

Not Every Woman Must Be a Mother: Exploring Childfree Aspirations Among Young Malaysian Women

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, ideas about womanhood are still closely tied to motherhood, yet a growing number of young women are beginning to question this expectation. This study explores how young Malaysian women in their early twenties understand and articulate their aspiration to remain childfree. Using a phenomenological approach, six unmarried women aged 23–24 were recruited through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the data were analysed thematically. The participants described several reasons for leaning toward a childfree future, including the desire for personal autonomy, concerns about financial readiness, mental and emotional capacity, and the wish to focus on early career development. They also reflected on how cultural and gendered expectations shaped their thinking. Many shared experiences of stigma and pressure from family and the broader community, where motherhood is often viewed as a natural or expected milestone for women. Despite these challenges, participants saw their childfree inclination as a way to protect their well-being and maintain control over their life choices. Overall, the study sheds light on how young women navigate the tension between personal aspirations and traditional norms in Malaysia's pronatalist environment. By centring their lived experiences, the findings contribute to broader discussions on reproductive autonomy, shifting gender expectations, and the evolving meaning of womanhood in contemporary Malaysian society.

Keywords: Malaysian women; childfree aspirations; gender norms, motherhood, phenomenology, early adulthood

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Malaysia recorded its lowest fertility rate in four decades, with an average of 1.6 children per woman (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). This decline forms part of a wider demographic shift across many parts of Asia and the globe, where changing economic conditions, evolving gender roles, and altered life-course expectations have contributed to lower fertility rates. Concurrently, an emerging body of literature highlights a growing number of individuals and couples who deliberately opt not to have children. While much existing research examines voluntary childlessness as an enacted life choice, there is increasing interest in the antecedent attitudes and intentions that precede such decisions, what we term here child-free aspiration.

The child-free movement refers broadly to the conscious orientation toward a life without children. Globally, scholars have documented a range of motivations for this orientation, including career priorities, financial considerations, concerns about the environment, and desires for personal autonomy and well-being (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Gillespie, 2003; Settle & Brumley, 2014). In Malaysia, preliminary evidence suggests similar drivers, with added layers of cultural and religious significance. For instance, recent qualitative work among Malay adults highlights the salience of autonomy, financial planning, and friction with traditional expectations as central themes shaping attitudes toward childbearing (Zhang, Rahman, & Lim, 2025). At the same time, socio-religious discourse, especially within Islamic ethical frameworks, frames procreation as morally significant, creating a terrain of negotiation for women considering a child-free future (Hazali, 2024).

This study advances two interrelated claims. First, it argues that the conceptual distinction between child-free choice (an enacted decision) and child-free aspiration (a forward-looking orientation) is analytically meaningful. Aspiration captures anticipatory judgments, identity work, and imagined futures that may influence decisions long before they are concretely enacted. Second, a phenomenological exploration of childfree aspiration among young Malaysian women in early adulthood offers culturally grounded insight into how personal values intersect with religious discourse, familial expectations, and broader sociocultural norms.

Why focus on young women in early adulthood? Urban, career-oriented women occupy a critical junction where competing demands, professional advancement, social expectations, and personal well-being become particularly visible. Their life trajectories often involve delayed marriage, prolonged education, and sustained workforce participation, factors which have been associated with lower fertility and heightened deliberation about parenthood (Houseknecht, 1987; Neal & Neal, 2025). Yet much of the Malaysian policy conversation about fertility emphasizes pronatalist solutions without sufficiently engaging with women's subjective reasoning or the cultural meanings embedded in their reproductive orientations. By centring the experiences of young women navigating early adulthood, this study highlights how contemporary Malaysian womanhood is being reimagined beyond traditional assumptions about motherhood.

Methodologically, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, as childfree aspiration is rooted in lived meaning, self-understanding, and reflective deliberation. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate how they imagine a childfree future, how they anticipate social and familial reactions, and how they reconcile personal priorities with cultural and religious expectations. This approach aligns with established qualitative work on voluntary childlessness that privileges personal narratives and meaning making (Gillespie, 2003; Mueller & Yoder, 1999), while addressing an existing gap: few Malaysian studies examine aspirational orientations among young, unmarried women who have not yet reached major reproductive decision points.

