

Summary Research Report

# Family-friendly Policies in the Workplace:

The current situation, needs and  
recommendations for China



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Cover Photo: A worker holds her child in her workplace in Yingde, Guangdong, China.

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China Population Association and UNICEF Office for China

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<sup>1</sup>Research Report on Family-friendly Policies in the Workplace: The Current Situation and Recommendations, March 2022, China Population Association.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a growing consensus among governments, private and public sector agencies, and community leaders about the need to invest in a care economy that is supportive of the needs of young working families. The need for family-friendly policies is increasingly recognized as being essential to ensure parents and families have adequate resources, services and finances to care for their infants and young children, simultaneously contributing to their overall productivity and skills improvement. Many of the policies aimed at reconciling the work and family life of workers are enshrined in the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions with key stipulations on parental leave, breastfeeding breaks and non-discrimination in the workplace<sup>2</sup>. These policies have also been integrated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5.4 on valuing, and supporting unpaid care and domestic work, and in SDG 8.5 on achieving productive employment and decent work.

Research has shown that investing in family-friendly policies is good for families, businesses, and economies<sup>3</sup>. For families, it ensures children are healthier and better-prepared to succeed in education. For businesses, it increases productivity, improves employee retention, and lowers recruitment costs. For economies, it contributes to greater gender equality, supports sustainable development, and stimulates economic growth. With its objective of protecting and promoting child rights, UNICEF advocates for the provision of adequate parental leave, paid breastfeeding breaks, affordable, accessible and quality childcare, and child benefits to all families.

Figure 1. Transformational shifts and policies for family-friendly workplaces



<sup>2</sup>Family-friendly Policies: a Global Survey of Business Policy, accessed April 25, 2022, UNICEF

<sup>3</sup>Redesigning the Workplace to be Family-friendly: What Governments and Businesses Can Do, accessed April 25, 2022, UNICEF.

In order to initiate change and develop recommendations for strengthening family-friendly workplace practices in China, UNICEF supported this exploratory research to document the current status of implementation of family-friendly policies in selected industries in China. The research focused on three key dimensions related to family-friendly workplaces: **time, services and finances**. Referencing national survey data from 2019<sup>4</sup>, an analysis of the childcare situation of children aged 0-2 years was conducted, along with an assessment of relevant childcare policies and practices. Field interviews with eight businesses were carried out to better understand existing family-friendly practices in the workplace, as well as the relevant issues and challenges in the implementation of current policies.

The research demonstrated that working mothers of children aged 0-2 years valued family-friendly policies in the workplace. Moreover, while the core concepts on family-friendly policies have been incorporated into institutional and policy frameworks, the implementation in the workplace needs to be further strengthened. Several challenges were identified during the research. For example, while time-related support policies are widely available, they need to be further expanded; service-related support policies are relatively recent and have low coverage; financial support policies remain inadequate and have narrow coverage; and businesses lack incentives to establish family-friendly workplaces. To strengthen the establishment of family-friendly workplaces in China, governments and businesses need to promote the core concepts on family-friendly workplaces, and devise guidance and standards to ensure equitable access and benefits among all workers, especially parents.

The findings of this research serve as a starting point to understand the varying needs of working parents and families, expand government policies related to family-friendly workplaces, and support businesses to improve their implementation. In addition, the research findings can serve as a valuable case study for the introduction, implementation and improvement of family-friendly policies globally.



**Female workers assembling toy products on an assembly line in Yingde, Guangdong Province**

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<sup>4</sup>The National Population and Family Dynamics Monitoring Survey is periodically conducted by the government to understand changing population trends. In 2019, the survey was organized by the National Health Commission and Conducted by the China Population and Development Research Center. Adopting a stratified, three-stage, probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling method, the survey targeted women aged 15-49 years across China's 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. 300 counties were selected across the country, with a sample size of 60,000 households.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

For societies and economies to thrive, governments and businesses need to support workers through family-friendly policies as they carry and raise children from pregnancy to school age<sup>5</sup>. Family-friendly policies help to balance work and family life, and typically provide three types of essential resources needed by parents and caregivers of infants and young children: time, services and finances<sup>6</sup>. While some governments and businesses have made strides to establish family-friendly policies, such as paid parental leave, breastfeeding breaks, flexible work arrangements and quality childcare services, this is not yet a reality for most parents around the world.

Evidence from countries around the world have demonstrated that implementing family-friendly policies in the workplace not only supports better care of infants and young children, reduces parental pressures, and improves overall happiness of families, it also improves skills development and retention of workers, increases work efficiency, and boosts social cohesion. Thus, implementation of family-friendly policies in the workplace is an important investment in socioeconomic development of a country, and necessitates collective action from governments, businesses, and families.

With an emphasis on quality and equitable social development, and to cope with the challenges brought about by a low birth rate and an ageing population, the Government of China has promoted the development of family-friendly policies through laws and regulations and emphasized the important role of businesses. Most recently, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and various departments published the *Implementation Plan to Actively Respond to Population Aging and the Construction of Childcare Facilities* during the 14th Five-Year Plan in June 2021, which recommended industrial parks, businesses and other entities to establish, renovate and expand childcare facilities, and extend childcare services to the public. Then in July 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the *Decision on Optimizing the Family Planning Policy to Promote Long-term Balanced Population Development*, which specified that family-friendly policies are an important social responsibility of employers; employers are encouraged to formulate policies that help employees balance work and family life; flexible leave and work arrangements should be devised to support working parents to care for their infants and young children.

To ensure every child has a good start to life and to protect the interests of families and employees in China, this exploratory research on family-friendly policies in the workplace focused on gathering and analyzing data on employees engaged in formal full-time employment. Moreover, this research was timely to identify key issues and challenges, clarify future policy direction, provide recommendations for policymakers and businesses to strengthen implementation, and compile evidence for academia to conduct further research.

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<sup>5</sup>Family-friendly Policies: Redesigning the Workplace of the Future, accessed April 25, 2022, UNICEF.

