

Research Article

Motivations for Having Large Families: Perspectives of the Rural Elderly

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Received: 26/Nov/2024; Accepted: 28/Dec/2024; Published: 31/Jan/2025

Abstract—Having large families are a norm in rural areas in many parts of developing countries, including Malaysia. This is because children are considered the main source of financial support for parents in old age. Most parents in rural areas do not have any source of income to sustain themselves during their later years. For this reason, families in developing countries often expect to have many children, a situation that leads to high fertility rates. Research on female fertility shows that the more advanced a society becomes, the lower its fertility level tends to be. The main aim of this paper is to examine the motivations why rural elderly in Malaysia are likely to have large families. Using a qualitative research design, ten research participants were purposively selected to explore this issue. The findings highlighted five key reasons why the research participants chose to have many children: (1) economic benefits for the parents, (2) old age security, (3) assistance with household chores for mothers and work outside the home for fathers, (4) continued spiritual rewards for parents after death, and (5) societal praise for couples with many children. Based on the motivations discussed, it is reasonable that the fertility rate in rural areas remain high.

Keywords— Fertility; family size; financial security; financial support; elderly parents; developing countries

1. Introduction

Modernization has created a situation in which the desire for large families has diminished. Many families prefer to have fewer children. In developing countries, many governments have implemented measures, such as introducing family planning services, to encourage a decline in fertility rates. There are two approaches to fertility: an anti-fertility approach and a pro-fertility approach. Demographers refer to the approach that opposes fertility as an anti-natalist policy, while the approach that supports fertility is known as a pro-natalist policy. Developing countries typically adopt pro-natalist policies, whereas “developed countries in Europe, North America”, Great Britain, and parts of Asia adopt anti-natalist policies. An “anti-natalist policy” is “a government policy aimed at reducing birth rates to” slow the growth of a country's population. Countries that implement this policy often have large populations, experience rapid population growth, and are concerned about overpopulation issues. China is an example of a country that has practiced an anti-natalist policy, notably through its one-child policy introduced in the 1970s. Due to overpopulation issues, Indonesia is another example of a country that has successfully implemented an anti-natalist policy for decades. In other words, anti-natalist policies are proactive measures designed to reduce birth rates by encouraging people to have fewer children. The goal is to significantly lower the number of births in a country to avoid overpopulation problems. On

the other hand, a pro-natalist policy supports an increase in birth rates. This policy is typically adopted by developing countries and those that previously had very low birth rates but did not face overpopulation issues. Some countries that once implemented anti-natalist policies have shifted to pro-natalist policies due to population decline caused by their earlier measures. Singapore is a prime example of a country that transitioned from an anti-natalist to a pro-natalist policy. This work highlights the outcomes of a qualitative study to explore the motivations for having large families.

2. Related Work

Since “children are the main source of” financial support in later life, having many children is a norm in rural areas of many developing countries, including Malaysia. Families in these regions often expect to have large families, a situation that contributes to high fertility rates. Children are considered valuable for their positive economic contributions and as a source of financial security during old age. The more children parents have, the stronger their financial situation is perceived to be. Elderly parents feel less anxious during financial crises, as they can rely on their children for support. Parents without children often face significant challenges in financial support. In rural Malaysia, most parents hope to have many children. Newly married couples are often pressured to have children immediately, with little delay between marriage and the birth of their first child. This cultural expectation is a source of

pride for many parents. Couples with many children are praised and admired, while those without children are often scorned, and a household is considered incomplete without children. In demography, “the number of children born to women” “is measured using the Total Fertility Rate (TFR)”. The TFR indicates the average number of children women have during their lifetime after completing their childbearing years. Empirical research shows the more advanced a society is, the lower its TFR tends to be. For example, Africa has a higher TFR compared to North America, Europe or Japan indicating families in Africa are generally larger (Table 1).