The study is guided by three aims: (1) to identify the motivations and values shaping childfree aspirations among young Malaysian women; (2) to examine how cultural, familial, and religious contexts influence these aspirations; and (3) to explore the anticipated social and psychological implications of holding such aspirations. Accordingly, the research is organised around the following questions:

1. What motivations, values, and life circumstances contribute to young Malaysian women's childfree aspirations?
2. How do cultural, familial, and religious contexts shape the formation and expression of these aspirations?
3. What social and psychological consequences do participants anticipate, and how do they expect to navigate them?

By focusing on aspiration rather than enacted choice, this study offers a forward-looking understanding of how young Malaysian women construct their reproductive futures. It contributes empirical insight to the growing scholarship on voluntary childlessness in Southeast Asia and theoretical depth to conversations about gender, religion, and the cultural meanings of motherhood. Practically, the findings offer implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to understand diverse reproductive orientations and to design inclusive policies that reflect women's articulated life goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For clarity, this review is organised into three areas relevant to the present study: (1) contributing factors to childfree aspirations, (2) impacts associated with the rise of voluntary childlessness, and (3) research methods used in previous studies.

Personal and Individual Factors

Research consistently shows that individual motivations and personality traits play a central role in shaping the decision to remain child-free. Autonomy, personal fulfillment, and the desire to prioritize self-development are among the most frequently cited factors (Mettinen, 2010; Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Settle & Brumley, 2014). Many individuals perceive childbearing as potentially restrictive to personal freedom and lifestyle preferences,

with career aspirations and educational goals often taking precedence (Nguyen, 2021). Psychological factors such as identity, life satisfaction, and personal values also influence the decision, with some individuals reporting higher well-being when pursuing a childfree lifestyle compared to those who reluctantly embrace parenthood (Taylor, 2021).

Individual motivations and psychological orientations play a crucial role in shaping women's aspirations to remain child-free. Scholars consistently highlight autonomy, self-realization, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment as central motivators (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Settle & Brumley, 2014; Avison & Furnham, 2015). Many women perceive motherhood as limiting their personal freedom and career development, viewing child-free living as a pathway to psychological stability and self-determination (Mollen, 2006; Mueller & Yoder, 1999).

Voluntarily child-free individuals often report comparable or higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being than parents, challenging assumptions that equate motherhood with fulfillment (Avison & Furnham, 2015). Gillespie (2003) argues that voluntary childlessness represents not a rejection of femininity but a redefinition of womanhood that privileges autonomy and self-expression. Similarly, Park (2002) notes that adopting a child-free stance often functions as an act of agency within cultural contexts that idealize motherhood. These insights align with the present study's focus on child-free aspiration, a forward-looking stance that reflects identity formation and value-based decision-making before motherhood becomes a lived reality.

Sociocultural Influences

Cultural norms and societal expectations exert strong influence on reproductive attitudes. In many societies, motherhood remains a marker of adulthood, social value, and femininity (McQuillan et al., 2012). Those who diverge from this expectation frequently encounter stigma, stereotyping, and social exclusion (Park, 2002; Letherby, 2002).

In Malaysia's collectivist cultural landscape, child-free aspirations often conflict with expectations relating to filial piety, family continuity, and communal belonging. Recent Malaysian studies indicate that Malay individuals who identify as child-free must navigate significant cultural and moral pressure, particularly from family members who frame motherhood as an essential component of womanhood (Zhang, Rahman, & Lim, 2025; Mohd Ismail, 2025). Hazali (2024) frames child-free decisions within Islamic ethical principles, emphasizing tensions between modern values of autonomy and religious expectations regarding procreation, an important perspective for understanding the moral discourse surrounding child-free attitudes in Malaysia.

