Practical Constraints and Poor Childcare Decision-Making among Malaysian Parents: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The increasing participation of women in the labour force in line with Malaysia's rapid economic development has increased the demand and use of childcare services. Despite the protective Child Care Centres Act 1984 (Act 308), there are still unregistered childcare centres operating and many working parents also rely on these unregistered childcare centres which are of course exposed to safety and quality risks. A qualitative phenomenological study was used to explore how Malaysian parents made childcare decisions under practical constraints, which often led to poor decision-making. Using purposive sampling, seven working parents from Peninsular Malaysia who had direct experience with unregistered childcare centres were interviewed through semi-structured sessions. The data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach with NVivo software. The findings revealed that parents' childcare choices were largely shaped by real-world constraints rather than mere neglect or lack of awareness. Three main themes emerged: (1) proximity and accessibility as key considerations for daily comfort and perceived safety, (2) affordability as a core factor of financial stress in childcare decision-making, and (3) flexibility of operating hours as a practical enabler for parents who need to work outside of hours. These interrelated factors capture the manner in which economic, logistical, and institutional constraints intersect with parental choice that ultimately leading to poor childcare decision-making. The study discovers that improving childcare decision-making among parents in Malaysia requires systemic policy intervention at various levels. Improving affordability measures, raising operating flexibility and enhancing regulatory clarity could reduce the gap between parent needs and capacity in the childcare system. There is also a need for accessible, affordable and regulated childcare services to ensure safe and effective decision-making that supports children's well-being and all-round development.

Keyword: Poor Childcare Decision-Making, Practical Constrains, Working Parents, Malaysia, Unregistered Childcare

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, Malaysia's rapid economic growth had led to a massive expansion of female participation in the workforce, which had ultimately triggered major changes in the structure of the modern family (Sultana et al, 2013; Talib, 2009). This change had led to parents working as one of their efforts to balance and supplement family income. Therefore, there had been a growing need for safer and quality childcare services that allowed working parents to achieve a balance between work needs and family responsibilities (Davidson, Foo, & Lim, 2022). TASKA, or childcare centres in this case, needed to be emphasized because they functioned to maintain a safe and healthy environment in promoting early childhood development.

In Malaysia, the Child Care Centres Act 1984 (Act 308) was passed with the aim of ensuring that registered child care centres complied with the standards that had been set. However, this act was still being violated and continued to be violated to this day. This certainly had a severe impact on the issue of safety and quality of child care centres, which remained a major agenda in the never-ending list of issues in Malaysia.

Recorded data reported more than 300 cases of child abuse and neglect in 2022, the majority of which were related to unregistered child care centres (Carvalho, Tan, & Rahim, 2023; Kosmo, 2024). Another study by Chin, Nor, and Lim (2021) revealed that almost half of the child care centres in Malaysia were not regulated by the government. This clearly raised serious questions about why so many parents still chose child care centres that could pose potential dangers to their children.

In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) had also highlighted the fact that quality early childhood care had a direct impact on children's physical, emotional, and social well-being. However, parents in Malaysia often faced several pressures where they had to struggle with the affordability, location, and flexibility of operating hours of a childcare service. A study conducted by Suliati Asri, Wahab, and Ibrahim (2023) had highlighted that economic limitations and the affordability of childcare fees were the main factors for parents choosing to use unregistered childcare centre services. At the same time, factors such as distance from home or workplace were also no less important aspects in reducing commuting time and daily stress for working parents (Hong, Zhu, & He, 2022; Horwood, Fergusson, & Hayatbakhsh, 2021). In addition, parents who worked shifts or those who worked in industries with irregular work schemes also preferred childcare centres with non-standard working hours, even though there was no guarantee of safety or legal registration, due to the urgent need factors that drove their decision-making (Davidson et al., 2022; Mutalib, Salleh, & Azman, 2022).

This clearly showed that parents' choices were not only the result of negligence or ignorance but also represented real-world constraints that they had to face in their professional and socioeconomic lives while still not neglecting their family responsibilities. According to previous research, parents made decisions based on logistical convenience and strong social trust when they were unable to obtain formal information and instead relied more on informal advice (Pacheco-Applegate, Herbst, & Sandstrom, 2020).