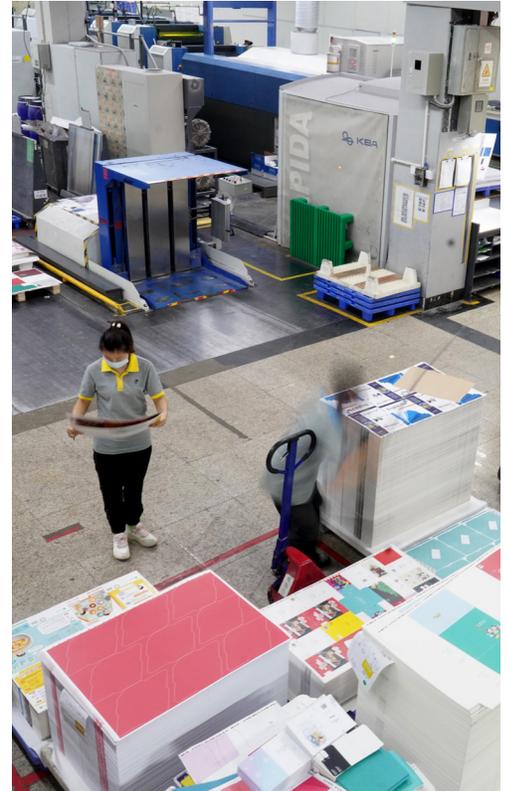
<sup>6</sup>Family-Friendly Policies: Handbook for Business, June 2021, UNICEF.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used during the research, including desk research, policy review, data analysis and field research. To ensure comprehensive desk research, existing international and domestic literature on family-friendly policies in the workplace were reviewed to understand emerging trends and realities, including statutory policy documents issued by government agencies at different levels in China (see Table 4 in the Annex). In addition, key findings from the evaluation of the two-child policy conducted by the CPA in 2018 were included in the analysis. During the policy review, laws, policies and regulations at the national, provincial and municipal levels relevant to family-friendly workplaces were summarized according to the three dimensions of time, services and finances, including an analysis of the current policy implementation.

Relevant data from the 2019 National Population and Family Dynamics Monitoring Survey (hereinafter referred to as the 2019 Survey) were identified and analyzed to understand the needs for family-friendly policies in the workplace in China. Data on female employees who gave birth and had at least one child aged 0-2 years were extracted from the 2019 survey to investigate existing family-friendly policies and determine the unmet needs.

Exploratory field research was conducted with eight businesses<sup>7</sup> in Beijing, Nanjing, Shenzhen and Foshan, including state-owned enterprises, private enterprises and wholly foreign-owned enterprises in various sectors such as pharmaceutical research, development and manufacturing, new energy battery and automobile manufacturing, and architectural design. The composition of the workforce of the eight businesses ranged in gender, age, education, location and salary, but were primarily made up of young and middle-aged employees (see Table 3 in Annex). The research team inspected the work environment of the businesses, organized group discussions and one-on-one interviews with human resource managers and employees to understand the current implementation and challenges of family-friendly policies, the existing benefits offered to employees, as well as the unmet needs and recommendations for improving these policies.



**A female worker who recently returned from maternity leave is assigned an easier task in Dongguan, Guangdong Province.**  
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<sup>7</sup>The eight businesses voluntarily participated in the field research. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team had limited access to a representative sample of businesses. However, the findings of the field research still provide important conclusions and insights worthy of further investigation.

## 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Family-friendly policies should be designed to provide parents and caregivers with more family time, supportive services and finances. This section presents the need for family-friendly policies among working mothers, and assesses the implementation of existing family-friendly policies in the workplace in China based on the three key dimensions of time, services and finances (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The three dimensions of support policies

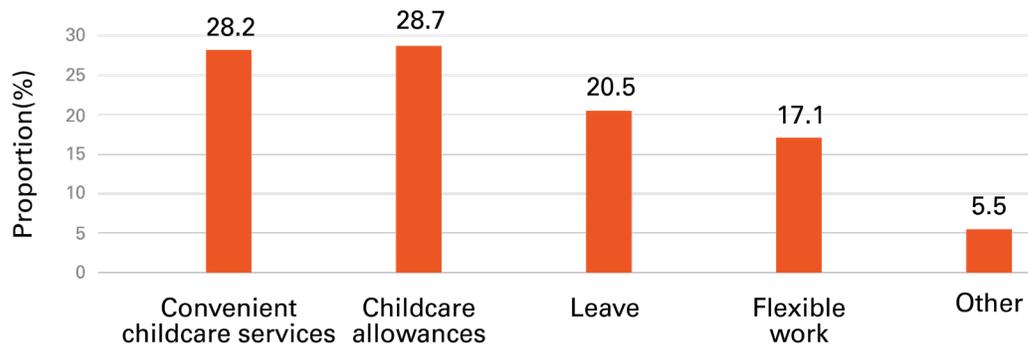


### 3.1 CURRENT POLICIES

Among women surveyed in the 2019 survey, many expressed needs for family-friendly policies in the workplace. Overall, respondents expressed similar needs for convenient childcare services (28.2 per cent), childcare allowances (28.7 per cent), leave (20.5 per cent) and flexible work (17.1 per cent), though there were slightly higher demands for service-oriented and financial support policies. In contrast, when the data was disaggregated by migration status, the results revealed that migrant workers expressed higher needs for time-related support policies but lower needs for financial support policies. This is likely because migrant workers generally do not live in the same city as their families (who would have provided childcare support) or they had to leave their children behind in their hometowns. Thus, they are eager to have flexible leave and work to spend more time with their infants and young children.

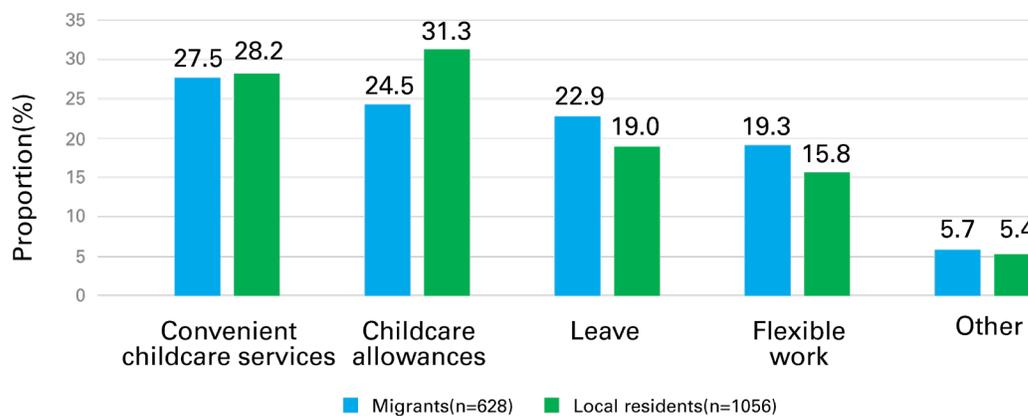
Moreover, it was found that workers with lower educational attainment expressed significant higher needs for service-oriented and financial support policies and lower needs for time-related policies. This may imply that workers with low educational attainment tend to have a greater desire for professional childcare services and have a more pressing need to share the cost of childcare.