Donath (2015) describes child-free women as culturally and politically charged figures whose choices challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and highlight inequalities associated with unpaid care labor. Gillespie (2001) similarly situates voluntary childlessness within a postmodern model of reproduction, where lifestyle autonomy and pluralism coexist with persistent social conservatism.

Beyond Malaysia, research across East Asia reveals comparable ideological shifts. In urban China, Liu, Zhang, and Chen (2023) document growing acceptance of voluntary childlessness among younger generations who frame it as a rational and modern lifestyle choice. Likewise, Gietel-Basten and Yeung (2023) found that Hong Kong women increasingly define "childfree" as an empowering identity. Collectively, these studies illustrate how changing gender roles, modernization, and individualization influence child-free aspirations in rapidly developing societies.

Economic and Practical Considerations

Economic pressures are frequently cited as drivers of child-free attitudes. Rising living costs, limited state-supported childcare, and increased work-life imbalance make parenthood appear financially and emotionally burdensome (Brown, 2020; Mohd Ismail, 2025). Houseknecht (1987) noted that voluntary childlessness often increases in societies where women's workforce participation rises without parallel policy support for caregiving responsibilities.

In Malaysia, similar concerns persist. Professional women frequently express apprehensions about financial instability, childcare costs, and career disruptions associated with motherhood. Dewantara, Putri, and Sari (2023) describe this tension as an “inner war” between personal readiness and cultural obligation, reflecting how economic insecurity intersects with psychological strain. Thus, child-free aspiration is shaped not only by financial considerations but also by the desire for emotional stability and autonomy.

Decision-Making Pathways and Identity Processes

The development of a child-free orientation is typically gradual and reflective, shaped by accumulated life experiences, interpersonal relationships, and social influences. Blackstone and Stewart (2012) conceptualize this as a process of identity negotiation, wherein individuals continuously reassess their values and priorities in relation to societal norms. For some, the inclination emerges early as a stable life philosophy; for others, it evolves through introspection or shifting relational and career contexts (Settle & Brumley, 2014).

Within Malaysia, Zhang et al. (2025) found that women navigate a moral negotiation between autonomy and cultural expectations when contemplating a child-free future. From an Islamic perspective, Hazali (2024) differentiates between child-free by choice and childless by circumstance, explaining that while Islam encourages procreation, it recognizes valid considerations such as emotional readiness, health, and financial capability. This adds a nuanced moral dimension to women’s deliberations in a Muslim-majority context.

Gendered pressures further complicate these pathways. Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell (2007) show that women experience significantly more social pressure and moral scrutiny regarding childlessness compared to men. This reinforces the importance of studying aspiration rather than only choice, as aspirations capture the internal negotiations and societal tensions that occur before a decision is enacted.

Impacts of the Childfree Trend

Beyond individual decisions, voluntary childlessness has broader psychological, demographic, and societal impacts. At the psychological level, evidence contradicts assumptions that the childfree face poorer well-being. Avison and Furnham (2015), reviewing mental health outcomes, found no consistent link between voluntary childlessness and depression or anxiety. However, McQuillan et al. (2012) reported that childfree women may experience lower societal validation due to strong cultural scripts linking womanhood to motherhood.

At the demographic level, countries experiencing rising childfree rates face structural challenges. Basten (2009) highlights declining fertility and the potential long-term strains on population replacement and pension systems. Mohd Ismail (2025), analysing Malaysian demographic data, warns that increased voluntary childlessness may contribute to faster population ageing, labour shortages, and shifts in housing preferences. Hakim’s (2003) Preference Theory contextualizes these demographic patterns by noting that women’s choices reflect deeper lifestyle orientations, home-centred, adaptive, or work-centred, which influence national fertility trends.