Table 1: Total Fertility Rates by Regions, 2020

Regions	Total Fertility Rates
“Northern Africa”	3.0
“Sub-Saharan Africa”	4.8
“Western Africa”	5.2
“Eastern Africa”	4.5
“Middle Africa”	5.8
“Southern Africa”	2.4
“Northern America”	1.7
“Central America”	2.2
“Caribbean”	2.1
“South America”	2.0
“Western Asia”	2.6
“Central Asia”	2.8
“South Asia”	2.4
“Southeast Asia”	2.2
“East Asia”	1.5
“Northern Europe”	1.6
“Western Europe”	1.7
“Eastern Europe”	1.5
“Southern Europe”	1.3
“Oceania”	2.3

Source: Population Reference Bureau, various tables [1]

The topic of having children, that is issues related to family size, is a key area in demography. Demographers use the term “fertility” to describe family size. Fertility is a demographic concept referring to the number of live births a woman experiences over her lifetime [2]. Fertility has attracted the attention of not only demographers but also policymakers concerned with the economic development of nations.

From research on fertility transitions, it has been found that fertility rates remain high in many parts of developing countries [3]. In regions such as Africa and the Middle East, national total fertility rates often exceed 5.0. Similarly, in rural societies within developing countries, fertility rates often remain above 5.0 [3]. Factors contributing to high fertility include the level of female education, women's involvement in the labor force, the acceptance of birth control, and other sociocultural and economic variables.

Bulatao [3] concluded that high fertility rates in modern times are indicative of a lack of access to several critical resources, including (1) health services, (2) education, (3) social security and old-age insurance, (4) consumer goods and social opportunities that reduce the need to compete through childbirth, (5) media, and (6) family planning services.

If access to these resources were improved, the pattern of high fertility in communities could be disrupted. In rural areas, where access to these aspects is often limited, families tend to have a large number of children. While some couples may wish to have fewer children, their lack of access to the necessary knowledge and resources prevents them from effectively managing their family size.

Changes in a family's economic situation can influence the desire for a large family. Economic theory views children as goods, similar to other economic commodities. As income rises, parents tend to consume more goods, which may include having more children. However, early theorists also suggested that rising income levels influence tastes and values, eventually reducing the desire for large families [4]. This is because higher income levels are said to increase aspirations for social advancement, which can lead to a greater desire for other goods. These competing desires may ultimately reduce the number of children a family.

Building on this economic theory, Bulatao [3] elaborated that as income rises, parents tend to allocate more resources toward their children's education, prioritizing quality over quantity. Higher income provides parents with alternative sources of economic security, reducing their reliance on children's economic contributions. This shift diminishes the demand for large families. Economic, social and cultural factors “also play a significant role in” shaping fertility rates [5]. One key factor is the increasing level of women's education. Educated women are more likely to participate in economic activities outside the home, marry later, and use birth control. In societies where birth control is not widely practiced, however, fertility rates tend to remain high.

The socio-economic and cultural factors influencing the decline in fertility can be understood through “a process known as demographic transition”. This term describes the shift from a state of “high fertility and mortality rates to one of low fertility and mortality rates”, typically associated with a society's transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy or from traditional to modernized living conditions [6]. Early theories of demographic transition suggested that pre-modern societies experienced high fertility, and that modernization led to a decline in fertility rates [6].

3. Theory

The theory used to explain the issue of having large families in this article is economic theory [3]. The theory postulates that the lower a woman's income, “the higher the number of children” she “is likely to have”, as these women may view the quantity of children as more important than their quality.

4. Method

This is a qualitative study. A qualitative study primarily relies on the collection of qualitative data [7], or, as Creswell [8] describes it, an inquiry approach used to explore and understand a phenomenon. The aim of this study, as

mentioned earlier, is to explore and understand the perceptions of elderly parents regarding why they have many children in their families. To explore this issue, 10 elderly individuals aged 65 and above from rural areas in Kedah, Terengganu, and Selangor were purposively selected as research participants. They were chosen as they have large families. Two participants from Terengganu have 8 children, while those from Kedah and Selangor have 5 to 6 children. Here, it is not uncommon for elderly parents to have large families. It is hoped that this research will provide valuable insights into why they choose to have many children.