To fill this knowledge gap, this study sought to ascertain how parents' decision-making processes in making choices about childcare service use were influenced by practical constraints such as cost, distance, and flexibility of operating hours that lead to poor childcare decision-making among Malaysian parents. It was hoped that the results of this study would increase knowledge about how parents made decisions in the real world and offer policy recommendations to improve early childhood care systems, making them more accessible, safer, and more affordable for all economic classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays, childcare centre services in Malaysia are not only a social issue but also an increasingly complex and ongoing economic challenge. Under the Child Care Centres Act 1984 (Act 308), TASKA are required to register with the Department of Social Welfare, yet concerns remain about childcare providers operating without registration (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2024; Government of Malaysia, 2026). This situation raises concerns about regulatory enforcement and parents' awareness of childcare safety requirements under the Act. Against this background, socioeconomic and logistical factors play an important role in determining parents' childcare decision-making when choosing between registered and unregistered childcare centres.

Among the main constraints in the selection of childcare centre services is the cost of childcare. Suliati Asri et al. (2023) outlined that the affordability of childcare fees was the most common issue in parents' decision-making, with many parents choosing to use unregistered childcare centres because the fees offered were cheaper than those of registered centres. Ruban (2018) also found that low-income parents preferred affordability over care quality. The Social Wellbeing Research Centre's (2023) Belanjawanku report highlighted that childcare expenditure can place pressure on household budgets. Higher operational costs in registered centres may also translate into higher fees, limiting access for middle-income families (Ngadni & Singh, 2024). This concern is further supported by recent empirical evidence on financial trade-offs. In interviews with 67 mothers in Massachusetts, Savage and Robeson (2025) found that due to unavailability of affordable and suitable childcare some families were forced to settle for less-than-ideal arrangements. Similarly, Finders et al. (2025), examining childcare access among families with low incomes, also

identified the significance of logistical fit and financial support. These studies provide comparative international evidence rather than direct estimates for Malaysian parents; they suggest that affordability should be interpreted in relation to the childcare options actually accessible to a family.

Beyond affordability, distance and location also play a significant role in influencing childcare options for parents. Hong et al. (2022) found that parents prefer to utilise childcare centres that are close to where they work or live in order to reduce travel time. Horwood et al. (2021) found that disadvantaged families who have limited transport, would consider distance when choosing childcare. Some parents may also rely on informal sources, such as word of mouth from neighbours or friends, although an official directory of registered TASKA is available through government channels (Government of Malaysia, 2026). Mutalib et al. (2022) also noted that uneven geographical distribution of registered centres between rural and urban regions causes accessibility problems. However, childcare accessibility is also shaped by the number and suitability of available options, not simply travel distance. Using survey data, Finders et al. (2025) conceptualised access in terms of reasonable effort, affordability, support for child development, and the ability to meet parents' needs. Similarly, the multi-site qualitative study by Betancur et al. (2025) found that parents viewed location, cost, and health and safety as major priorities, while high fees and waiting lists often restricted their preferred arrangements.

In addition to cost and accessibility, time constraints and schedule flexibility are equally significant factors. Horwood et al. (2021) and Davidson et al. (2022) ascertained that shift workers and individuals working irregular schedules prefer centres that were open for extended hours, even if they were unregistered childcare centres. Suliati Asri et al. (2023) in Malaysia highlighted the reality that in the absence of family-friendly workplace policies and flexible work schedules, parents may be compelled to seek informal care arrangements that are easier to organise. The tension between parents' flexibility and childcare has also been highlighted by Savage and Robeson (2025), who found that mothers often had to make a trade-off between quality, price and time spent. This highlights how flexibility needs to be considered along with affordability and accessibility.

