maternity leave policy does not satisfy mothers because the length of the leave time is too short for a nuclear family that is comprised of only a husband and a wife. Additional impediments are that pre-natal leave to visit the doctor may not be easy to obtain, maternity leave with full pay is for a limited period, and the childcare service costs are high. Thus, younger couples choose to reduce their family size or postpone pregnancies. After giving birth, breastfeeding facilities may not be available at the work site, which is an important factor in women's fertility intentions.

Today, women have greater access to education. Thus, they have opportunities to think about their career goals. Better entitlements need to be given in regards to women's pre-natal leave, maternity leave, and post-maternity leave in order to allow these aspirations to be met. This is an important factor that policymakers need to address. Women need access to such leave to ensure that there are minimal negative impacts on their career paths or on their future in the company.

The government should reconsider maternity leave and parental leave policies if they wish to encourage the younger generation to increase their fertility. Parental leave should be granted to fathers to support mothers in taking care of newborn babies. Maternity leave policies—for pre-natal, maternity, and post-maternity leaves, along with compensation rates—should be adjusted. The attitudes of the employers toward mothers should be improved. Breastfeeding facilities should be built in the workplace, and having babies should not prevent women from attaining their career goals.

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