Data were collected through qualitative interviews and observations. A series of visits were conducted to explore the research participants' perceptions of the number of children they have. During these interactions, details were recorded, including the motivations they chose to have many children. All the collected data were then analysed thematically. Figure 1 illustrates the flowchart of the research process.

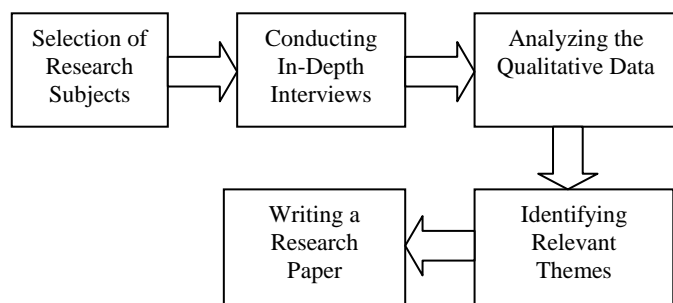


Figure 1: Flowchart of the Research Process

As shown in Figure 1, there were five steps in this research process. Before beginning the writing of the paper, the researcher first conducted preliminary study to identify participants who met the criteria of having a large number of children in their families. After obtaining consent for interviews, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews. These interviews were repeated as needed to gather additional information. All information gathered was recorded during the interviews and subsequently analysed. From the analysis conducted, a total of five themes were identified (Table 2). These themes form the foundation for the discussion and writing of this article.

5. Results and Discussion

As stated in the introduction, this paper presents a qualitative study exploring the motivations for having large families from the perspectives of the elderly parents in rural Malaysia. Thus, the discussion in this section focuses on the motivations for having many children, as shared by the research participants from this study (Table 2).

Table 2: Themes of Motivations of Having Large Families

Themes	Description of Themes
Economic benefits for parents	Economic benefits for parents refer to the financial support they receive from their children, which helps cover various living expenses, especially in their later years. Having

	children is important for providing economic support to meet the financial needs of elderly parents each month
Old age security	Refers to the financial support and stability that individuals receive, typically from children, to ensure a comfortable and secure life during later years. Financial contribution is the main reason why parents in developing countries want to have many children
Assistance with household chores for mothers or work outside the home for fathers	Children are important for providing practical support in household affairs and assisting fathers with daily work outside the home.
Continued spiritual rewards for parents after their death	Parents continue to receive rewards through the actions and success of their children even after they pass away. A child's responsibility extends beyond their parents' lifetime, as the duty to honor and serve them continues after their death
Societal praise for couples with many children	Malay community praises married couples who have many children. From the start of their marriage, they are expected to have many children.

Source: Field Notes

5.1 Economic Benefits for Parents

Today, fertility rates remain high in many developing countries due to the socioeconomic benefits children bring to the family [3]. The idea of having a large family is often rooted in the financial contribution children make to their parents' well-being. When a child is born, they are not seen as a burden but rather as an asset for the parents' future financial security. As children grow into adults, they are expected to provide economic support for their elderly parents. Therefore, in many developing countries, particularly in rural areas, having many children is considered beneficial to the family. Children are seen as vital for economic support, helping to meet the financial needs of their elderly parents every month. A study “conducted by Wan Ibrahim Wan Ahmad and Zainab Ismail” in rural areas of Malaysia [9] shows that children play a crucial role in providing financial support to the family, particularly for elderly parents. These children, even if they have migrated to towns far from their parents, send remittances every month [10]. The more children a parent has, the more financial support they receive each month [11], [12], [13], [14]. This contribution is often sufficient to meet the elderly parents' monthly needs. Elderly without children, on the other hand, may have to work until they are physically unable to do so. As long as they are able, they continue to work to earn an income. One research participant shared, "My husband and I never worked in the formal sector. We don't have a pension. We're lucky because we have children. They give us money every month. We are happy now. In the past, when the children were not yet working, we faced financial problems. Now, there is no need to be concerned about money—it's always there. Our children will help."

