

Chapter 7

Decision to Have Children from the Perspective of Young Malay Muslim Academic Women

Zuraini Jamil Osman

Abstract One issue that has been widely discussed in numerous studies in many countries, including Malaysia, as been linked to career women is motherhood. The aim of this paper is to explore what made the young female Malay Muslim academics decided to have children in their family life. Two groups of respondents with a small sample size, who work in the public universities in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor areas, have been recruited. The first group consists of ten married women, and the second group includes five single female academics. I used a qualitative interview method to collect the primary data. The findings showed that all these women desired three to six children and none of them wanted to be childless. All the women also made it clear that the number of children they have had, or plan to have in the future, is ideally based on several factors that they had carefully considered. The factors have been categorised into five, namely, early marriage; financial, emotional and psychological stability; religious encouragement; career commitment; and the number of siblings.

Keywords Career women • Malay academic women • Motherhood • Decision to have children

7.1 Introduction

For some married career women, starting a family shortly after marriage becomes the next important thing to do, while others may decide to remain childless or delay starting a family in order to achieve their career goals [1–4]. In some Asian countries, the changes in marriage trends played a considerable role in affecting declining fertility during the last decades of the twentieth century. It has been reported that Japan, Hong Kong and Korea are the most affected countries, facing the lowest fertility rates [3]. Koo and Wong's study [4] found that the new

Z.J. Osman (✉)

Department of Social Studies and Citizenship, Faculty of Human Sciences, Sultan Idris Education University, 35900 Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia
e-mail: zuerinas@yahoo.com; zuerjami@fsk.upsi.edu.com

generation of young, educated women in Hong Kong prefers to marry and have children after the age of 30. Their studies indicated that 22 % of married couples aged 30–40 were childless, 41 % had one child and 31 % had two children. Similarly, Chan and Wong's study (2009) revealed that young, educated women in Hong Kong not only delayed marriage but also refused to have many children and some of them decided to remain childless [cited in 4]. One study in Turkey, which has a majority Muslim population, carried out by Ecivit et al. [1] found that professional Turkish women, who worked in computer programming occupations, mostly opted for a single child or preferred to remain childless. Hakim's [cited in 2] studies in Britain found that some women in high-status professions and managerial positions remained childless in order to minimise problems with their work-life balance.

In Malaysia, several studies have been conducted on the differential fertility rates of the three major groups: Malays, Chinese and Indians [5–8]. For instance, a study carried out by Arshart and Tey [6] found that Chinese or Indian women aged 20–49 who had ever been married were likely to have fewer children than their Malay counterparts. According to Leete [5], having a larger family in Malay society was in line with and relative to the Malaysian population policy proposed by the former Prime Minister, Tun Sri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in September 1982 and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, which caused a decline in the use of modern contraceptive methods among Malays.

Findings from both studies were similar to a study conducted by Tan and Tey [8], who found that among the three major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia, the desire to have more children among the Malays was about twice as high as among Chinese and Indians. This study also stated that rural Malay women have more children than their counterparts in urban areas. In recent studies, delayed marriage and people opting to remain single have been found to contribute to declining fertility rates among Malaysian communities [9, 10]. According to the 2010 census, Bumiputera fertility rates are still higher than those of their counterparts, which were 2.8 children per woman, followed by Indians with 2.1 and Chinese with 1.8 [11].

7.1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study attempts to explore how the young female Malay academics, who work in two urban areas, namely, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, made a decision to have children in their family life. More specifically, the objectives of this study are (1) to find out the number of children they desired and (2) to examine the factors influencing their decisions to have children.

7.2 Methodology

In the context of this study, which was an exploratory study, I used a qualitative semi-structured interview as a tool to collect the primary data. According to Oakley [12] and Hesse-Biber [13], a researcher can obtain more personal information from the study respondents, particularly pertinent to their private lives, as well as can understand in depth about the respondents' experiences by using this method. Two groups of respondents with a small sample size, who work in the public universities in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor areas, have been recruited. These two urban areas have been chosen because they do not only represent the most modern and metropolitan cities but also provide many higher educational institutions, job and education opportunities and differences in social stratification, as well as they have Malays as the biggest ethnic group. The first group consists of ten married young Malay academic women, and the second group includes five single female academics. Their age range was between the ages of 24 and 40 years. I recruited all the respondents through my friendship networks and the snowballing technique by using the purposive sampling [14].

