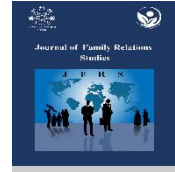




Journal of Family Relations Studies

Journal home page: <http://jhfs.uma.ac.ir/>



Research Paper

Examining the Phenomenology of Couples' Reluctance to Childbearing



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Citation: Hadadzadeh, M., Shakeri, M. & Estabraghi, M. (2026). Examining the Phenomenology of Couples' Reluctance to Childbearing. *Journal of Family Relations Studies*, 6(1): 9-19. <https://doi.org/10.22098/jfrs.2025.15618.1201>



[10.22098/jfrs.2025.15618.1201](https://doi.org/10.22098/jfrs.2025.15618.1201)

ARTICLE INFO:

Received: 2024/08/11

Revised: 2025/02/01

Accepted: 2025/04/02

Available Online: 2026/02/15

Key words:

Childbearing,
Couples' reluctance
to childbearing,
Phenomenology

ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating couples' perceptions of their reluctance to childbearing.

Methods: The approach of the current research was qualitative and phenomenological. The research participants were 12 couples from Yazd, who were selected as a purposive sample. Interviews were conducted until the point of saturation was reached. The research tool used was a semi-structured interview, and the data analysis method employed was Smith's approach. To establish the validity of the data, the opinions of various qualitative researchers and research participants were sought.

Results: Finally, couples' perceptions of their reluctance to have children were obtained, resulting in six main themes and sixteen sub-themes. In response to the question regarding the formation of the grounds for couples' reluctance to have children, the themes of changes and cultural and economic conditions were identified. The theme of replacing pets and friends was also obtained in response to the research, for example, replacements of couples for not having children.

Conclusion: The findings of the investigation into couples' perceptions of their reluctance to have children revealed that it is influenced by the realities of life in the present era. To improve the situation of decreasing desire to have children, policymakers should apply solutions based on the facts of couples' perceptions.

1. Introduction

Having children is an important phenomenon in demographic movements and is a key aspect of sustainable development for a country. Although having children and giving birth may seem like a simple matter, it is a complex issue that involves numerous quantitative and qualitative factors (Hosseini et al, 2023). In recent years, many developed and developing countries have experienced a decline in the desire for childbearing (Fauser et al, 2024). Research has shown that by 2050, 93% of all countries will have a total fertility rate below

the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. This indicates that the fertility rate is decreasing in the majority of countries worldwide (Wang et al., 2020). It should be noted that the reluctance to have children represents a social and generational disruption from traditional norms and cultural values, which has a significant effect on the continuity of the life cycle and the concept of family (Escobar Estay, 2018). We are aware that the life cycle encompasses the establishment of new families, and having children constitutes an

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integral part of this cycle, contributing to the transmission of values associated with the institution of the family (Brauner-Otto & Geist, 2018). However, the family as an institution has become more complex than ever before, with significant cultural and economic changes, increased communication flows, and the emergence of new spheres of social interaction, all of which have led to changes in its structure (Kazemipour, 2021). The change in living conditions has also brought about transformations in the representation and acceptance of various aspects of collective life (Roshandel Arbatani et al, 2014). These changes include shifts in the life cycle, life expectancy, birth and death rates, family formation, and structure, among other factors (Rojas Betancur et al., 2023). These profound changes in the family as a structural institution are reflected in the decision not to have children (Brauner-Otto & Geist, 2018) and the decision not to be a mother or father (Pardo, Cabella & Nathan, 2020). Rojas Betancur et al. (2023) believe that such decisions can be rooted in economic, environmental, or sexual factors.

Research has indicated that the current reluctance to have children is associated with various factors, including uncertainty about the future, environmental crises (Ripple et al., 2019), economic and social concerns (Mohammadibakhsh et al., 2022; Wang & Sun, 2016; Zarei et al, 2024), occupational insecurity, and health issues such as epidemics (Vera, 2020), which have become more pronounced. Therefore, childlessness has become a life option. People have come to realize that in today's social world, it is possible to live without children, and this choice may lead to a better life for some individuals, with fewer responsibilities and greater freedom for others (Alvarez & Marre, 2022). In this regard, research conducted by Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson (2022) in Sweden has highlighted the concerning trend of declining fertility in Western countries, particularly in Northern European countries, during the 2010s. One of the significant reasons identified for the postponement of childbearing is the impact of employment in the labor market. These researchers believe that a few structural factors have contributed to the formation of fertility decline in Sweden. Other factors, including global influences, may contribute to the general inclination to forgo or postpone childbearing. Additionally, Campisi et al. (2023) have indicated that unemployment is associated with lower fertility rates. Furthermore, their study clarified that changes in fertility patterns and the inclination to delay childbearing in European countries are influenced by economic and social conditions.