Alongside these constraints, risk perceptions and limited information also influence childcare decisions. Hotz and Wiswall (2019) noted that parents often don't have complete information when making their decisions, while Pilarz et al. (2022) and Sandstrom et al. (2024) illustrated that reliance on social reviews and peer experiences can result in subjective assessments of childcare quality. Chin et al. (2021) emphasised that ineffective communication between authorities and users can leave parents unaware of their selected childcare centres' registration status. Recent studies further emphasise the role of information-seeking in childcare selection. Tang et al. (2024) reported that 43.1% of the parents in their analysed sample considered only one provider during their search, with information sources associated with subsequent choices. DeMeo Cook et al. (2025) found that families used multiple decision-making strategies but continued to face difficulties in obtaining relevant childcare information. Betancur et al. (2025) likewise observed reliance on personal recommendations and digital information, alongside difficulties assessing available options. These findings support closer examination of how practical limitations and imperfect information interact in parents' decisions.

Overall, the literature suggests that parents' decisions in choosing childcare centres in Malaysia were not only influenced by perceptions of safety but also by real practical constraints. Nevertheless, a research gap remains in examining how these three important factors (cost, distance, and time) interacted in shaping parental decision-making that may lead to poor childcare decision-making, especially among parents who had experienced direct harm or neglect in unregistered centres. Therefore, this study aims to examine in greater depth the lived experiences of working parents in this context through a phenomenological approach.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A phenomenological approach and qualitative methodology were used to explore the lived experiences of

Malaysian parents in making childcare decisions, particularly those whose children had been harmed (through abuse, neglect, or abandonment) in unregistered childcare centres. As it allowed the researchers to see how parents' decision-making processes were influenced by practical constraints and to capture their reasoning processes in depth, a phenomenological approach was applied. The phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meanings attached to childcare decisions. Guided by an interpretivist orientation, semi-structured interviews were used to identify shared and divergent experiences. Participants were selected for their direct experiences of adverse childcare incidents rather than statistical representativeness (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Knott et al., 2022).

Participants & Sampling

Extreme-case purposive sampling was employed to recruit working mothers whose children had experienced abuse, neglect, or negligence in unregistered childcare arrangements. Seven participant accounts were included in the present analysis, which focuses on practical considerations relating to proximity, affordability and operating-hour flexibility. Participants represented different occupations and were aged 26–51 years, residing in Perak, Melaka, Selangor and Johor (Table 2). Sample adequacy was considered in relation to the focused research question, the specificity of participants' experiences and the richness of their accounts, in line with the information-power approach (Malterud et al., 2016). Wan Ruslan et al. (2014) suggest that qualitative studies may involve approximately two to ten participants, provided that sufficiently comprehensive data are obtained.

Potential participants were identified through parent-focused social media groups, mothers' support networks and childcare advocacy organisations. Eligibility criteria included being an employed mother who relied on childcare services and having a child who experienced a documented incident of abuse, neglect or negligence. Only one mother from each distinct incident was recruited to avoid duplicate case accounts. Potential participants were screened against predetermined criteria, and incidents were assessed using available supporting documents, including police reports, medical records or other relevant official documentation. Before the individual interviews, participants were informed about the study purpose, confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw, and informed consent was obtained.

Table 1: Participant criteria

Criteria	Description
Employment Status	Parent(s) who are working and dependent on the unregistered childcare centre.
Child Age Group	Child between 0 - 4 years old of age at the time of the incident.
Type of Incident	At least one incident involving neglect, abuse, or negligence at the unregistered childcare centre.
Type of childcare used	Unregistered childcare centre (operate without license)
Willingness to Participate	Parent(s) who are willing and able to share their experiences in detail

Table 2: Demographic Information of Research Participants

Participants	Age	Occupation	Child age	State
P1	40	Lecturer	6 months	Perak

P2	51	Administrative assistant	1 year	Perak
P3	26	Clerk	6 months	Melaka
P4	29	Livestream host	1 year 3 months	Selangor
P5	40	Teacher	6 months	Melaka
P6	30	Hotel receptionist	2 years	Johor
P7	38	Information officer	6 months	Melaka

Interview Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was developed from the literature and reviewed by three experts to ensure that the content was appropriate, clear and concise. A pilot interview was performed and there were only minor changes made to the wording of the questions. This guide included questions regarding participant background, childcare information-seeking, previous childcare arrangements, why they chose this provider, their experience of harm and their reflections. Further questions were included to elicit more detailed answers. The interviews lasted around 45-60 minutes. They were conducted with the participants consent using an audio recorder. Field notes were also used to capture any non-verbal cues. Each interview was one to one to ensure participant confidentiality and to give them the opportunity to openly discuss childcare experiences. Face to face and online interviews were used depending on participant availability. All interviews followed the same core questions with an open questioning approach.