Culturally and politically, Donath (2015) argues that voluntary childlessness challenges pronatalist norms and exposes gender inequalities, particularly those related to unpaid care work. These shifts may also reshape gender roles, workplace expectations, and family structures, signaling a broader transformation in social norms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how Malaysian professional women conceptualise and make sense of childfree aspiration. Phenomenology is well-suited for examining experiences, intentions, and meaning-making processes, particularly when the phenomenon under study involves personal reflection and negotiation of cultural norms. As prior research shows, reproductive orientations are embedded in identity, values, and emotional reasoning, making them best understood through

methods that privilege subjective interpretation (Gillespie, 2003; Settle & Brumley, 2014). Given that aspiration refers to future-oriented intentions rather than enacted decisions, the phenomenological approach enables the researcher to capture anticipatory thinking, imagined futures, and internal negotiations, elements not easily accessible through quantitative surveys.

Participants

Six young Malaysian women aged 23–24 participated in this study. All were single and resided in urban settings. Their backgrounds reflected a mix of student, early-career, and part-time creative or service work, including roles in entrepreneurship, administration, marketing, software engineering, graphic design, volunteering, and part-time modelling/acting. Their gross monthly incomes ranged from irregular or non-fixed earnings to RM5,000, representing primarily B40 to lower M40 socioeconomic groups. This demographic profile reflects young women navigating early adulthood and career formation—contexts that shape how they reflect on and develop childfree aspirations.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in either English or Malay, depending on participant preference, and took place online or face-to-face. An interview guide with open-ended questions explored participants' values, motivations, cultural influences, and anticipations regarding a childfree future.

Example prompting areas included:

- perceptions of motherhood and womanhood
- personal motivations behind childfree inclination
- anticipated social reactions
- perceived advantages and challenges
- religious or cultural considerations

Follow-up questions were used to elicit clarification and deeper reflection. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke's (2006). The process involved six-phase stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying potential themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming final themes, and (6) producing the final narrative. Manual coding was used to assist in managing and organising the data. Themes were refined through iterative reading to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' narratives and resonated with the study's phenomenological orientation.

FINDINGS

Participants' Profile

Six women participated in this study, all of whom were single and aged between 23 and 24. The participants represented a range of early-career professional and semi-professional backgrounds, including entrepreneurship, corporate administration, marketing, software engineering, modelling, and part-time creative work. Their educational levels ranged from diploma/undergraduate students to holders of a bachelor's degree.

Socioeconomic backgrounds varied across B40 and M40 categories, with estimated monthly incomes ranging from RM1,500 to RM5,000. One participant held a flexible hourly income due to part-time modelling work, while another reported having no fixed income due to voluntary and temporary engagements. Most participants lived in urban environments and were financially independent, except one participant whose living expenses

were supported by family. Overall, the sample reflects young, urban, educated Malaysian women who are navigating early adulthood, career formation, and future life planning, contexts that shape their reflections on and aspirations toward a childfree life (details in Table 1).

Table 1. Participants’s Demographic Profile

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Profession	Gross Income (RM)
P1	24	Single	Entrepreneur/Graphic Designer	1500
P2	24	Single	Career Engagement Executive	4000
P3	23	Single	Assistant Marketing Manager	3500
P4	23	Single	QA Softwar Engineer	5000
P5	23	Single	Part-Time Volunteer	Non-fixed income
P6	24	Single	Part-Time Model	None-fixed income

Overview

Five overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (1) redefining womanhood beyond motherhood, (2) choosing the childfree path: what drives the decision, (3) emotional landscapes of living childfree, (4) navigating judgment, pressure, and stigma, and (5) imagining a more understanding and inclusive society. Together, these themes illustrate how childfree aspiration is shaped by the interplay of personal values, sociocultural expectations, and anticipated life trajectories. The participants’ insights were shaped by their position as young women in early adulthood, balancing education, emerging careers, and evolving personal identities within a sociocultural environment that strongly emphasises motherhood.

Theme 1: Rethinking Womanhood Beyond Motherhood

Participants described the choice to remain childfree as an intentional and reflective process rooted in autonomy, self-realization, and resistance to traditional expectations. They reframed womanhood and marital identity in ways that did not depend on motherhood.