In addition to these studies, Bangladesh, recognized as one of the world's most deprived countries, has witnessed a significant decline in fertility rates, primarily driven by

issues such as increased female education (Bora et al., 2023). The total fertility rate (TFR) in Bangladesh dropped from 5.5 in 1985 to 2.1 in 2017 (The World Bank, 2019). Meanwhile, in China, the average TFR ranged from 1.49 between 2011 and 2020, reflecting a notable shift in social and cultural norms regarding marriage and childbearing among women. This decline in fertility rates is likely to continue, despite the introduction of the universal three-child policy in 2021 (Yang et al., 2022).

It should be noted that with the decline in population growth rates, many studies have been conducted on the lack of growth in childbearing. The studies conducted have identified results such as socio-economic and environmental factors, educational status, etc., for this issue. These factors are valid in terms of research, but several points should be noted: first, each of the studies used different methodologies; second, the situations and goals of these studies were different. Another point that has been identified is that they were very scattered and dependent on time, place, and situational requirements. Therefore, it can be argued that these factors were not independent of the context, which indicates the main gap in the existing literature. This makes it difficult to apply the results of the studies in different contexts. Building upon current research, employing the phenomenological method has enabled a more in-depth investigation of this issue, centered around the perceptions of couples in Yazd city.

Therefore, three research questions were examined in this research:

Q1: What are the causes of couples' reluctance to have children?

Q2: What are the factors contributing to couples' lack of desire for childbearing?

Q3: What are the alternatives for couples who choose not to have children?

2. Materials and Methods

The method of the present research is a qualitative phenomenological approach. The qualitative phenomenological approach provides a situation to discover the lived experiences of the participants and provide rich descriptions of how such experiences were made available to the researchers (Smith et al., 1999). The target group was childless couples living in Yazd province, who were selected by criteria-based purposive sampling. The criteria for selecting the participants were at least 5 years of marriage and a definite declaration of not wanting to have children. Accordingly, 12 couples were interviewed. In the 10th interview, data saturation was achieved, but to be sure, 2 more interviews were conducted. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Study participants' demographic characteristics

Name	Man's age	Woman's age	Level of Education (Man)	Level of education (Woman)	Duration of marriage
A	37	36	Master's degree	Master's degree	13
B	28	26	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	7
C	43	39	PhD degree	Master's degree	21
D	36	27	Bachelor's degree	Diploma degree	5
E	42	40	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree	12
F	31	28	Diploma degree	Diploma degree	9
G	42	35	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	5
H	28	29	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	8
I	32	32	Master's degree	Master's degree	6
J	36	28	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	6
K	32	30	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree	9
L	27	29	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	6

Ethical considerations

The participants were informed of research aims, and before conducting each interview, verbal information about the interview protocol was provided via email and cell phone. Finally, they signed an informed consent form. By considering research ethics, the researcher avoided imposing his values, attitudes, and beliefs on the participant, and their rights were recognized during the research process, and they were given the right to withdraw from the research during the interview process.

Instruments

An in-depth semi-structured interview was implemented in this study as the main data collection tool. In order to ensure the content validity of the semi-structured interview form, the questions were also reviewed by three experts in this field. Moreover, a semi-structured interview protocol was focused on the couples' perceptions of their reluctance to childbearing. This semi-structured interview included 18 questions on the reasons for couples' unwillingness to have children, the role of government policies, social groups, religion, technology, cyberspace, etc., in couples' unwillingness to have children, what couples would like to replace children with, etc. Some of the questions raised in the interview were: What are the most important reasons why you do not want to have children after a few years of marriage? What measures can the government take to encourage you to have children? Who supports your decision not to have children, and who considers it a mistake, and what is your reaction to them? In addition to these questions, an attempt was made to encourage the interviewees to provide more experiences by using probing questions.