Data Analysis & Trustworthiness

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: (1) familiarisation, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. NVivo was used to manage the transcripts, coding, analytical notes and thematic maps. A codebook was developed and statements were coded to ensure they were consistent to the original transcripts. Code(s) were changed or merged if appropriate and themes carefully developed. Trustworthiness was ensured by keeping a record of decisions made during analysis, having an audit trail, being aware of researcher bias, member checking and triangulating with appropriate observational and documentary evidence.

The adequacy of the seven-participant sample was assessed in relation to the focused research question, the specificity of participants' experiences, and the depth of the interview accounts. Extreme-case purposive sampling enabled the inclusion of mothers with direct experience of adverse incidents in unregistered childcare arrangements, providing contextually relevant accounts of the practical constraints shaping their decisions. Across the seven interviews, thematic analysis identified recurring patterns concerning proximity and accessibility, affordability, and flexibility of operating hours. These patterns provided sufficient analytical depth to address the study's specific aim. Consistent with the information-power framework of Malterud et al. (2016), sample adequacy was therefore considered in terms of participants' relevance and the richness of the data, rather than participant numbers alone. Although these themes recurred across accounts, recurrence was not treated as definitive evidence of data saturation, since further interviews might have generated additional insights.

Researcher Reflexivity

The primary researcher in this study identifies as a female with business risk management background who does not have children. She is as an academic researcher without experience as a parent and does not have existing relationships with the participants prior the data collection. This pronounced outsider status shaped the research process and controlled the risk of assumed understanding about the participants' accounts.

Several participants were initially hesitated to participate in the study. They were likely to avoid recalling the traumatic circumstances of child abuse or neglect under centre care. Recognizing these barriers, the researcher constantly assured them that the interview protocol had been approved by the university research ethics committee and no harm would be caused by the interview. Moreover, the researcher also explained that they could withdraw from the study if necessary.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexivity journal to document implicit assumptions regarding the challenges associated with childcare decisions and emotional responses from the interview. Reflexive journaling, combined with peer debriefing where other researchers reviewed the codes and themes, corrected bias stemming from the lack of fully understanding the participants' experience. This process ensured that the final themes emerged from the study accurately portrayed the participants' realities.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was provided by Human Research Ethics Committee of Sultan Idris Education University (2024-0279-01). Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to data collection. Participant participation was voluntary and guaranteed. In addition, participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time without suffering any loss. Data confidentiality was also guaranteed through the anonymization of personal details and secure storage of all research materials and data. Researchers always adhered to the norms of academic honesty, refraining from any form of misconduct, including falsification of information or misrepresentation, throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

In this study, seven parents were interviewed. Using phenomenological analysis with NVivo software, three main themes emerged as key factors (practical constrains) that strongly influenced parents' decisions to keep choose unregistered childcare services: (1) proximity and accessibility, (2) affordability of childcare, and (3) flexibility of operating hours. These themes show how practical limits, not just neglect, affected parents' childcare decision-making.

Theme 1: Proximity and Accessibility as Key Considerations

In-depth semi-structured interviews with study participants found that the most commonly mentioned practical limitation was the location or accessibility of childcare services. Parents preferred centres or caregivers that were near their homes or workplaces. Being close is linked to convenience, shorter travel times, and improved trust, especially when the caregiver is a neighbour or a familiar community member.