P2 articulated this clearly:

“Having children should not define my worth or my marriage. My goals and happiness are not dependent on being a mother.” (P2)

Several participants expressed the view that choosing not to have children should be a neutral personal matter rather than a source of judgment. As P4 stated:

“It’s really about choice. Some people want kids, some don’t. It doesn’t make one more complete than the other.” (P4)

Several participants also challenged conventional marital norms, viewing them as restrictive to women’s self-expression. P1 noted:

“Marriage shouldn’t automatically mean motherhood. That expectation feels like a cage for women who want something different.” (P1)

Collectively, these narratives reveal how modern, urban Malaysian women are reshaping the meaning of femininity and marriage by asserting agency and value-driven decision-making.

Theme 2: Choosing the Childfree Path: What Drives the Decision

Four subthemes emerged as motivations: mental readiness, financial and economic considerations, career aspirations, and health or physical concerns. Several participants emphasised the importance of psychological readiness, expressing concerns about their emotional capacity to undertake motherhood.

P3 explained:

“I don’t think I’m mentally ready to raise another human being while trying to survive my own struggles.” (P3)

Financial pressure was a recurring concern, especially in the context of rising living costs in urban Malaysia.

P5 stated:

“It’s not that I hate children. I just can’t imagine the financial burden. I want to live comfortably, not survive paycheck to paycheck.” (P5)

Many participants linked their aspirations to their professional identity. They perceived motherhood as potentially disruptive to their career growth.

As **P6** put it:

“I worked too hard to build my career. Having a child would mean putting everything on pause and I’m not willing to do that.” (P6)

Theme 3: Emotional Landscapes of Living Childfree

The emotional landscape of remaining childfree comprised both empowerment and ambivalence. Three subthemes emerged: feelings of freedom, internalised guilt, and social isolation.

Many participants experienced an increased sense of emotional stability and personal freedom.

P2 shared:

“I finally feel free to focus on myself and what I love. I don’t have to rush home or plan my life around someone else’s needs.” (P2)

Despite clarity in their decisions, some participants reported moments of guilt shaped by societal messaging.

P1 reflected:

“Sometimes I feel selfish. Society tells you a woman’s purpose is to be a mother, and when you go against that, you question yourself.” (P1)

Social comparison occasionally led to feelings of loneliness, especially in family discussions centred around children.

P4 expressed:

“When everyone talks about their kids, I just stay quiet. It’s not that I regret my choice it’s just lonely sometimes.” (P4)

These experiences demonstrate the emotional complexity of navigating autonomy within a strongly pro-natalist cultural environment.

Theme 4: Navigating Judgement, Pressure and Stigma

All participants reported encountering stigma or criticism related to their childfree status, largely influenced by patriarchal and religious norms. Participants were frequently labelled as selfish or shortsighted.

P3 shared:

“People tell me I’ll regret it when I’m old. They don’t realize how confident I am in this decision.” (P3)

Family members were often sources of pressure, questioning the legitimacy of their marriages or perceived femininity.

P5 noted:

“My relatives keep asking when I’ll have a baby, as if my marriage isn’t real until I do. It’s exhausting.” (P5)

Online platforms intensified scrutiny, creating an environment where strangers felt entitled to comment on personal choices.

P6 described this clearly:

“Online, people say childfree women are against religion or don’t want responsibility. It’s frustrating how strangers think they can judge your life.” (P6)

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, interpreting criticism as part of Malaysia’s ongoing cultural evolution toward greater individual autonomy.

Theme 5: Imagining a More Understanding and Inclusive Society

Participants envisioned a society where individual choices regarding family and motherhood are respected and not morally scrutinized. Three subthemes emerged: acceptance and empathy, policy and workplace reforms, and cultural redefinition of motherhood.

Many expressed a desire for greater societal understanding.

P1 explained:

“It’s not about rejecting motherhood, it’s about having the freedom to choose. Everyone deserves that right.” (P1)

Participants advocated for flexible work arrangements, career pathways, and equitable systems benefiting both parents and non-parents.