Data Analysis

In this study, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a qualitative thematic approach was used to analyze the data, in which three stages of data generation, data analysis, and case integration had been proposed (Smith et al, 2021). Also, according to Creswell et al (2007), 4 strategies were used to evaluate the quality of the findings as follows. (1) Prolonged engagement, the first author does not jump to early conclusions with insufficient observations, she spends an adequate period to know the research ecosystem and make a trusting connection with participants. (2) Member checking, all participants confirm their interview text and extracted codes. (3) Rich description, the coding process, as well as more details of the extracted themes and direct quotations, have been provided to the readers. (4) Peer review, coding was also done and compared by a researcher and one other expert in qualitative research. Moreover, the review and adaptation of the opinions of some qualitative researchers and participants were exploited. The reliability of the researcher's analysis and peer review by another researcher working in the field related to the research subject was also obtained based on the Miles and Huberman formula (2016), at 0.91.

3. Results

In the present study, interviews were first implemented and repeated. Then, minor and sub-themes were determined and labeled. Subsequently, the themes were organized and grouped, whereby, through continuous comparison of the differences and similarities among the sub-themes, overarching themes were derived.

The obtained results, in accordance with the research questions, are listed below. The results related to the first research question are reported in Table 1.

Table 2. The Results of the First Research Question

Main themes	Sub-themes
Uncertainty and obstruction	Couples' fear of the future and their reluctance to take on responsibilities. Childbearing prevents them from fulfilling their dreams.
bottlenecks and dissatisfaction	Toughening of economic conditions, and raising the age of marriage Educational conditions of parents and educational problems

Main themes	Sub-themes
	Health, medical, and pharmaceutical conditions
	Dissatisfaction with common life
Experiences of others and previous	Previous experiences of parents
	Observing the infidelity of other people's children

The first main theme is uncertainty and obstruction. This theme consists of two sub-categories: "Couples' fear of the future and their reluctance to take on responsibilities" and "Childbearing prevents fulfilling their dreams". The main theme can be explored by referring to several quotes from the interviewees. One of the interviewees said that: If we had children, considering how challenging life is right now and the fact that the child would have to face the stresses and anxieties of life on their own, we feel relieved that we can be who we are, with or without children. There is no entity after us that would have to cope with life all by itself.

The other interviewee stated that:

Whatever expenses were intended for a child, it is better for me to spend them on myself, for my own comfort, well-being, and leisure activities. I allocate the time that would have been dedicated to a child to myself and my spouse, ensuring that at least one person, who is my partner, is emotionally and mentally fulfilled. I divide my time between my goals, work, and aspirations that I am at least capable of achieving. However, when a child comes into the picture, we would have to invest all our energy and abilities into the child and their aspirations.

The second main theme is "Bottlenecks and Dissatisfaction", which consists of four sub-themes: "Toughening of economic conditions and raising the age of marriage", "Educational conditions of parents and educational problems", "Health, medical and pharmaceutical conditions", and "Dissatisfactions with common life".

In this regard, the sample group said the following:

To be frank, the overall circumstances in our country have become challenging, and even the prospect of marriage has become demanding. Maybe if it were time for us to get married, we would not have gotten married. The decision to have children is a separate matter altogether.

Initially, I had little desire for children as I aspired to pursue a master's degree. However, I eventually realized the significance of free time. If I had a child, I wouldn't have the same level of freedom I currently enjoy. Some of my friends, who are also my classmates, have children, and they express deep regret about the challenges they face in continuing their education after becoming parents. Well, the freedom of a mother who is studying is much less than that of a housewife, who is ultimately only herself and her husband, and her husband also accompanies her.