- Participant 1: "At the time, I was living in Bukit Beruntung, so my main priority was finding a caregiver nearby. I was still breastfeeding, but my milk supply was low when pumping. I figured if she ever ran out of milk, I could easily pop over to the caregiver's house to nurse my baby. Her house happened to be right in front of my old campus, so it was incredibly convenient."
- Participant 7: "The location was incredibly close to my workplace—less than five minutes away. That was actually my most important consideration. If it's too far and an emergency happens, it becomes a real problem. That is why I chose the closest option available."
- Participant 2: "We chose her (caregiver) because she was close to home. Since she lived in the same neighbourhood, it made mornings and after-work pickups so much easier. It meant less commuting time and lower travel costs. Plus, because she was our neighbour, we already trusted her."
- Participant 3: "The main reason we chose it (childcare) was its proximity to our house. Since both my husband and I work, having it close by made things so much easier for us."
- Participant 5: "The most important factor is actually that it's right behind my house. I've lived here for a long time, so it makes going to work early in the morning so much easier. If anything happens, my husband can easily just drop off or pick up our child right behind the house."

In addition to providing practical advantages, proximity and accessibility fostered social trust and a sense of safety for parents. Parents felt more comfortable leaving their children with neighbours or other close acquaintances. Hong et al. (2022) and Horwood et al. (2021) also found that short commutes were an important factor in choosing childcare, especially for working parents with limited mobility. Due to the lack of easily accessible formal information about registered childcare facilities, parents were forced to rely on informal networks (Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020). Proximity was a key driver in this study because it allowed parents to reduce the stress of daily travel and respond more quickly in the event of an emergency, even if the childcare services used lacked legal registration or safety oversight. This was certainly the biggest factor influencing parents who ended up getting caught up in poor childcare decision-making that unknowingly put their children at risk of harming their well-being and development.

Theme 2: Affordability as a Core Factor in Childcare Decision-Making

Affordability in relation to the cost of childcare services was the second most commonly cited practical constraint among parents. Parents who participated in this study generally stated that their decision to use unregistered childcare services was driven and influenced by their ability to pay and the costs offered. Low- and middle-income families are now more likely to access unregistered childcare services more easily thanks to reduced fees, negotiable fees, and flexible and cheaper cost structures.

- Participant 1: “We also had to take childcare fees into account at the time. Our salaries weren't very high, so when we checked the price and found out it was RM250, we thought it was perfectly fine. The caregiver agreed to that amount, and she even offered to do all the laundry.”
- Participant 2: “The caregiver's rates were very reasonable. It wasn't a lot of money, so we could easily afford it.”
- Participant 3: “The second childcare provider didn't have a set fee. Instead, she asked us what we could afford to pay, so I gave her RM350. My husband looked into other options as well, but they were all charging between RM450 and RM500.”
- Participant 4: “Back in 2018, if I remember correctly, childcare only cost around RM350 a month. I looked after my kids myself over the weekend, so they were only there from Monday to Friday. On workdays, if I was running late, I usually wouldn't get to the caregiver's house until about 8:00 p.m. Whenever that happened, she would just charge me a late pick-up fee of RM10 per hour.”

This theme emerged to further illustrate how parental decision-making is influenced by economic pressures leading to poor childcare decision-making. Many of the study participants, particularly parents with limited funds, considered affordability to be an important factor in decision-making. Suliati Asri et al. (2023) assert that affordability plays a significant role in the decisions taken by Malaysian parents. Many families were financially burdened by childcare costs, which can amount to up to 15% of household income (Social Wellbeing Research Centre, 2023). According to earlier research, because registered centres charge more, low-income families were more likely to use unregistered alternative care (Ruban, 2018; Ngadni & Singh, 2024). Therefore, affordability is more a function of need than preference which ultimately exposes parents to being influenced into using unregistered childcare services which are risky for children’s wellbeing.

Theme 3: Flexibility of Operating Hours as a Practical Enabler

The flexibility of childcare operations' hours was the third practical constraint stated. Parents who participated in the study pointed out that unregistered childcare facilities were more flexible than registered childcare facilities in accommodating early drop-offs, late pick-ups, and short-term or irregular childcare needs.