7.3 Results and Discussions

All my respondents, married and still single, wanted to have children, and interestingly, all of them desired more than two children as shown in Tables 7.1 and 7.2, which is consistent with the available literature that indicates having more children is generally accepted in Malay Muslim society.

Table 7.1 shows that eight out of ten married respondents had been married for more than 5 years, one couple had been married for 4 years and another for just 6 months. All of them except the newly married (Maria) have children between the ages of 11 months and 13 years. Most have two (Emilia, Basariah, Yusrina, Umaira), three (Mashitah, Shakila) or four children (Rashidah, Arena), and one has six children (Halimah). Interestingly, these women still desired additional children in the future. For instance, Basariah (aged 32, married) said: 'I think I want to have more kids in the future, at least three more [laughs], in shaa Allah [if it is Allah's will].' This desire seems to have been shared by Rashidah (aged 37, married), who said 'I think my family size is enough now. However, if I could, I still want one more child [laughs].'

The female single respondents also shared similar opinions with the married women when they expressed a desire to have three to five children, as shown in Table 7.2. As Mazniah (aged 24, single female) said, 'I want a big family because the more the merrier. For me, having four children is enough.'

Evidently, the declining fertility rates are not affecting my sample as all of them prefer to have more children in their families. The married respondents made it clear that they were not only expressing their desires, but some of them have put

Table 7.1 Number of children born to married respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Length of marriage	Number of children	Age of children (in years)
Emilia	31	7 years	2 (1 son and 1 daughter)	7 and 3
Basariah	32	4 years	2 (both sons), 4 months pregnant with the third child when the interview was carried out	3 and 2
Rashidah	37	12 years	4 (2 sons and 2 daughters)	11, 9, 6 and 18 months
Halimah	35	13 years	6 (all sons)	12, 11, 9, 5, 3 and 11 months
Arena	35	10 years	4 (2 sons and 2 daughters)	10, 8, 6 and 4
Mashitah	37	9 years	3 (1 son and 2 daughters)	9, 5 and 2
Yusrina	37	10 years	2 (both daughters)	8 and 3
Umaira	31	7 years	2 (1 son and 1 daughter)	7 and 5
Maria	27	6 months	–	–
Shakila	40	15 years	3 (2 sons and 1 daughter)	13, 10 and 6

Table 7.2 Ideal number of children desired by single respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship status	Desired children
Amalina	25	Single	4
Bahijah	29	Single	4
Irdina	27	Engaged	3–5
Naimah	26	Engaged	5
Mazniah	24	Single	4

their desires into practice. Although all the women in this study wanted to have more children, they still have certain limits. This study also found that three- to six-child families were the most desired family size, and this was considered to be both an ideal and the average family size among my respondents. This can be seen when two of the respondents considered that a family larger than six would be too many for them. As Rashidah and Halimah explained,

Having one more child is enough for me because I have already got four children. To have more than that, it is too big a number for me [laughs]. (Rashidah, aged 37, married)

I think among my friends, I am the one who has the most children [laughs]. The majority of my friends only have between one and four children. I have six and I think that number of children is enough for now [laughs]. (Halimah, aged 35, married)

With regard to the family size desired by my respondents, all the women made it clear that the number of children they have had, or plan to have in the future, is ideally based on several factors that they had carefully considered. I have categorised the factors that influenced their decisions about having children into five, namely, early marriage; financial, emotional and psychological stability; religious encouragement; career commitment; and the number of siblings. Interestingly, they stated that the decision about their desired family size was a joint decision with their husbands, boyfriends or fiancés.

7.3.1 *Early Marriage*

Halimah (aged 35, married) was the only respondent who stated that the reason she had six children was that she had married earlier than her counterparts. As shown in Table 7.1, the length of Halimah's marriage was 13 years, and she had married at the age of 22. Considering the fact that her age at marriage was quite young, I found that this confirmed Halimah's reason why she not only was the youngest to marry among my respondents but also had the most children in my study. As she recalled her experience, 'I got married at the age of 22, and I married earlier than my friends, and for sure I have more children than my friends too [laughs].'