Many of the necessary items for many diseases are

sanctioned, God forbid, if a child has a problem, how much it will cost, how much medicine is not available, and how difficult the living conditions will be. The second reason is attributed to the extensive pollution that exposes children worldwide to numerous problems. The presence of high levels of lead and pollution in the air and dust has led medical professionals to assert that children born in such conditions often experience premature birth and various health issues. The prevailing weather conditions and pollution have influenced families' inclination to refrain from having children. One of my acquaintances decided to have a child after a considerable period. Unfortunately, her child is now experiencing mental health issues. When I spoke to her about it, she revealed that she was employed in the chemical department of a factory, and due to the pollutants present in the factory, her child encountered difficulties. As a result, she regrets her choice of having children and expresses a wish that she had never become a parent. Numerous individuals witness these circumstances and conclude that they would rather not have children, as it allows them to maintain a sense of normalcy in their lives. They recognize the potential consequences of having a child with problems and understand the potential magnitude of such a situation.

Regarding childbirth, I neglected to mention an important aspect. Upon observing some friends who have gone through the experience, I noticed that they encountered significant challenges during natural childbirth, despite being in reputable hospitals such as Mujibian and Mortaz. The difficulty they faced left them hesitant about having another child. They described the process in a negative light, instilling a deep fear of childbirth within me. This fear of giving birth stands as a significant obstacle for me. The circumstances need to be exceptionally favorable for two couples to be mutually attracted to each other and have undergone significant growth intellectually, economically, psychologically, and culturally. Only in a tranquil and stable environment can the existing issues be resolved, ensuring that a child does not become an additional burden on top of their pre-existing challenges. The concerns associated with raising a child, from the time they are born until they grow up, are numerous and demanding. The responsibilities and time commitments involved can exacerbate existing problems and conflicts within a family, further complicating their differing perspectives. It is a misconception for some families to believe that having a child will automatically improve

their lives. While the joy brought by a baby can be unparalleled, life is not solely defined by that sweetness. Ultimately, parents desire a child who is biologically their own to foster a sense of unity. However, childbearing for a woman's body is filled with confusion, exhaustion, depression, time constraints, and a general state of disarray. Life becomes more arduous rather than reaching a better state.

The third general theme is "Experiences of others and previous", which itself consists of two sub-categories: "Previous experiences of parents" and "Observing the infidelity of other people's children", and the opinions of the interviewees are as follows:

As I observe contemporary families, I witness the challenges they face in fulfilling the needs, desires, and aspirations of their children. This struggle resonates with my circumstances as well. While this responsibility may be somewhat more manageable for women at certain junctures, men, considering our cultural context, bear the weight of providing for the family's financial demands and ensuring the realization of their children's dreams. Consequently, this situation can be quite demanding for men, considering the burdens they already carry. As I observe society from the perspective of a man and the head of a family, I am aware of the heightened expectations placed upon me. The pressure to fulfill my children's

dreams weighs heavily on my shoulders, and this thought fills me with great apprehension. I fear that one day I may not be able to fulfill my child's desires, as if a personal dream of mine remains unfulfilled. I have experienced the difficulties and challenges I had to navigate to achieve my aspirations, and I cannot bear the thought of my children having to endure similar hardships.

Presently, there has been a significant decline in the level of support and care provided to elderly parents. Even families whose children reside in the same city find themselves deeply engrossed in their own lives, work, and raising their children. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to provide the necessary care for aging parents as it should be. The notion of moving elderly parents to nursing homes or assisted living facilities has become widely accepted. However, what is disheartening is that I have personally witnessed acquaintances whose children are currently in high school or university, openly telling their parents not to expect assistance or support from them in their old age. These hurtful words are spoken publicly, and although I may not personally experience such situations, it is distressing to witness the pain they inflict upon those who hear them.

The results related to the second research question are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The Results of the Second Research Question

Main themes	Sub-themes
Changes	1- Changing the level of expectations
	2- Changed beliefs about the philosophy of having children
	3- Change in religious beliefs
	4- Changing lifestyle
Cultural and economic conditions	1- Economic situation under sanctions
	2- Cultural-social environment

The formation of reluctance to have children occurs within a specific context, as perceived by the interviewees; the most important aspects of its formation are the two main themes of changes and cultural and economic conditions. The main theme of the areas of reluctance to have children is changing, which itself consists of four sub-themes: "change in the level of expectations", "changed beliefs about the philosophy of having children", "change in religious beliefs", and "change in lifestyle".