- Participant 5: “The first factor is definitely time. Because the place is so close, I did a test drive in the morning after dropping the kids off just to see exactly how many minutes it would take to get to school (my workplace). Since I drop them off at 7:00, I can get to school by 7:15, which is perfect. If I had chosen a different childcare provider, I’d have to deal with another traffic jam and more traffic lights, which just isn't convenient. It would also make things difficult for me if an emergency ever came up.”

- Participant 6: "For me, it comes down to time. I need the flexibility of round-the-clock childcare, and everything we've set up is by mutual agreement. Honestly, I'm willing to pay whatever she charges as long as it makes my life easier. I just need someone to watch the kids for a short while, especially since I only asked for ten days, not a full month."
- Participant 4: "I asked her if it would be okay if I picked up the kids late sometimes, and she said yes. Her schedule aligned perfectly with mine. Even if I was running late until 8:00 p.m., it was never an issue—she would just charge me an extra fee."

An important practical factor for parents who juggled work and childcare responsibilities was the flexibility of operating hours. Parents appreciated caregivers who could adjust their schedules to suit irregular working hours. This was in line with findings by Horwood et al. (2021) and Davidson et al. (2022), who found that parents working non-standard hours often relied on informal childcare arrangements. In Malaysia, this situation was made worse by the lack of family-friendly work policies (Mutalib et al., 2022). Despite the potential safety risks, this led parents who worked shifts or informal jobs to still find unregistered childcare providers more attractive, as they could offer care outside of regular operating hours that ultimately blinding parents to poor and risky childcare decisions for their children.

Overall, the themes emerged from this study supported the Rational Choice Theory which postulate that an individual make a decision by weighing the benefits and costs associated with the available options. A logical decision is to select an option that will maximize the utility, while minimizing constraints. In the childcare decision context, this study clearly demonstrates that parents made a concerted effort to understand the potential values and risk in making such decisions. They compared the financial burden of childcare against their household income, and arrived at the decision that fit their financial capability.

However, the childcare cost is the not the only determining factor in the childcare decisions. The interviews evidently proven that parents also weighed the proximity of the childcare to their homes and workplaces, which is a rational action for parents who care about their children and work. The reasons for selecting childcare closer to home and work were to minimize their constraints, i.e., to nurse the child, prepare for emergencies, and convenient drop-off and pick-up. No participants stated that the cost of travelling influenced them to choose caregivers closer to homes of workplaces, also verified that for parents, a rational childcare decision was driven by the need to be closed to the children of very young age.

On a different note, rational parents also made decisions based on family and work constraints. While registered childcare mostly operates at normal office hours (7.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.), unregistered childcare fill in this gap by offering services outsides the normal work hours. In this study, the livestream host and hotel receptionist required flexible childcare services due to their shift-based work schedules. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, school teachers' dismissal times vary between 2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m., depending on school hours. However, due to heavy administrative workloads, they are often required to stay later, with their actual working hours fluctuating according to the school season. As a result, they selected flexible childcare arrangement which would accommodate their work demands.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how working Malaysian parents decide to choose unregistered childcare facilities despite potential safety and legal concerns, along with how they made childcare decisions under significant practical constraints that lead to poor childcare decision-making. Parents who participated in these phenomenological interviews described how proximity, cost, and flexible operating hours influenced parents' decisions about childcare services.

This was consistent with international research that revealed how parental decisions were often shaped and influenced by socioeconomic pressures and the lack of formal and affordable childcare options (Chaudry et al., 2011; Forry et al., 2014; Pilarz & Hill, 2022). As a result, their decisions were not always made based on safety or quality considerations, but rather on urgent practical needs, leading to potentially compromised childcare choices.

The findings presented showed that for dual-earner parents managing work and childcare responsibilities, proximity and closeness were mere survival strategies. Most of the participants favoured childcare centres near homes and workplaces. These tended to be from familiar neighbours or members of the community because the shorter distance saved time and allowed quicker response in the event of an emergency. Such situational compromises illustrate how constraints forced parents to make less-than-ideal decisions simply to cope with daily demands. This reliance on social networks of trust reflected a broader global trend in which parents relied on locally anchored solutions or informal recommendations when there was no explicit regulatory information (Vincent et al., 2010; Morrissey, 2008).