7.3.2 *Financial, Emotional and Psychological Stability*

Financial stability was viewed as the primary factor that influenced their decision making on the number of children they desired. Education, healthcare and childcare were the basic necessities, which my respondents perceived as important to provide for their children. For instance, the cost of raising children was one of the factors that Basariah and her husband had discussed before deciding the number of children they wanted to have. She explained:

We want to have a big family, but we have to consider our financial, physical and mental condition. I now send my children to the nursery and the cost is quite high and expensive. In fact, I know that to provide them with good education, we also need to have a lot of money. We, therefore, decided to have not more than four children as we found our financial condition could only afford to have that number of children. (Basariah, aged 32, married)

Amalina shared a similar reason with Basariah when she and her boyfriend found that financial preparation was vital if they wanted to have many children, particularly when they decided to settle down in an urban area:

If I can, I want to have a big family and have many children. I want to have more than four children. However, I think that is inappropriate because I will settle down in the Kuala Lumpur area. I cannot have many children because I have to consider my finances as well. You know, the life demands of living in the Kuala Lumpur area are really high. My boyfriend also has the same opinion as me. So, we [she and her boyfriend] have decided not to have many children. We were thinking to have four children, and we thought that was enough and just nice with our financial condition. (Amalina, aged 25, single female)

As mothers, virtually all my respondents realised that they have a huge responsibility in raising their children and want to do it well. Shakila (aged 40, married) and Naimah (aged 26, single female) mentioned that the number of children they desire played an important role in ensuring that their wishes to provide the best for their children can be fulfilled. According to Shakila, her decision to have only three children was also agreed by her husband as they intended to give their full attention to all their children's needs. Thus, she emphasised that they never plan to have another child. Naimah told me that she initially wanted to have two children after

she had considered that her financial, emotional and physical ability as a mother would only be able to manage and handle two children. However, after a discussion with her fiancé, she decided to have four when her fiancé felt that two children were too few for their future family size. Therefore, they came to an agreement on the number of children as they were ready to take on the challenges together. She felt that her greatest challenge when she married might be in handling that situation of being a career woman when at the same time she wanted to be a good mother.

7.3.3 *Religious Encouragement*

Two of my respondents have related their desire to have more children to Islamic teachings. According to Basariah (aged 32, married) and Halimah (aged 35, married), religious encouragement about the benefits of having children has influenced them, and they also believed that to have children was one of the objectives in a marriage. According to these women, Islam does not limit the number of children, and therefore, all parents are expected to bear as many children as possible unless there are reasons that would risk harm to the mother or the children. For this reason, they made it clear that ideally marriage is designed to form a family and have children and, as mothers, childcare was one of the most important responsibilities that they have to fulfil.

However, to fulfil their huge responsibility as mothers, they realised that they needed to plan well so that they could become responsible mothers in order to produce good children. They also believed that children are granted to them by Allah S.W.T, and therefore, children are seen as a gift and adornment in the world. For instance, Halimah explained that she was very concerned with her responsibilities towards her children and she always wanted to ensure that she would be able to manage them, as she stated: ‘They [her children] are a trust given by Allah S.W.T. and I will have to take care of all their needs.’

Basariah (aged 32, married) was also the only respondent to mention that her desire to have children was also related to Islamic beliefs about the hereafter as she said: ‘when we as parents die, they will pray for us in the hereafter.’ She believed that children should pray for their parents as often as possible, not only during the parents’ lifetimes but also when they died. Basariah further explained that she believes this is important for her as a Muslim. She found that this attitude was important for her to implement as a Muslim because this was the only way for her to seek benediction for her deceased parents, and she expected her children to do the same thing for her.¹

¹ I found that Basariah’s views were similar to what has been said by the Prophet Muhammad S.A. W., who said in the *Hadis* ‘when a person dies, he can no longer do anything about his future life except in one of three ways: a continuous act of charity, a useful contribution to knowledge and a dutiful child who prays for him.’ In this matter, Islam has made it clear that this commandment applies to both parents through the prayers of both sons and daughters.

7.3.4 *Career Commitment*

Career commitment was also one of the factors that related to the decision made by my respondents about the number of children they desired. They were concerned that having more children than they wanted would interfere with their careers. This matter was raised by two of my respondents who are currently pursuing their studies at PhD level. Arena (aged 35, married) wants no more children; she said: 'I have already had four children, two daughters and two sons. I think that's enough so far, and at the same time, I'm doing a PhD now which I need to focus on.' Maria, the newly married respondent, stated that her career commitment was a reason why she and her husband had decided to delay pregnancy and wanted to have only three children:

My husband and I prefer to have only two or three children. The main reason we want to have only this number of children is because I will be a career mother, therefore, I am afraid I cannot give full attention to them. I have two important roles that need to be fulfilled simultaneously. As I have just got married and I am also doing my PhD now, we decided to have our first baby after I finish my studies next year. (Maria, aged 27, married)