In this regard, the interviewees stated that:

In earlier times, when societal homogeneity prevailed, the disparity between social classes was less pronounced. For instance, my maternal grandfather held a noble status as a khan, yet his economic situation was such that rice was a rare delicacy consumed only once a year. Conversely, in the neighboring household, rice was never part of their meals. It mattered little how they looked, what clothes they wore, or the extent of their investments in their children.

Distinctions based on social class, brands, and discretionary spending were nonexistent back then. In those times, the majority of society shared a similar reality where everyone was on equal footing. The circumstances and the class divide were minimal. Life was uncomplicated, and communication channels were limited. What I mean is that a 10-year-old child had no awareness of what life was like in Tehran or how others lived. They believed that everyone's life was akin to their own. However, nowadays, children have a better understanding of how others live, which leads to heightened expectations and desires for a certain lifestyle, either for themselves or their children. When my mother, for instance, discovers that someone in Europe is living at a certain standard and is raising their child accordingly, she desires the same level of upbringing for her child. Previously, knowledge about life beyond our immediate surroundings was scarce and limited to the four adjacent alleys. One of our former neighbors had a family with 14 children. According to him, during that period, our

children would attend school with simple meals like dry bread. Back then, families found contentment in such modest provisions, considering them sufficient. However, the situation seems to have changed. Perhaps the children of the past, through their endeavors, have achieved certain milestones, but they now face numerous complexities and shortcomings that can only be understood by engaging in meaningful conversations with them. Through these conversations, the underlying issues will become apparent.

I am completely opposed to the notion of bringing children into existence. Considering the current circumstances and the prolonged economic struggles our country has been facing, it is not advisable to encourage childbirth amidst such difficulty. After all, our lives are relatively short, and it is crucial that we prioritize establishing a fundamental standard of living. Moreover, in my opinion, Iran lacks the necessary basic amenities, and therefore, contemplating childbirth should not even be entertained. Regardless of the location, be it within or outside Iran, I am firmly against the entire process of pregnancy and childbirth.

I consistently express the belief that Islam encourages us to have children and assures us of sustenance. Besides its divine promises, I understand this honest assurance to ultimately refer to the provision of nourishment for infants, indicating that God has created the physical conditions necessary to support a family and address a child's basic hunger. However, there are other aspects of a child's upbringing and development that require further explanation, and I have not witnessed Islam making specific promises in those areas. It is possible that such promises exist, but I have not come across them. Nevertheless, I perceive that Islam encompasses a range of recommendations that may be open to interpretation. To elaborate, as a practicing Muslim and Shia, I hold religious beliefs, but I view the call in Islam, made 1400 years ago, to have children as an additional cultural aspect compared to the prevailing societal values of that time. It was a culture centered around struggle, military service, and the formation of cohesive communities through education. The idea behind this was that individuals, from the moment of their birth, contribute to the establishment of a better social and political culture. I believe that Islam's invitation to have children primarily derived from the conditions prevalent 1400 years ago, where the only cost associated with having a child was providing milk, which God truthfully guarantees. The second aspect is the provision of human resources and intellectual capabilities.

Indeed, life undergoes constant transformation with each passing day, and our perspectives evolve accordingly. We cannot continue to live in the same manner as we did

during our childhood. The children of this era cannot experience life as we did because the societal landscape has changed significantly. In the past, everyone existed on a relatively equal level. There were no stark differences that fueled the desire to compare oneself with others. However, the present reality is vastly different.

The second main theme of the grounds for reluctance to have children is the "cultural and economic conditions", which itself consists of two sub-themes: "Economic situation under sanctions" and "Cultural-social environment". In this regard, the interviewees stated that: Perhaps if I had a stable home life and a sufficient income to afford a babysitter, I would desire to have two or three children. My intention would not be solely for personal enjoyment or to keep myself occupied, but rather with a sense of assurance. If I were confident that the child's future would be well provided for, I would willingly bring a child into the world.

Our primary concern lies in the initial cost of childbirth. Presently, the estimated costs associated with pregnancy range between 50 and 100 million. This includes expenses for various procedures such as sonograms, tests, and more. However, our problem is not limited to maternity leave alone. The larger issue stems from the financial situation of our country. For instance, following the Nowruz Eid, we faced challenges in acquiring essential equipment, as well as fulfilling basic needs such as food and clothing. Despite our best efforts to prioritize these expenses, the economic decline resulting from imposed sanctions has made it increasingly difficult for us to afford such expenditures.