Financial constraints again enhanced this reality. Parents as participants in this study also frequently cited that price or affordability as similarly important factors. The high cost of registered childcare providers has prompted low- and middle-income families to turn to cheaper initiatives offered by informal or unregistered childcare services. This was consistent with reports that economic structural limitations caused low- and middle-income mothers to prioritize cost and convenience over safety guarantees or levels of accreditation (Henly & Lyons, 2000; Forry et al., 2014; Press et al., 2015). Surrogates of affordability thus dictated decisions and highlighted persistent gaps in access to high-quality, secure childcare centre services (Penn, 2019). Consequently, affordability pressures often resulted in trade-offs that undermined parents' ability to select safe, developmentally appropriate childcare environments.

In addition, changing and unexpected working hours also played an important role for parents who worked after their usual routine hours or beyond their normal working day, sometimes requiring them to work overtime. Parents enjoyed and appreciated caregivers who could accommodate early morning drop-offs, late evening pickups or last-minute situations, wherein flexibility was rarely offered in registered childcare centres. This supported global evidence that suggested that parents with non-standard working hours were more reliant on informal or unregulated childcare arrangements (Pilarz & Hill, 2022; Forry et al., 2014; Press et al., 2015). Such reliance, however, often came with limited oversight, increasing the likelihood of poor childcare decision-making when emergency flexibility overshadowed safety considerations.

Overall, this research suggested that childcare service choices were subject to structural pressures within clear practical constraints related to labour market rigidities, availability concerns, and economic pressures. These combined pressures placed families, particularly those in lower and middle socioeconomic groups, at greater risk of making childcare decisions that did not necessarily align with the best interests of their children. To address these persistent situations and issues, reforms needed to not only change individual (parent) behaviour but also recognize childcare services as a fundamental social and economic infrastructure that was essential for the long-term health of families and communities (Moss, 2019). Without systemic improvements, parents will continue to operate under constraint-driven decision-making that compromises children's early care quality and safety.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and the broader literature, this section proposes several practical policies and recommendations to strengthen Malaysia's childcare ecosystem and reduce reliance on unsafe or unregistered childcare centre:

Expand Access to Affordable Childcare

Tiers of subsidies or tax incentives should be introduced for licensed childcare providers to help low- and middle-income families afford high-quality childcare services (OECD, 2023). This will lessen the financial disparity that forces parents to provide unofficial, unregulated care.

Promote Flexible and Inclusive Childcare Models

Provide childcare programs that connected to the workplace and licensed facilities with extended hours to serve parents with irregular work schedules. Research from around the world indicates that this kind of

flexibility enhances both the children's wellbeing and the job security of parents (Morrissey, 2008; Press et al., 2015).

Implement Parent Education and Outreach Programs

Organize workshops and national campaigns to inform parents about the dangers of unregistered childcare, children's rights, and quality indicators. Research shows that parents who are well-informed are less likely to make risky childcare decisions (Vincent et al., 2010; Press et al., 2015).

LIMITATION

This research is subject to several limitations. First, the number of participants or sample size was very small and only involved working parents from Peninsular Malaysia. As such, the findings cannot be assumed to represent all parents in Malaysia, especially those in Sabah and Sarawak who may face different situations. Second, the interviews relied on parents trying to recall past incidents, so some details might not have been entirely accurate due to memory or emotional factors at the time. Third, this study only examined parents' perspectives and did not include childcare providers or authorities who could have offered a clearer picture of what is happening within the childcare system. Since the study focused on personal experiences, the results reflect what these parents went through but do not explain the exact causes behind their decisions, indicating the need for future research with larger and more diverse groups. Therefore, future research should consider larger samples, include multiple regions such as Sabah and Sarawak, and incorporate the perspectives of childcare providers, regulatory agencies, policymakers and relevant authorities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of childcare decision-making in Malaysia and the challenges surrounding unregistered childcare centres.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (Approval Code: 2024-0279-01). All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the relevant institutional and ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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