5.2 Older Age Security

Old age security is the main reason why parents in developing countries want to have many children [15]. This is primarily because parents in these countries often lack other financial resources, with children's financial contributions being their main source of support [16], [17]. Government assistance is typically minimal or nonexistent. Without children, couples in developing countries would have to work until they are too old to cover their daily expenses, leading to significant financial challenges [18], [19].

Empirical studies have shown that children and family members play a crucial role in the lives of older individuals [20]. In developed countries, the importance of children lies in social relationships and the need for long-term care. However, in developing countries, children and family members are also vital for providing old age security in addition to social relationships and care [20].

The "old age security hypothesis suggests" "that in environments where parents face uncertainty about" their "ability to support themselves in old age, "they expect financial support from children" [21]. Expectations like this are very strong in rural areas, which leads to large families. Research participants in this study mentioned that the primary reason they want many children is to ensure financial security in their old age. If one child helps, they are grateful because it alleviates their financial worries. As one participant stated: "We hope for many children because we don't know for sure which one, we can expect to help us in our old age. We are grateful if even one of them is willing. It's unrealistic to expect all 10 children to help us, but one is enough."

5.3 Assistance with Household Chores for Mothers and Work Outside the Home for Fathers

Children are important for providing practical support in household affairs and helping fathers with daily work outside the home. They are often trained to assist their parents from a young age. While child labour is prohibited, children are still expected to contribute productively to the family economy from an early age [22]. For girls, this often means being trained to manage household responsibilities or care for younger siblings while their parents work outside the home.

The International Labour Organization defines children's involvement in family work as child labour. However, the estimation of child labour worldwide—whether children are engaged as paid workers outside the home, unpaid workers, or performing family or domestic work—varies greatly due to inconsistent definitions. It has been estimated that 1 in 10 children worldwide are involved in child labour [22].

Although child labour often carries a negative connotation, parents in developing countries have their own reasons for expecting their children to assist with household tasks. One reason is that they have no choice but to rely on their children to ease their daily burdens. These parents do not view their children as laborers. From the children's perspective, they understand their parents' financial struggles and wish to help alleviate their hardships.

One research participant shared: "What is expected is to lighten the household work. We ask our child to study and go to school, but if they have free time, we encourage them to use it to help us. It's not always possible for our children to dedicate all their time to studying. When we ask them to help, we are indirectly teaching them responsibility."

5.4 Parents Continue to Receive Rewards When They Die

In Islamic perspectives, the most important responsibility of a Muslim is to obey Allah, which defines the vertical relationship between the individual and God. In the context of human relationships—horizontal relationships—the most important duty is toward parents. In fact, obedience to parents is frequently mentioned in the Quran immediately after obedience to God. A child's responsibility to their parents does not end when the parents are no longer alive; it continues even after their death.

Living children are expected to serve their deceased parents, according to Islamic belief. This means that even after parents have passed away, they can still receive blessings through their living children. Children can continue to earn rewards for their deceased parents by praying for forgiveness on their behalf and giving charity in their name. If a parent leaves behind many children, the deceased parent benefits greatly if all of these living children pray for their forgiveness and give charity, with the reward being attributed to the deceased. This principle is outlined in the Quran and Hadith, the final Revelation.

"If our parents die having committed many sins, those sins can still be forgiven by God, as long as there are living children who continually pray for their forgiveness."

This is a core belief among Muslims and is clearly stated by the Prophet in a sahih hadith. Once, a companion, who was a dear friend of the Prophet, asked if there were any actions that could benefit deceased parents. The Prophet replied that there are four such actions: 1) pray for their well-being and forgiveness, 2) fulfill their promises and carry out their wills, 3) show respect and serve their closest friends, and 4) be kind to those who were connected to our deceased parents [23].