Figure 3. Family-friendly policies most wanted by working mothers of children aged 0-2 years (2019, N=1,684)



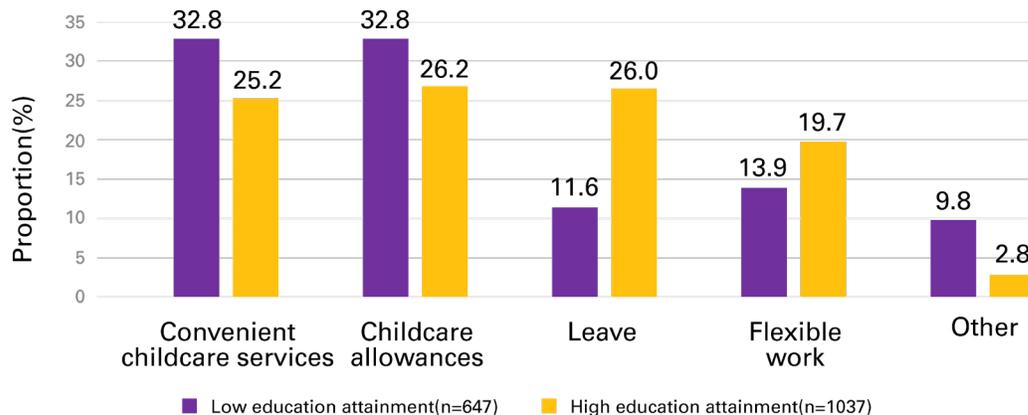
Note: 1. Leave refers to maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave; 2. Convenient childcare services most closely relates to ease of access rather than cost and quality; 3. Data extracted from the 2019 National Population and Family Dynamics Monitoring Survey.

Figure 4. Family-friendly policies most wanted by working mothers of children aged 0-2 years by migration status (2019, N=1,684)



Note: 1. Leave refers to maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave; 2. Convenient childcare services most closely relates to ease of access rather than cost and quality; 3. Data extracted from the 2019 National Population and Family Dynamics Monitoring Survey.

Figure 5. Family-friendly policies most wanted by working mothers of children aged 0-2 years by education level (2019, N=1,684)



Note: Low education attainment refers to senior secondary education and below, and high education attainment refers to college education and above.

## 3.2 Time-related Support Policies

### 3.2.1 Policy Review

With regard to time-related support policies, maternity-related leave has been an important component of labour protection and family planning in China. These policies have been continuously improved by the national and local governments. Notably, the *Special Regulations on Labour Protection for Female Employees* issued in 2012 stipulates **pregnant employees may attend check-ups during work hours without using leave**; pregnant employees are legally entitled to 98 days of maternity leave, with additional entitlements for different circumstances (e.g., complications during childbirth); and **female employees with infants aged 0-23 months should be allotted a one-hour breastfeeding break per day**.

With the implementation of the universal two-child policy and the recently introduced three-child policy, **most provinces have revised policy documents to further extend the length of maternity and paternity leave** (see Table 2 in Annex). In addition, the revision of the *Population and Family Planning Law* in 2021 led to the **legal inclusion and roll-out of parental leave** in China, with 30 provinces integrating parental leave into their population and family planning regulations.

To ensure infants and young children receive adequate care, the General Office of the State Council **encouraged flexible leave and work arrangements for parents of infants and young children** in 2019 as stated in the *Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Development of Care Services for Infants and Young Children under Three*. Since 2020, flexible work arrangements, including working from home and telecommuting, have become routine as a COVID-19 prevention and control measure. During the pandemic, Beijing and other provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions also introduced policies to encourage employers to adopt flexible arrangements for working parents with children taking online classes at home due to school closures.

Table 1. Types of maternity-related leave in China

	Description
<b>Maternity leave</b>	Leave entitlement of pregnant employees during the prenatal, childbirth and postnatal periods. It protects the health of mothers and newborns, and provides job security for mothers.
<b>Paternity leave</b>	Leave entitlement of working fathers to take care of their wives and newborns. It promotes gender equality and protects the interests of children.
<b>Parental leave</b>	Leave entitlement of both parents to care for infants and young children aged 0-3 years (in some cases, children aged 0-6 years years). It promotes equal work opportunities and sharing of family responsibilities.

### 3.2.2 The Current Situation

According to data from the 2019 survey, 17 per cent of working mothers with children born after 2009 did not use their full maternity leave. In comparison, nearly 31 per cent of their spouses did not use their full paternity leave.

### 3.2.3 Field Interview Findings

The field research revealed that all eight businesses surveyed **actively implemented statutory maternity-related leave and abided by relevant labour protection policies for women during pregnancy and breastfeeding**. Many employers made temporary adjustments to meet the needs of pregnant employees, such as redistributing responsibilities, reducing workload, and eliminating overtime. However, **many human resource managers shared that implementing and extending maternity-related leave significantly increased labour costs and financial pressures**. For example, when employees take maternity-related leave, businesses need to make internal adjustments or hire temporary staff to fill the vacant roles. Moreover, relevant laws and regulations do not clearly stipulate how maternity benefits should be provided during the extended maternity leave period. If this is to be borne by the employer, it will further increase the costs to businesses.

Field research also found the **current time-related support policies do not adequately safeguard women's income and career development**. While maternity insurance guarantees the base wages of employees, performance-related bonuses and overtime pay accounted for a relatively high proportion of their total remuneration. Thus, many female employees experienced a significant drop in wages during their maternity leave. As women are often expected to be the main caregiver of children in China, they are more likely to interrupt their careers than their husbands and take on significant childcare responsibilities. Accordingly, female employees often faced increased challenges in balancing work and caregiving responsibilities when they return to work. Some male employees expressed their worry that extended leave would affect their overall income and career advancement, and thus chose to take less paternity leave, making it difficult for them to equally participate in childcare.

**Most businesses surveyed provided flexible leave policies but there was no standardized flexible work arrangement.** During interviews, employees and managers mentioned three types of flexible leave and work arrangements: adjusted work hours to facilitate pick-up and drop-off of school children and avoid commuting during peak hours; flexible leave to take care of children or deal with urgent matters at home, and time-off in lieu of overtime; and remote work and telecommuting. As most of the businesses surveyed were in the manufacturing sector, remote work and telecommuting was not a possibility. While flexible leave policies were in place at most businesses, employees working on production lines or in difficult-to-fill positions expressed challenges in using flexible leave.

## 3.3 Service-oriented Support Policies

### 3.3.1 Policy Review

The care and nurturing of infants and young children is one of the top social issues in China. In support of service-oriented policies, particularly breastfeeding policies, the National Health and Family Planning Commission, NDRC and 10 other departments jointly issued the *Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Establishment of Maternal and Child Facilities* in 2016 to encourage more public spaces and workplaces to **establish mother-baby rooms or breastfeeding rooms**, offering privacy for breastfeeding mothers. The *Guiding Opinions* required the establishment of mother-baby rooms that are at least ten square meters in public spaces over 10,000 square meters, with a daily people flow exceeding 10,000, and where breastfeeding mothers and babies visit frequently. By the end of 2020, most major airports, train stations, supermarkets, hospitals and workplaces across the country were equipped with mother-baby rooms or breastfeeding rooms.