Now, let's discuss our living environment: Meybod city has experienced a significant influx of immigrants due to industrialization. From a cultural standpoint, I observe children attending school and forming friendships with individuals who come from different cultural backgrounds, upbringing styles, and socio-economic levels compared to our own families. Their thinking patterns, ways of interacting, and overall lifestyles differ from ours. This influx of immigrants is causing a shift in the cultural context of the city. Whether these individuals are migrating from other cities within the country or coming from Afghanistan as Afghan refugees, the cultural landscape is transforming. This changing cultural context raises concerns when it comes to raising a child. As parents, we must consider the extent to which we can shape their upbringing before we send them off to school and expose them to a society that may have completely different values and norms. This situation can have a significant impact on a child's development. I have observed many couples and families in Meybod who contemplate leaving the city solely due to concerns about the potential impact on their children's lives. They ponder

whether it is appropriate to have children in such a rapidly changing environment.

The results related to the third research question are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. The Results of the Third Research Question

Main themes	Sub-themes
To replace pets and friends	1- Keeping a pet
	2- Socializing with friends and relatives

Couples have discussed alternative options to not having children, and these alternatives primarily revolve around two sub-themes: keeping a pet and socializing with friends and relatives. Regarding the sub-theme of keeping a pet, participant A stated that:

Certainly, having a dog can serve as a substitute for having a child, and it comes with minimal costs. The expenses associated with owning a dog are relatively low, usually limited to an annual vaccination. By having a dog, we can fulfill our need for love and affection towards another living being. Similarly, the dog reciprocates our love and provides companionship, thereby compensating for the emotional connection we seek.

Regarding the sub-theme of spending time with friends and relatives, couple E expresses, "We allocate a significant portion of our free time to socializing with friends and relatives. We either go out together for enjoyable activities or visit each other's homes, which helps alleviate feelings of loneliness.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Due to the decline in population growth and its negative consequences for the country's future, the present study aimed to qualitatively study the phenomenon of the reluctance of young couples to have children.

This goal was investigated in the form of three main questions. Uncertainty and obstruction, bottlenecks and dissatisfaction, and experiences of others and previous were obtained in response to the question of the causes of couples' reluctance to have children (the first research question). Themes of changes and cultural and economic conditions were obtained in response to the question of the formation grounds of couples' reluctance to have children (the second research question). In response to the third question of the research, which focused on the alternatives couples consider for not having children, another theme emerged related to the replacement of animals and friends. Regarding the causes of couples' reluctance to have children, three main themes were identified. According to the perceptions of couples, one of the primary reasons for their reluctance to have children is the presence of uncertainty and hindrances in their shared life. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by [Savelieva et al. \(2023\)](#), where the researchers identified a lack of confidence in the life situation as the most influential factor in the decision to delay or forgo having children. This

factor encompasses various dimensions, ranging from uncertainty about perceived financial stability and incomplete education of either oneself or one's spouse to concerns about the size of the apartment and the challenges of balancing paid work and childcare responsibilities.

One of the themes that emerges within the broader theme of uncertainty and hindrances is parents' fear of the future and the acceptance of responsibility. One influential factor in parents' fear of having children is their attitude towards parenthood ([Mikaeili et al., 2025](#)). Indeed, it is important for couples to increase their awareness and understanding of the implications of having children. They should acknowledge that they have the right to dedicate time to other activities and pursuits they enjoy. They are not supposed to be with their children all the time. They should not have unrealistic or unreasonable expectations of themselves, such as being a flawless parent and perfect parenting. Being good enough is indeed enough.

The second theme related to the theme of uncertainty and obstruction is the consideration of the child as an obstacle to the fulfillment of dreams. Research conducted by [Bodin \(2021\)](#) supports this finding, highlighting that one of the reasons couples are unwilling to have children is their desire for balance and stability in life. The participants indicated that they should achieve a certain level of stability in their education and career before having children, as having a child can be an obstacle to pursuing further education and achieving job stability.