As one of the research participants said: "All Muslims want children because religion encourages us to have many. There are many reasons why religion tells us to have many children. These children are very beneficial when we die. If parents die having committed many sins, those sins can still be forgiven if their living children continually pray for their forgiveness. Even in the grave, the rewards from the good deeds of the children will continue to flow to the parents' spirits."

5.5 Societal Praise for Couples with Many Children

The Malay community praises married couples who have many children. From the beginning of their marriage, couples are expected to have children. If a married couple does not yet have children, neighbours often ask, "When are you going to have children?" There is joy when the newlyweds announce a pregnancy, but sadness when it is revealed the couple has not yet conceived.

This is a common custom in the study area, similar to rural communities in other places as well. This situation sometimes creates pressure for married couples. While some couples may need to wait for the right time to have children, many nowadays no longer focus on having a specific number of children. Instead, the quality of children is more important. There are also couples who desire many children but are unable to have them. Therefore, having children is not always a choice couples can fully control.

There are three main reasons why Malay society expects married couples to have many children. One reason is rooted in the socio-economic conditions of the Malay community, where poverty is widespread. Many Malays need children as a financial source [24] as they lack formal education and have never worked in the formal sector, where they could have access to retirement benefits [25]. As a result, they must work until they can no longer physically do so.

Given these conditions, it is natural for the research participants in this study to expect many children to provide support in old age. Based on their experiences, as well as those of elderly people in other countries, such as Indonesia [26], life without children can be very challenging, especially in later years [27].

Second is, society perceives that parents with children tend to have a more comfortable old age and do not need to continue working into their later years [28]. This is why some elderly people in rural areas choose to live with their children as they grow older [29], [30]. The Malay community, particularly the research participants of this study, as well as the rural Malay community in other parts of Malaysia, takes a pragmatic approach to life's needs, with children helping to ease the burden on parents [31], [32], [33], [34], [35].

Another reason is tied to Islamic beliefs. Rural people in Malaysia generally hold stronger religious convictions and adhere closely to religious values. In Islam, children play an important role not only in the lives of parents in this world but also in the hereafter. For parents who have children, the rewards of good deeds continue to flow even after their death, which is seen as a blessing. This value is held by most rural people in the study area, including the research participants. One research participant said: "We are poor people. When we were young, we could survive because we could work. But when we are no longer able to work, what will happen to our lives? It would be problematic if we didn't have children."

6. Conclusion and Future Scope

This paper discusses the results of a qualitative study on the motivations of the elderly in rural Malaysia to have large families. The study identifies five reasons why elderly individuals in these areas desire many children. These findings align with those of other studies conducted outside Malaysia on similar topics. Empirical research in rural Malaysia has shown that families in these areas tend to have more children. This preference for large families reflects trends observed in other developing countries.

"Children are often regarded as a" critical "source of support", particularly because they can provide financial assistance to their parents in old age when they are no longer able to work. For most rural parents, as shown in this study, alternative sources of income are limited, making children a vital means of economic security. Consequently, families in developing countries often aspire to have many children, believing they will offer financial support in the future.

The results of this study also support economic theories explaining why rural women desire larger families. Families with low social status, limited income, and no financial security in old age often view having many children as a strategy, not only for care but also for ensuring economic stability. This study has limitations, particularly regarding the sample size, respondent characteristics, and the area of study.

Future studies on fertility differences in Malaysia should comprehensively compare urban and rural families. These studies should analyze variations in motivations for family size across different socioeconomic groups and locations, providing a more nuanced understanding of fertility patterns and their underlying causes. Additionally, future research should emphasize quantitative designs to identify the factors driving the desire for larger families in Malaysia.

Data Availability

Data for the finding of the study are not publicly available.

Conflict of Interest

Author declares that he does not has any conflict of interest.

Funding Source

No funding source exists.

Authors' Contributions

The author is fully responsible for this manuscript, and accepted its submission to the journal to review.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses his immense gratitude to the top management of ICMS for the support and encouragement.

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