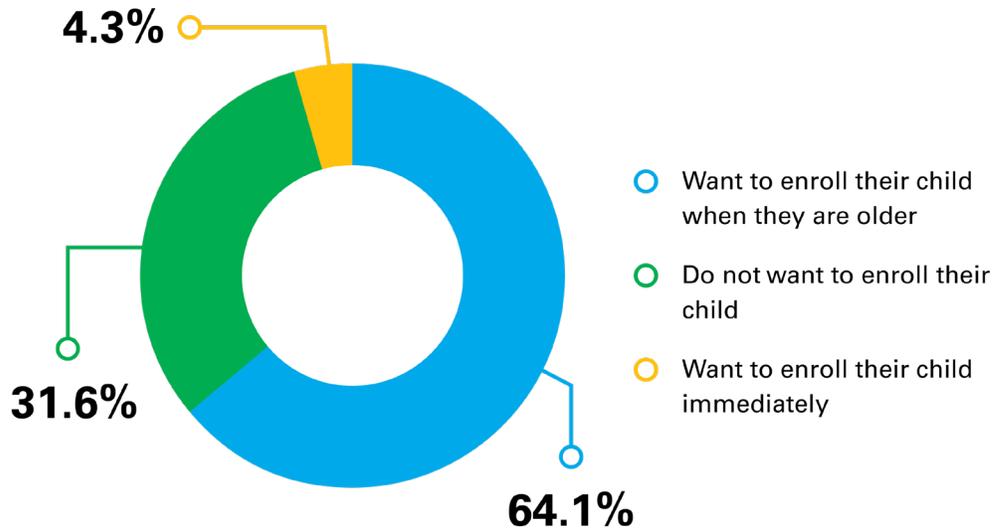
The government has also strengthened its policy formulation on childcare service provision. To improve the availability of childcare services, the *14th Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2021-2025)* calls for the **number of childcare facilities for children aged 0-3 years to increase from 1.8 per 1,000 population in 2020 to 4.5 per 1,000 population in 2025**. Moreover, the *Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Care Services for Children and the Elderly in 2020* **called on employers in large-scale industrial parks to establish childcare facilities for employees and nearby residents**. Some provinces have also emphasized the critical role of employers in providing childcare services in the workplace, but without any concrete incentives for employers.

### 3.3.2 The Current Situation

The 2019 survey revealed that among the 1,500 village/neighborhood committees surveyed, 20.1 per cent indicated they had childcare institutions or nursery classes within kindergartens in their villages/neighborhoods, and 38.5 per cent indicated they did not have kindergartens in their villages/neighborhoods. It is evident that very few children aged 0-2 years in China have received professional childcare.

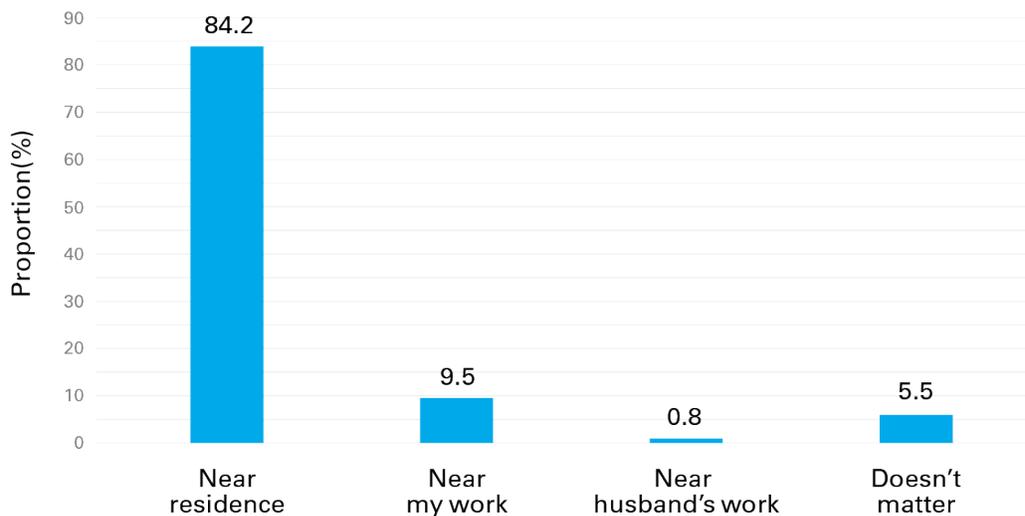
With limited childcare options, many working parents rely on the support from their families to balance work and life responsibilities. According to the 2019 survey, **only 2.2 per cent of working mothers enrolled their children aged 0-2 years in childcare institutions**, and 6.2 per cent enrolled their children in kindergarten early at age 2. The remaining **91.6 per cent did not enroll their children aged 0-2 years in childcare institutions**, and the vast majority of these children were cared for by family members when the mothers returned to work. 64.1 per cent of these working mothers wanted to enroll their children in childcare institutions when they were older, while 4.3 per cent wanted to enroll their children immediately. Various explanations were given as to why they have not enrolled their children. Opposition from family members who thought the child was too young (32 per cent) and childcare institutions denying enrollment due to child's young age (28 per cent) were the most common. Others indicated there were no childcare institutions nearby (12 per cent), the security measures of childcare institutions were not reliable (9 per cent), the childcare fees were high (5 per cent), and the conditions of childcare institutions were poor (7 per cent).

Figure 6. Proportion of mothers who want to enroll their child in childcare institutions (2019, N=1545)



When asked about the desired location, **84.2 per cent of mothers preferred childcare institutions close to their residence**. Interestingly, 9.5 per cent preferred childcare institutions close to their work, while only 0.8 per cent preferred childcare institutions close to their husband's work. This may imply that husbands are less often responsible for picking children up from childcare. More in-depth analysis of gender roles in childcare needs to be explored.

Figure 7. Desired location of childcare institutions among mothers who have not enrolled their children (2019, N=1,125)



### 3.3.3 Field Interview Findings

**Six businesses surveyed had standardized mother-baby rooms or breastfeeding rooms, and allowed one hour of breastfeeding break each day.**

The overall utilization of mother-baby rooms or breastfeeding rooms was relatively good. About 10 square meter in size, these rooms were equipped with refrigerators, sofas and other equipment. Some working mothers did not use breastfeeding breaks as their infants were left in the care of family in their hometowns. In some instances, female employees were able to use the accumulated hours as flexible leave.