7.3.5 *The Number of Siblings*

A study carried out by Ghani [15] on the differential between three generations, grandmothers, mothers and granddaughters, in marital fertility schedules in Malaysia found that the generations show that a mother's fertility behaviour tends to be followed by her daughters [15]. I also found that the number of siblings in my respondents' parental family had strongly influenced their decisions about the number of children they desired. As all my respondents were from large families, hence, they themselves tended to value large families as well. Three of them told me that they hope to have at least two children if they cannot have a similar number to *their parents*. For example, Emilia (aged 31, married) has decided to have four children, not only because she considers it ideal but also because it accords with her own upbringing. Umaira also talked about both herself and her husband living with a large number of siblings, and therefore, she imagines having at least five or six children. She said:

I think my family size is still small. My husband and I are planning to have four or five children, which I think is ideal. My husband and I also come from big families. I have five siblings and my husband has six. (Umaira, aged 31, married)

Basariah's story about her own childhood experiences of living with her large family has also inspired her to have a large family size. According to her, she enjoyed and treasured the times together with all her family members. She felt that it brought happiness and joy to her life. Therefore, as she looked forward to that

environment in her own family, her desire to have more than two children was clearly revealed. She said:

My family is considered to be a big family. I felt very happy spending my time with all of them. I have six siblings and we had fun growing up together. Although everybody is working now, we still find time to get together. I like to be around my siblings and parents. I would like to have, you know, that kind of noisy and happy environment too in my family. (Basariah, aged 32, married)

7.4 Conclusion

It is clear that having children is still considered important for my respondents although they realised that they need to fulfil the big responsibility as a mother and their career responsibility. Interestingly, they not only wanted to have children but also desired a certain number of children due to several factors and considerations. They also have a say in deciding their desired family size. It could be accepted that the respondents in this study seem not affected by the declining fertility rates as they prefer to have more children. Their views towards the number of children they desired are consistent with the findings from the fertility research in Malaysia, which found that Malay Muslim women were known to desire more children than Chinese and Indian Malaysian women. With certain limits, the study found that three- to six-child families were an ideal and the average family size desired by these women after they had a joint decision with their husbands, boyfriends or fiancés.

References

1. Ecivit, Y., Gunduz-Hosgor, A., & Tokluoglu, C. (2003). Professional women in computer programming occupations: The case of Turkey. *Career Development International*, 8(2), 78–87.
2. Hakim, C. (2006). Women, careers and work-life preferences. *British Journal of Guidance and Counseling*, 34(3), 279–292.
3. Jones, G. W. (2007). Fertility decline in Asia: The role of marriage change. *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, 22(2), 13–32.
4. Koo, A. C., & Wong, T. W. P. (2009). Family in flux: Benchmarking family changes in Hong Kong society. In K. Chan, S. K. Agnes, & Y. Chu (Eds.), *Social transformations in Chinese society, special focus: doing families in Hong Kong*. Boston: Brill Leiden.
5. Leete, R. (1996). *Malaysia's demographic transition: Rapid development, culture, and politics*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
6. Arshart, H., & Tey, N. P. (1988). An overview of the population dynamics in Malaysia. *Malays J Reprod Health*, 6(1), 23–46.
7. Ying, S. L. (1992). Determinants of fertility in Malaysia-How much do we know? *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 23(1), 112–132.
8. Tey, N. P., & Tan, P. C. (1994). Do fertility intentions predict subsequent behaviour? Evidence from Peninsular Malaysia. *Studies in Family Planning*, 25(4), 222–231.

9. Mat, R., & Omar, R. O. (2002). Demographic trends in Malaysia with special focus on women. Department of Statistics, Malaysia. Available at <http://www.statistics.gov.my>. Accessed 15 May 2011.
10. Tey, N. P., Ng, S. T., & Yew, S. Y. (2011). Proximate determinants of fertility in Peninsular Malaysia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health* 23(3), 1–11.
11. Department of Statistics, Malaysia. (2010). Population distribution and basic demographic characteristics 2010. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics.
12. Oakley, A. (1981). *Subject women*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
13. Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). The practise of feminist in-depth interviewing. In S. J. N. Hesse-Biber & P. L. Leavy (Eds.), *Feminist research practices*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
14. Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods*. New York: Oxford University Press.
15. Ghani, P. A. (2006, September 4–5). *Modelling of cohort fertility changes among major ethnics in Peninsular Malaysia*. Paper presented at the National Statistics Conference, Putrajaya International Convention Centre, Malaysia.