P2 stated:

“We need systems that don’t punish women for either choice whether they want kids or not.” (P2)

Participants urged for more nuanced interpretations of cultural expressions like “anak itu rezeki” or children are a blessing from God.

P4 reflected:

“That phrase can be beautiful, but also guilt-inducing. Not having kids doesn’t mean we reject blessings, it’s just a different kind of life.” (P4)

These suggestions highlight participants’ aspirations for a Malaysia that recognises diverse womanhood experiences and life trajectories.

DISCUSSION

Comparison with Existing Literature

This study examined the childfree aspirations of young Malaysian women in early adulthood, exploring how they negotiate personal values, cultural expectations, and religious considerations as they imagine a future without children. The findings deepen existing scholarship on voluntary childlessness by extending the focus from choice (enacted decisions) to aspiration (forward-looking orientations), highlighting the anticipatory reflection and identity work embedded in these early-stage reproductive intentions.

Building on the introduction's framing of "want versus expectation," the discussion further shows that participants continuously balanced what they personally desire with what society expects of them. Their narratives reveal an active negotiation process, where aspirations are shaped not only by personal convictions but also by the pressure to conform to culturally dominant pronatalist norms. This highlights that childfree aspiration is not simply a preference but a site where social expectations are questioned, reinterpreted, or resisted.

Consistent with international literature, autonomy, personal freedom, and lifestyle flexibility emerged as central motivations for aspiring to be childfree. Although the participants share similar ages and relationship statuses, their differing income levels and career trajectories demonstrate that the aspiration to be childfree cuts across economic and occupational lines. Higher-income participants emphasised career progression and lifestyle autonomy, while lower-income participants foregrounded financial instability and emotional readiness, suggesting that different life circumstances can lead to the same reproductive outlook. Prior studies in Western contexts have documented similar values among voluntarily childless individuals (Gillespie, 2003; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Settle & Brumley, 2014). Participants in this study likewise articulated a desire to prioritise emotional well-being, early career development, and meaningful life pathways outside of motherhood.

The present findings also echo global patterns concerning stigma. Park (2002) identified stigma management strategies among childfree adults; similarly, participants in this study described selective disclosure and careful negotiation with family members to avoid conflict. Letherby's (2002) argument, that stereotypes of selfishness persist despite lack of empirical support, was affirmed by participants' reports of being labelled as "selfish," "immature," or "too career-driven." Furthermore, financial concerns, highlighted in earlier work (Brown, 2020; Mohd Ismail, 2025), were strongly present in participants' decision-making processes. Women discussed rising living costs and the emotional toll of financial strain, viewing the childfree path as a more stable and rational alternative.

While many findings parallel Western literature, this study reveals cultural and religious nuances unique to Malaysia. Young Malaysian women in this study constructed their childfree aspirations within a context shaped by collectivism, filial expectations, and Islamic values. Participants described intense familial pressure, reflecting Malaysian norms that emphasise continuity of lineage and the cultural expectation that motherhood is integral to womanhood. Unlike Western contexts where individualism dominates, Malaysian participants reported a heightened sense of obligation to family and society, requiring intentional negotiation to assert their reproductive autonomy.

Islamic ethical discourse was another salient influence. While some participants internalised pro-natalist religious messages, others adopted more nuanced interpretations, arguing that emotional readiness and responsible decision-making are compatible with Islamic values. Hazali (2024) supports this interpretation by distinguishing between religious encouragement for procreation and the recognition of valid personal circumstances that may lead one to delay or avoid parenthood.

This finding underscores the importance of recognising how religious frameworks are actively interpreted rather than passively accepted. Women in this study did not reject religion; rather, they engaged in moral reasoning to align their aspirations with their spiritual beliefs.