**Five businesses surveyed were unwilling to provide childcare services.**

One business in Beijing set up a childcare space in the office, and services were delivered by professional staff of a childcare institution. The human resource manager stated that this benefit was valued by employees, helped attract quality talent and contributed to reducing staff turnover. Two businesses in Nanjing explored different models of providing childcare services. One established a partnership with a nearby kindergarten to support the high costs of kindergarten enrollment for their employees' children. The other explored the construction of a childcare institution for their factory workers but failed to get approvals from government departments. Most businesses expressed significant obstacles in providing childcare services, including difficulties getting relevant approvals from government departments for the construction of childcare facilities; challenges in the sustainability of childcare facilities due to high investment and operating costs; and lack of policy regulations for employer-supported childcare services on safety standards, facility management, staffing, teacher qualification and food safety standards of childcare facilities.

"I gave birth in 2015 and breastfed my infant for 10 months. For convenience, we rented a place about 10 minutes from my work. With the one-hour breastfeeding break, I was able to go home at noon to feed my infant, and did not have to find a place in the office to pump breast milk. My work established a mother-baby room in 2016, and now my colleagues can pump breast milk with privacy and without stress."

– A worker from one of the eight businesses surveyed during the field research



**A female employee working in a factory in Dongguan, Guangdong Province**

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"I really wish there was a childcare institution near my work. This way when I go to work, I can visit my child from time to time, but it won't significantly interrupt my work. Ideally, childcare institutions can be established near or in the workplace where the childcare fees are lower. But the most important thing is to feel reassured by the childcare professionals taking care of our children."

– A worker from one of the eight businesses surveyed during the field research

## 3.4 Financial Support Policies

### 3.4.1 Policy Review

To reduce the burden of childcare and early education costs, the State Council issued the *Interim Measures for Special Additional Deductions for Individual Income Tax* in December 2018, which stipulated **tax deductions for children's education at RMB 1,000 per child aged 6 years and above each month**. In 2020, this deduction was further extended to include children aged 3 years and above to promote pre-primary education. In March 2022, the *Notice of the State Council on Establishing Special Additional Deductions for Individual Income Tax for the Care of Infants and Young Children Under Three* further stipulated **tax deductions for childcare at RMB 1,000 per child aged 0-3 years each month**.

Maternity insurance is one of the key social insurance schemes in China to support mothers and new parents, with the government or employer providing guaranteed wages and allowances. The guaranteed wages during maternity leave are calculated and paid according to the average monthly salary of the employee in the previous year. In 2019, maternity insurance was integrated into the basic medical insurance scheme for employees. **At present, maternity insurance and allowances are guaranteed for most female employees in China.** However, the coverage of maternity insurance can be further expanded because self-employed contractors and freelancers (e.g., drivers for mobile taxi applications, food and package delivery personnel) cannot participate in basic medical insurance for employees<sup>8</sup> and thus do not have to access maternity insurance.

**China is exploring the inclusion of childcare and early education allowances into the national child welfare allowance system.** The existing system focuses on protecting orphans, abandoned infants and children in distress, rather than an overall mandate to support family development. To optimize family planning and promote the balanced development of the population, some provinces have introduced childcare and early education allowances and subsidies. For example, Zhejiang Province is exploring the provision of basic parenting subsidies for families with infants and young children aged 0-3 years.



Staff of a daycare center playing with children of working parents in Dongguan, Guangdong Province  
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<sup>8</sup>According to the Statistical Bulletin released by the National Medical Security Administration, 237.52 million people in China participated in maternity insurance in 2021. Similarly, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security released its annual Development Bulletin, which indicated there were 746.52 million employed people in China by the end of 2020. It can be deduced that many employed people do not participate in maternity insurance.

### 3.4.2 The Current Situation

The 2019 survey conducted a deep dive into the cost of childcare in China. In 2019, the average monthly cost for children enrolled in childcare institutions and kindergartens was RMB 965 (USD 144) including food costs. Specifically, the costs for childcare institutions, kindergartens and pre-primary classes were RMB 1,684 (USD 251), RMB 961 (USD 143) and RMB 851 (USD 127), respectively. Moreover, 28.5 per cent of children enrolled in childcare institutions and kindergartens also attended extracurricular activities and classes, and the average annual spending on extracurricular activities, early education classes and parent-child classes was RMB 6,870 (USD 1,026). In 2019, 4.2 per cent of the children not enrolled in kindergarten also attended extracurricular activities, early education classes and parent-child classes, with an average annual spending of RMB 7,563 (USD 1,129).

According to the 2017 China Institute for Educational Finance Research-Household Survey (CIEFRHS)<sup>9</sup>, the household education burden during the pre-primary stage was 9.36 per cent. In other words, the education costs of children aged 0-6 years per person per year accounted for 9.36 per cent of the total household expenditure. In 2019, China's per capita disposable income was RMB 30,733<sup>10</sup> (USD 4,590), of which the average proportional spending on healthcare was only 8.8 per cent. It can be purported that childcare is a significant burden for most families.

The current special deductions on individual income tax on childcare and children's education are very limited. Specifically, the current domestic individual income tax threshold is RMB 5,000 (USD 746). Only when the person's monthly income exceeds RMB 5,000 (USD 746) after deductions for the social insurance and housing funds, can the family enjoy the special deduction of RMB 1,000 (USD 149) per child. Therefore, these tax subsidies may be ineffective for vulnerable groups. Moreover, for those who can enjoy the tax deductions, the maximum economic benefit is RMB 1,000 (USD 149) at the highest progressive tax rate (45 per cent), which does not exceed RMB 450 (USD 67).

### 3.4.3 Field Interview Findings

**All eight businesses surveyed provided maternity insurance in accordance with national regulations.** Managers were familiar with the payment policies of maternity insurance, and were able to provide maternity benefits and allowances to employees in a timely manner. **Most businesses surveyed expressed challenges in bearing financial responsibilities for extending maternity-related leave.** Many expressed that without an appropriate cost-sharing mechanism with the government and employees, it is difficult to fully guarantee the implementation and extension of maternity-related leave.

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<sup>9</sup>Wei Yi, "China Institute for Educational Finance Research-Household Survey Report (2019)", Social Sciences Literature Publishing House.

<sup>10</sup>National Bureau of Statistics, "Resident Income and Consumption Expenditure in 2019", (stats.gov.cn).

### 3.5 Other Findings

The field research also found that most businesses lacked awareness of the importance of family-friendly workplaces. Nearly 90 per cent of managers and employees believed that childcare is a family responsibility, and businesses do not need to provide support. However, most managers recognized that supporting family development is conducive to improving employee efficiency and retention, as well as promoting corporate development. A few businesses promoted family-friendly workplaces and introduced policies that reduced the burden of medical care, education and housing for employees, and enriched employees' sense of belonging through organization of activities, including team building and family day.