The second main theme was the theme of bottlenecks and dissatisfactions. One of the sub-themes within this theme is the toughening of economic conditions and the rising age of marriage. Research by [Zarei et al \(2024\)](#) showed that economic factors, as one of the intrapersonal factors, have a negative impact on women's attitudes towards childbearing. Research by [Fiori et al. \(2018\)](#) also demonstrated that after the economic crisis in 2007-2008 in Italy and the subsequent tightening of economic conditions, there was a significant decline in women's desire to have a second child. The research of [Caltabiano et al. \(2017\)](#) also considers the economic recession as the main reason for couples not wanting to have children. Since the birth of a child necessitates providing healthcare, welfare, educational facilities, and more, and the provision of these necessities imposes significant financial pressure on parents, couples often seek to delay

having children during difficult economic conditions. On the other hand, the research conducted by [Singh et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrated a correlation between the age of marriage and childbearing. As the age of first marriage, particularly for women, increases, there is a decrease in the desire to have children.

The second main theme related to bottlenecks and dissatisfaction is the educational conditions of parents and educational problems. In this regard, McDonald's theory of gender equality can be used to explain this issue. According to this theory, women have a preference for attaining equal status with men, which includes pursuing higher education and employment opportunities. As a result, they choose to delay motherhood to avoid compromising their social standing. They tend to prioritize their academic pursuits and educational endeavors without any reservations regarding their intellectual abilities. In this regard, research by [Yaghoobi Choobari et al \(2022\)](#) showed that employed and independent women have little desire to have children, and they consider motherhood a boring role.

The third main theme related to the theme of bottlenecks and dissatisfaction is health, medical, and pharmaceutical conditions. The high cost of treatment, inadequate availability of painless childbirth facilities, limited choice in delivery methods, concerns about the risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth, high healthcare and treatment expenses during pregnancy, lack of government support and healthcare services, and apprehension about the impact of work-related matters on the child's health are all factors related to health, medical, and pharmaceutical conditions that can influence couples' decisions to postpone fertility.

The fourth main theme related to the theme of bottlenecks and dissatisfaction is dissatisfaction with common life. [Alijanzadeh et al.'s research \(2023\)](#) clarified that there is a positive and significant relationship between marital satisfaction and people's attitudes towards fertility and childbearing. Therefore, the dissatisfaction of living together and the possibility of divorce among couples make them postpone having children, because they don't like to add the concerns of children to the concerns of their lives.

The previous experiences of parents are the third main theme. The first sub-theme within this category is the influence of parents' previous experiences. A value survey conducted in Europe revealed that a significant number of people hold the belief that having a child does not positively impact the life satisfaction and happiness of couples. This finding can help explain the declining fertility rates observed in Europe ([Ugur, 2020](#)).

The second theme is observing the infidelity of other people's children. In some cases, young couples may experience a loss of desire to have children due to

observations of disrespectful behavior and disloyalty towards parents exhibited by certain children. Additionally, the prospect of children eventually placing their parents in nursing homes can also contribute to this fear. Since their children may exhibit similar negative behaviors toward them in the future, it leads to such concerns.

About the formation grounds of a couple's reluctance to have children, two main themes were obtained. The first main theme about the formation of couples' reluctance to have children is the theme of change. In this regard, research conducted by [Qin et al. \(2023\)](#) indicated that the primary reason for couples not wanting to have children is their concern about the changes it would bring to their lives. The first theme related to the concept of change is the shift in expectations. Family demographers have highlighted the necessity for new explanations that can effectively capture the recent transformations in childbearing ([Comolli et al., 2021](#)). For instance, expectations and perceptions of the future, which may not necessarily directly align with the actual economic situation or present circumstances, have been recognized as significant yet underestimated factors in fertility decision-making ([Vignoli et al., 2020](#)).

The second theme related to the concept of change was the shift in beliefs regarding the philosophy of childbearing. In the past, children were viewed primarily as a source of labor for the family. Consequently, families with more children had access to a larger labor force, which often translated into improved economic conditions. However, with the advancement of production methods and the emergence of non-family social institutions, the economic advantages of having children and the reliance on them by parents during times of old age and hardship have diminished ([Torabi, 2018](#)).