An additional culturally specific insight relates to the role of emerging career identity rather than established professional identity. Participants' aspirations to excel in their careers were not merely personal preferences but also responses to Malaysia's evolving labour market, rising educational attainment among women, and persistent gendered expectations around unpaid care work. Their narratives highlight how professional ambition intersects with structural constraints, shaping reproductive aspiration as both a personal and pragmatic choice.

Social and Policy Implications

The findings have implications for Malaysian policy discussions surrounding population ageing and declining fertility. Current pronatalist strategies often assume that women want children but face structural barriers. However, this study shows that a segment of Malaysian women make conscious, value-based decisions to remain childfree. Policies that solely encourage childbirth may overlook these diverse orientations. Future policy development should: promote workplace flexibility and gender-equitable career pathways, expand mental health and counselling support for reproductive decision-making, and include diverse women's voices in fertility policy dialogues.

Building on this, the findings indicate that policy interventions must move beyond general encouragements and address practical, structural reforms. For example, implementing structured flexible-hour schemes, expanding remote-work eligibility for early-career women, and increasing access to affordable, high-quality childcare can better support those who choose motherhood while still respecting the autonomy of women who prefer to remain childfree. These concrete measures make policy recommendations clearer and more actionable.

Additionally, workplace policies should avoid creating a hierarchy that privileges parents over non-parents. Non-parent employees should also receive equitable access to personal leave, wellness programmes, and professional development opportunities. Recognising childfree adults as legitimate stakeholders in social and economic policy can help dismantle assumptions that contributions to society depend primarily on parenthood.

Taken together, these reforms would allow policymakers to respond more accurately to Malaysia's evolving demographic realities while promoting a more inclusive understanding of diverse womanhood experiences.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This study offers several strengths. The phenomenological approach provided rich insight into how young Malaysian women make sense of childfree aspirations, capturing nuances that quantitative research often overlooks. Its focus on aspiration, rather than enacted childfree choice, addresses a clear gap in Malaysian and Asian scholarship. The inclusion of participants from diverse early-career and educational backgrounds also strengthened the thematic depth and contextual understanding of the phenomenon. At the same time, the study has limitations. The small, urban, and highly educated sample limits generalisability, and perspectives from rural or lower-income women may differ. In addition, self-reported narratives may be influenced by cultural sensitivities or social desirability, although such limitations are common in qualitative research.

These limitations suggest several avenues for future study. Research involving men, as well as comparative work between married and unmarried individuals, would broaden understanding of how gender and relationship status shape childfree aspirations. Studies examining Islamic jurisprudence and moral reasoning could deepen insight into how religious values influence reproductive decisions in a Muslim-majority context. Mixed-methods designs may help integrate lived experience with broader demographic patterns, while longitudinal research would offer a valuable understanding of how early aspirations develop, shift, or solidify over time.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the childfree aspirations of Young Malaysian women and showed that these intentions are shaped by a combination of autonomy, emotional readiness, financial considerations, and professional identity.

Participants challenged the assumption that motherhood is central to womanhood or marriage, instead emphasising personal fulfilment and self-determined life choices. At the same time, they navigated complex cultural and religious expectations, experiencing varying degrees of guilt, social isolation, and stigma despite strong personal clarity about their preference.

By focusing on aspiration rather than enacted choice, this study offers new insight into how reproductive intentions are formed within a Malaysian, Muslim-majority context. The findings underscore the need to recognise diverse life trajectories while remaining attentive to the cultural and religious responsibilities that shape reproductive decision-making. Understanding these aspirations contributes to ongoing conversations about gender roles, family expectations, and the evolving experiences of modern Malaysian women.

Normalising childfree identities is not about diminishing the spiritual significance of motherhood in Islam, but about recognising that women navigate different emotional, financial, and relational circumstances. Islamic teachings emphasise intention, accountability, and making choices with wisdom (*hikmah*); thus, allowing women the space to reflect on their readiness aligns with these principles. A society that honours the esteemed role of motherhood while also respecting the thoughtful, responsible decision to delay or forgo parenthood reflects a more compassionate, balanced, and equitable vision for Malaysia's future.

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