While three of the businesses surveyed had relatively high proportions of migrant workers, there was a lack of support policies that addressed their needs. In China, the migrant population continues to be an important source of labour. Considering the high costs of living in major cities, the lack of affordable housing and limited resources to care for their children, many migrant parents have to leave their child behind in their hometowns. The prolonged separation between parents and children has become a norm that is negatively impacting the development of infants and young children. Employers need to deepen their understanding of the actual needs of migrant workers, and introduce supportive family-friendly policies.

**“My daughter is in my hometown. I really wants to be with her, but I also need to earn an income to support the family. In a few more years after 15 years of social security coverage, I plan to go back to my hometown...I feel a lot of financial pressure, as most of my monthly salary goes towards taking care of elderly family and young children.”**  
– A worker from one of the eight businesses surveyed during the field research

**“My husband’s work covers the kindergarten costs of our child. However, the location of the kindergarten is far from my work, on the other side of the city. It takes me about two and half hours to pick-up and drop-off my child each day.”**  
– A worker from one of the eight businesses surveyed during the field research

According to the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Women in China conducted in 2020, mothers were chiefly responsible for childcare, homework and tutoring, as well as pick-up and drop-off of children aged 0-17 years, accounting for 76.1 per cent, 67.5 per cent and 63.6 per cent, respectively. In addition, 63.7 per cent of the children aged 0-3 years were mainly cared for by mothers during the day. The 2019 survey found similar results: 61.4 per cent of infants and young children aged 0-3 years not enrolled in childcare institutions were mainly cared for by their mothers during the day in the last month (including women who are unemployed and those without a work unit). The 2019 survey also revealed that 26.3 per cent of female employees who modified their work responsibilities due to childbirth believed that it had a negative impact on their career development. During the field research, while some female employees said that their spouse supported childcare responsibilities, they were still the main caregiver.



**Female workers assemble toy products on an assembly line in Yingde, Guangdong Province**  
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## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusions

Despite the expansion of family-friendly regulations, the **exploratory research identified various challenges in the extension of time-related support policies**. The main challenge stems from the fact that maternity-related leave benefits are provided via different funding channels and the standards of implementation vary greatly. Although most provinces have extended maternity and paternity leave and introduced parental leave, there are no regulations clarifying the disbursement mechanism or the proportion of contribution to guaranteed wages from employers. In some provinces, the continuation of the guaranteed wages and benefits for female employees after the legally mandated 98 days is decided by the employers. Therefore, businesses are often unable or unwilling to bear the human resource costs associated with additional maternity-related leave and benefits. Thus, while current time-related policies are adequate and aligned with global best practices, the lack of clear regulations or enforcement reduces incentives among businesses to extend the full range of maternity-related leave and benefits to safeguard the rights and interests of employees.

**Service-oriented support policies are relatively recent and have low coverage.** While the establishment of maternal and child facilities in public spaces has seen significant achievements, the construction of public childcare institutions for children aged 0-3 years is still in the early stages in China, with limited numbers of childcare institutions in the country. Findings from the desk research and policy review showed that the facility standards, service content and management of these institutions need to be improved and aligned with child-friendly principles. Moreover, policy guidance, incentives and support mechanisms for employers to establish childcare facilities remain unclear, thus few qualified employers have established childcare facilities. Lastly, the coverage rate of professional childcare services remains low due to the gap in the supply of convenient, accessible, affordable and quality childcare services.

**Financial support policies remain inadequate, have narrow coverage, and are unable to meet the high costs of childcare.** Currently, most financial support policies in China focus chiefly on childbirth, and there are few policies on cost-sharing mechanisms for parenting and education support. Maternity insurance in China only covers employees in regular full-time employment. As more young people participate in the gig economy, a growing number of self-employed contractors and freelancers cannot participate in maternity insurance. In addition, Chinese families take on significant economic burden in terms of childbirth, childcare and education. While the government has introduced special tax deductions, the current standards are limited and insufficient to offset the high costs.

From a gender perspective, women in China continue to bear the main caregiving responsibilities for children, and this is likely **directly and indirectly exacerbating employment and wage discrimination against women, and negatively impacting their career development**. Women are sometimes not given the same opportunities for advancement as their male peers because employers may believe that women cannot handle an increased workload due to their caregiving responsibilities. As men are still largely viewed as the breadwinner, working fathers often choose not to take maternity-related leave or only take partial leave to avoid interruption to their career advancement. Consequently, working mothers are expected to interrupt their careers and put their families first, and often have to balance caregiving and work responsibilities.

## 4.2 Recommendations

China has an established labour protection system to safeguard the rights and interests of workers, and the core concepts on family-friendly workplaces have been reflected in national and local policy frameworks. However, implementation is not standardized and there are significant gaps that need to be addressed. The following recommendations are put forward in response to the challenges identified during the research.

### 1 Establish a cost-sharing mechanism for extending maternity-related leave.

Provinces should clarify the cost-sharing mechanism for paternity leave and parental leave according to the local economic and social development situation. In addition, provinces that have not clarified the payment mechanism for extending maternity leave should ensure the guaranteed wages for female employees who gave birth remains unchanged or slightly reduced during the extended leave period.

### 2 Integrate flexible work arrangements for parents into labour protection policies.

While flexible work arrangements became a norm during the COVID-19 pandemic, these policies should be integrated into relevant labour protection policies for working parents with children aged 0-3 years. In addition, the government should formulate a practical monitoring and reporting system to ensure the rights and interests of working parents are protected.

### 3 Support qualified businesses to provide childcare services for employees.

The government should provide favourable tax reductions, tax exemptions or subsidies to businesses providing childcare services for employees. Businesses should be permitted to construct childcare facilities within their office space, and rezoning requests for childcare facilities should be granted. The operating costs of the childcare facilities should be integrated into the overall costs of the business, and businesses should be permitted to offer childcare services to nearby residents if space allows.

### 4 Actively explore child subsidies and benefits.

The current tax deductions and exemptions stipulated by the government provide limited support to parents. Based on the capacity of the Ministry of Finance and the local finance bureaus, and considering local conditions, the government should explore child subsidies and benefits to help protect the legitimate rights and interest of children and promote social inclusion and equality. A practical approach could be to universalize child benefits by age group, starting with children aged 0–3 years and gradually expanding these benefits to other age groups over time. This endeavor necessitates the participation of government, businesses and society at large to create an enabling environment with political and public support.

### 5 Promote gender equality in the workplace.

A government supervision mechanism on gender equality in the workplace should be established to protect the rights of working mothers and fathers. Businesses must ensure non-discrimination in the workplace, safeguard female employees from dismissal due to pregnancy, and provide additional training to mothers returning to work to reduce the interruption to their career advancement. To establish positive social norms on gender equality, childcare responsibilities should be shared by both parents, and maternity-related leave should be encouraged and accessed by both parents.