The third theme related to the concept of change was the shift in religious beliefs. Several studies, including those conducted by [Bhakat and Kumar \(2023\)](#) and [Malmir et al. \(2023\)](#), have demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between religious beliefs and the desire to have children. However, despite these changes and transformations in people's beliefs, which are themselves consequences of the globalization of communication and information and the spread of modern values, religious beliefs regarding childbearing are also affected. This can result in a decline in religious beliefs among individuals in this regard, subsequently reducing the likelihood of having children.

The final theme related to the concept of change was lifestyle change. Studies indicate that a traditional lifestyle, along with its associated beliefs and values, serves as a driving force for having children, while the modern lifestyle is considered an inhibiting factor ([Rasulzade Aghdam et al., 2016](#)). In the previous decades,

attitudes towards the ideal age of marriage, the process of selecting a spouse, separation and divorce, the desirability of marriage, decision-making power within the family, family relationships, and the desirability of having children were largely traditional. However, in recent times, there has been a shift in lifestyle and attitude towards these matters, resulting in their modernization. Savelieva et al. (2023) argue that a lifestyle change is one of the reasons for delaying childbearing. Factors such as frequent use of social media, a strong focus on work, being a woman, and choosing not to have children are all indicators of a shift in lifestyle that can influence the decision to have children.

The second main theme related to the reasons for couples' reluctance to have children is the theme of cultural and economic conditions. The first sub-theme related to the theme of cultural and economic conditions was the economic conditions during the period of sanctions. Research has indicated that in Iran, sanctions have had an impact on the depreciation of the exchange rate, resulting in inflation within the country (Larijani et al., 2022).

The second theme related to the concept of cultural and economic conditions was the cultural-social environment. Currently, theories that highlight the cultural, social, and value aspects of societies have gained popularity. The imitation of culture and values portrayed in the media and virtual spaces, particularly television and satellite platforms, has provided families with an opportunity to transcend their traditional roles and disregard traditional, ritual, religious, structural, cultural, and gender boundaries. Therefore, it seems that not having children is becoming the norm in Iran's current society.

Regarding the substitution of having children, the primary theme identified is the substitution of animals and friends. The first sub-theme associated with this substitution is keeping a pet. Research has shown that an increasing number of people are choosing to forego parenthood and instead bring pets into the home as a focus for attachment and caring behavior (Volsche et al., 2023; Volsche, 2018, 2019, 2021; Laurent-Simpson, 2021). In Iran, it appears that the phenomenon of pet ownership is on the rise. A significant number of respondents in the survey referred to their pets using family terms such as father/mother, child, or family member. It appears that a certain emotional void motivates individuals, especially couples, to keep pets, as humans have a desire to be seen and acknowledged. On the other hand, the lower level of responsibility and costs associated with keeping a pet, as opposed to raising a child, can serve as an incentive to expand the phenomenon of pet ownership as a substitute for having children.

The second sub-theme related to the theme of replacement was socializing with friends and relatives.

Some individuals hold the belief that not having a child does not pose a problem for them. Instead of dedicating their time to raising a child, they choose to spend their free time with friends and relatives, finding greater enjoyment in life.

Implication

The findings of this study revealed that, in addition to economic factors such as job insecurity and concerns about the future of children, cultural issues, lifestyle changes, religious beliefs, and personal philosophies regarding parenthood are among the most significant reasons for individuals not desiring to have children. These factors should be taken into consideration by policymakers when formulating population policies for the country. Therefore, the formulation of long-term policies instead of forced policies can be the key to the desire to have children.

Investing more effectively in education, culture, and fostering social trust can have a significant impact on people's perception of parenthood. This approach can work in a more rational and gentle manner compared to implementing aggressive policies when promoting population policies. Therefore, many countries today are striving to implement compromise policies or measures that facilitate the integration of work and family life, particularly for women. These policies aim to address one of the key factors contributing to the reluctance to have more children. Some examples of such policies include expanding childcare centers, providing parental leave for both mothers and fathers, and offering flexible working hours. These policies are commonly referred to as family-friendly policies.

Limitations: The present research solely relied on interview data obtained from childless couples in Yazd city. Furthermore, the sole data collection tool employed in this study was a semi-structured interview.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles have been observed in this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the writing and interpretation of the results of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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