## 5. LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations to this exploratory research. Due to resource constraints and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sampling of the businesses surveyed was not randomized. Moreover, the businesses surveyed were not representative of all industries, especially new emerging industries such as Internet platform companies. In addition, the employees interviewed held regular full-time positions, so the perspectives of self-employed contractors and freelancers could not be reflected. During the research period, China began implementing the three-child policy, with a significant number of new family-friendly policies released that were not included in our policy research. Further investigation of these policies is needed to update the recommendations in this report and to advocate for the implementation of a full package of workplace-based family-friendly programmes.



Parents and their child having lunch in the factory cafeteria in Yingde, Guangdong Province  
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# ANNEX: REFERENCE DATA

Table 1. Basic information on female employees with infants and young children aged 0-2 years identified in the 2019 National Population and Family Dynamics Monitoring Survey (1,712 qualified samples)

	Number	Proportion ( per cent)
<b>Type of enterprise<sup>1</sup></b>		
Public	438	25.6
Foreign-owned/joint venture	123	7.2
Private	1,151	67.2
<b>Level of education<sup>2</sup></b>		
Low	656	38.3
High	1,056	61.7
<b>Hukou registration<sup>3</sup></b>		
Locally registered	1,071	62.6
Migrant population	641	37.4
<b>Economic development<sup>4</sup></b>		
Developed regions	643	37.6
Other	1,069	62.4

- Note:**
1. Public enterprises including state-owned enterprises and group enterprises
  2. A low level of education is defined as completing senior secondary education or below, a high level of education is defined as having a university degree or above
  3. Locally registered refers to employees with households registered in the local township (or town/subdistrict); Migrant population refers to employees with households registered in other townships (town/subdistrict) of the same county (or municipality/district), other counties (or municipalities/districts) in the same municipality (or region/province), other municipalities (or region/province) in the same province (or municipality/district), or in other provinces (or municipality/district)
  4. Developed regions include Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Wuhan, Xi'an and Chengdu.

Table 2. Number of days of maternity, paternity and parental leave across China

	<b>Maternity leave</b>	<b>Paternity leave</b>	<b>Parental leave</b>
<b>Beijing</b>	158	15	5
<b>Tianjin</b>	158	15	10
<b>Hebei</b>	158	15	10
<b>Shanxi</b>	158	15	15
<b>Inner Mongolia</b>	158	25	10
<b>Liaoning</b>	158	20	10
<b>Jilin</b>	180	25	20
<b>Heilongjiang</b>	180	15	10
<b>Shanghai</b>	158	10	5
<b>Jiangsu</b>	158	15	10
<b>Zhejiang</b>	158-188	15	10
<b>Anhui</b>	158	30	10 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Fujian</b>	158	15	10
<b>Jiangxi</b>	188	30	10
<b>Shandong</b>	158	15	10
<b>Henan</b>	188	30	10

	Maternity leave	Paternity leave	Parental leave
<b>Hubei</b>	158	15	10
<b>Hunan</b>	158	20	10
<b>Guangdong</b>	178	15	10
<b>Guangxi</b>	158-178	25	10
<b>Hainan</b>	188	15	10
<b>Chongqing</b>	178	20	5-10 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Sichuan</b>	158	20	10
<b>Guizhou</b>	158	15	10
<b>Yunnan</b>	158	30	10
<b>Tibet*</b>	365	30	-
<b>Shaanxi</b>	158 <sup>b</sup>	15 <sup>c</sup>	10
<b>Gansu</b>	180	30	15
<b>Qinghai</b>	188	15	15
<b>Ningxia</b>	158	25	10
<b>Xinjiang</b>	158	20	10

Source: Data taken from the population and family planning regulations and other documents of provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions as of June 30, 2022.

\*Relevant local regulations have not been revised after the announcement of the three-child policy.

Note: 'a' denotes that both parents are entitled to the specified number of days of parental leave annually until their child's 6th birthday; 'b' denotes that when a couple has their third child, they are entitled to an additional 15 days; 'c' denotes when a couple has their third child, they are entitled to an additional 10 days.

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Table 3. Basic information on the eight businesses surveyed during the field research

	Number of employees	Age, gender and education composition	Industry	Type
<b>Nanjing Company S</b>	3,000+	Average age = 37; 315 female employees: 27 < age 25; 174 = ages 25-39; 114 > age 40.	Automobile manufacturing	Subsidiary of state-owned enterprise
<b>Nanjing Company Z</b>	500+	84 per cent of employees aged 20-29; 233 female employees (47 per cent); 21 employees with children aged 0-3 years.	Pharmaceutical research, development and production	Joint-venture enterprise (Hong Kong)
<b>Foshan Company J</b>	250+	Average age = 31; 79 female employees (29 per cent); 11.2 per cent have university degrees and above, 12.2 per cent have college degrees and above, 36 per cent completed senior secondary education.	Automobile parts manufacturing	Wholly foreign-owned enterprise
<b>Foshan Company S</b>	170+	Average age = 35; 17 female employees (9.5 per cent); 39 employees < age 25, 76 employees = ages 25-39, 64 employees > age 40.	Elevator manufacturing	Wholly foreign-owned enterprise
<b>Shenzhen Company B</b>	Approx. 270,000 (manufacturing plant surveyed had 50,000)	Male = 66.2 per cent Female = 33.8 per cent; 26.3 per cent < age 25, 58.2 per cent = ages 25-39, 15.5 per cent > age 40.	New energy batteries, automobile manufacturing	Publicly listed enterprise
<b>Shenzhen Company Y</b>	1100+	Average age = 36; Male = 54.1 per cent, Female = 45.9 per cent; 13.3 per cent < age 25, 50.5 per cent = ages 25-39, 36.3 per cent > age 40.	Small home appliances manufacturing	Private enterprise
<b>Shenzhen Company K</b>	6300+	Average age = 32; Male = 57.6 per cent, Female = 42.4 per cent; 23.1 per cent < age 25, 56.7 per cent = ages 25-39, 20.2 per cent > age 40.	Electronic parts manufacturing	Publicly listed enterprise
<b>Beijing Company T</b> (HQ in Shenzhen)	100+	Exact data on employee profile was not disclosed, mainly young and middle-aged employees.	Architectural design	Publicly listed enterprise

Table 4. List of policy documents reviewed

At the national level, all relevant policy documents of the State Council and central ministries and commissions were referenced and analyzed, along with provincial population policy documents. Key word searches, including “parental leave,” “childcare allowance” and “flexible work arrangement,” were used to investigate relevant policy documents at the prefecture and municipal levels. The list of specific policy documents reviewed are as follows.

	<b>Government entity/meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>
1	The 30th Meeting of the 13th Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress	August 2021	Law of the People’s Republic of China on Population and Family Planning
2	The 7th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People’s Congress	December 2018	Social Insurance Law of the People’s Republic of China
3	The 31st Meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People’s Congress	October 2021	Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of Family Education
4	The State Council	September 2021	China National Program for Women’s Development (2021-2030)
5	The State Council	September 2021	China National Program for Child Development (2021-2030)
6	The State Council	April 2012	Special Provisions on Labour Protection for Female Workers
7	CPC Central Committee and State Council	June 2021	The Decision of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Optimizing the Fertility Policy and Promoting the Long-term Balanced Development of the Population
8	CPC Central Committee	October 2020	Proposals of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-term Vision for 2035
9	The Fourth Session of the 13th National People’s Congress	March 2021	Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-term Vision for 2035 of the People’s Republic of China

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	<b>Government entity/meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>
10	General Office of The State Council	April 2019	Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Promoting the Development of the Nurturing Care Service for Infants and Young Children under 3 Years Old
11	General Office of The State Council	December 2020	Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Promoting the Healthy Development of the Old-age Support and Nurturing Care Services
12	General Office of The State Council	July 2020	Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Comprehensively Promoting the Transformation of Old Urban Residential Areas
13	The State Council	December 2018	Interim Measures for Special Additional Deduction of Individual Income Tax
14	The State Council	March 2022	Notice of the State Council on the Establishment of a Special Additional Deduction of Individual Income Tax for the Nurturing Care of Infants and Young Children under 3 Years Old
15	Insurance and Welfare Department of State Administration of labour	1982	Reply to the Issue of the Maternity Benefit for Female Workers after an Antepartum Bed Rest and Sick Leave for More than Six Months
16	National Health Commission	October 2019	Notice of the National Health Commission on Printing and Distributing the Standards for the Setup of Nurseries (for Trial) and the Management Standards for Nurseries (for Trial)
17	General Office of the National Health Commission, General Department of the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform, General Department of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, General Department of the State Administration of Market Supervision	December 2019	Notice of General Office of the National Health Commission, General Department of the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform, General Department of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, General Department of the State Administration of Market Supervision on Printing and Distributing the Measures for the Registration and Filing of Nurseries (for Trial)

	<b>Government entity/meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>
18	National Health Commission	January 2021	Notice of the National Health Commission on Printing and Distributing the Guidelines for Childcare in Nurseries (for Trial)
19	General Office of National Health Commission	January 2021	Notice of the General Office of the National Health Commission on Printing and Distributing the Guidelines for Infant Injury Prevention in Nurseries
20	General Office of National Health Commission	August 2021	Notice of the General Office of the National Health Commission on Printing and Distributing the Training Programme for the Management of Nurseries (for Trial) and the Training Programme for the Childcare Staff of Nurseries (for Trial)
21	National Health Commission, National Development and Reform Commission	April 2021	Notice on the Establishment of National Demonstration Cities Initiative of Infant and Young Child Nurturing Care Services
22	National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Civil Affairs, National Health Commission	June 2021	Notice on Printing and Distributing the Implementation Plan to Proactively Respond to the Aging Population and the Development of Childcare Services
23	National Development and Reform Commission	October 2019	Notice of the NDRC and the National Health Commission on Printing and Distributing the Implementation Plan for the Dedicated Action to Support Private Sector to Develop Affordable Childcare Services (for Trial)
24	General Office of the National Health Commission, National Development and Reform Commission	July 2021	Notice on the Submission of the Annual Local Number of Spots in the U3 Childcare Nurseries per 1,000 People in the Region
25	National Development and Reform Commission, National Working Committee on Children and Women, Ministry of Housing and Urban & Rural Development, Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, Office of the Central Cyber Affairs Office Commission, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Natural Resources, Ministry	October 2021	The Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Children Friendly Cities

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	<b>Government entity/meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>
	of Ecology and Environment, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, National Health Commission, General Administration of Market supervision, Ministry of Emergency Management, General Administration of Radio, Film and Television, General Administration of Sport, National Healthcare Security Administration, State Forestry and Grassland Administration, Communist Youth League of China, All China Women's Federation and China Disabled Persons' Federation	October 2021	The Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Children Friendly Cities
26	General Office of National Health Commission	December 2021	Notice of the General Office of the National Health Commission on Printing and Distributing Guidelines for Infant and Young Child Feeding and Nutrition in Nurseries (for Trial)
27	General Office of National Health Commission	December 2021	Notice of the General Office of the National Health Commission on Printing and Distributing the Guidelines for the Construction of Comprehensive Service Centres for Childcare (for Trial)
28	General Office of National Health Commission and General Office of Ministry of Emergency Management	January 2022	Notice on Printing and Distributing Fire Safety Guidelines for Nurseries (for Trial)
29	Public Announcement No.76, 2019, Ministry of Finance, State Administration of Taxation, NDRC, Ministry of Civil affairs, Ministry of Commerce, National Health Commission	June 2019	Public Announcement of the Ministry of Finance and Other Departments on the Preferential Tax Policy for Family Service Industry in Communities such as Old-age Support, Childcare and Domestic Services
30	Ministry of Housing and Urban & Rural Development, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, National Health Commission, State Taxation Administration, State Administration for Market Supervision, General Administration of Sport, National Energy Administration, State Post Bureau, and China Disabled Persons' Federation	August 2020	Opinions of the Ministry of Housing and Urban & Rural Development and Other Departments on Implementing the Action to Renovate the Urban Residential Communities with Essential Facilities

	<b>Government Entity/meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>
31	30 provinces, except Tibet, have revised their regulations on family planning and adjusted their Standing Committee of the Provincial People's Congress	2021-2022	Provincial Regulations on Population and Family Planning
32	General Office of Zhejiang Provincial People's Government	July 2017	Opinions of the General Office of Zhejiang Provincial Government on Accelerating the Construction of a Universal Child Welfare System
33	Beijing Municipal Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security and Municipal Education Commission	January 2020	Notice on Wages and Benefits of Enterprise Employees Taking Care of Their Children during School Closure due to COVID-19
34	General Office of Shanghai Municipal Government	August 2020	Three-year Action Plan of Shanghai's Childcare Services (2020-2022)
35	Hangzhou Municipal Party committee and Hangzhou Municipal Government	February 2020	Several Policies on Strict COVID-19 Prevention and Control and Support to Enterprises for the Resumption of Work and Production
36	General Office of the Panzhihua Municipal Party Committee and General Office of Panzhihua Municipal Government	June 2021	Notice of the General Office of the Panzhihua Municipal Party Committee and General Office of the Panzhihua Municipal Government on Printing and Distributing 16 Policies and Measures for Promoting the Aggregation of Human Resources

