

Original Article

Reasons for Intending to Childlessness in Couples Aged 30-45 Years: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background and Aim: The fertility rate of women in Iran has fallen below the replacement level, leading to concerns about population aging. This study aimed to investigate the reasons for not intending to have children among couples aged 30 to 45 in Tehran (1401-1402).

Materials and Methods: This study is a qualitative research using conventional content analysis. Purposive sampling with maximum variation was used to select participants from different backgrounds, locations, and social classes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. Data analysis was conducted using Graneheim and Lundman's approach and MAXQDA 2022 software.

Results: The results were categorized into four main themes: individual, social, political, and economic factors. Individual factors included perceptions of spousal irresponsibility, ideal standards, emotional problems, mental health problems, and addiction issues. Political factors included fear of the future and lack of security, uncertain political climate, high education costs, perception of government indifference, and political restrictions. Economic factors were the cost of children, fear of financial instability, concerns about future careers, the negative impact of children on women's professional roles, and housing problems. Socio-cultural factors included the role of school and the importance of education.

Conclusion: This study revealed the complexity of the decision-making process regarding childlessness in this age group.

Keywords: Voluntary childlessness, Qualitative study, Content analysis

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Introduction

The decrease in the fertility rate was observed in the first half of the 19th century in France, then in the United States and other European countries, and then in the second half of the 19th century in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. One of the Asian countries is Taiwan, which currently has the lowest fertility rate in the world. People with higher levels of education and professional skills are also more receptive to this shift in values than their peers (1). Fertility decline has been reported in Asia, especially in East and Southeast Asian countries, but this phenomenon is slower in South and West Asia. This process began in Iran after 1989, with family planning to reduce the number of births to the replacement level (2). Iran is currently one of the countries where the fertility rate is lower than the replacement level and has decreased significantly during the past decades. Predictions indicate that a decrease in total fertility until 2025 will bring the fertility rate below one and a half children. This is despite the fact that Iran's fertility rate was 6.9 in the late 70s and early 80s (3).

Numerous studies have been conducted to understand the determinants of childlessness, with a particular focus on involuntary childlessness. Several factors in early life, such as adverse childhood experiences, have been associated with infertility (4). Factors such as education are also influential in fertility decisions. The graduation rate of women exceeds that of men in almost all countries, and as a result, women spend a lot of time outside the home and in the labor market. In addition to education, there is a fundamental incompatibility between work and childbearing in some societies (5). Also, in the last 50 years, contraceptive methods have been created only for women, which are caused by gender schemas about women's gender and the resulting responsibility. To encourage people to have children, it is necessary to know these patterns and, according to the new conditions, to choose appropriate policies, such as the combination of work participation and child care (6). Voluntary-involuntary state of childlessness is studied in a continuum. The weaker the desire to have children, the more a person tends to remain childless. For childless men and women, the emotional values

expected from children and the values related to family formation are most critical. Also, the general concern was related to the responsibilities and financial costs of the child and job restrictions (7). Various factors, such as cultural differences and historical contexts, can explain the choice of childlessness. Studies show that older people who decided years ago not to have children not only have no regrets but also feel relieved. They knew this peace was caused by not experiencing possible misfortunes with children (8). On the other hand, not wanting to have children has caused pressure from others; this reluctance is based on personal opinion or fear of genetic issues.

Of course, sometimes people insist on this unwillingness to exaggerate their personality traits, which causes incompatibility for parenthood (9). Couples between the ages of 25 and 27 make fewer short-term decisions than couples between the ages of 35 and 37. At the same time, couples aged 35 to 37 are more inclined not to have children, and in the case of high self-esteem, their adherence to this decision increases (10). Some research assessed the number of siblings that influenced fertility. Sibling fertility, education, income, and marital history are among the factors that impact family fertility (11). The paternalistic approach ties the value and social role of a woman to motherhood and considers people who do not want to have children to be unconventional in many ways and humiliates them; therefore, they are rejected by society (12).

In today's societies, for various reasons, women have changed their attitudes about their identity and their traditional roles. They tend to rediscover their identity and expand the paths of identity development and subversion of the structures of femininity. Also, in modern life, the increasing nuclearization of families and the reduction of family support for the keeping and raising of children and having children is an excessive burden on the shoulders of women (13). Research shows that 90% of women and 85% of men do not show any interest in the government's social and economic programs regarding the support of childbearing, and their motivation is not affected by such incentives. Today, women are involved in social interactions and are active in many fields. And they do not see their identity as material, and their motivation has changed. Therefore, to plan for population growth,

more attention should be paid to the motivation of women to have children than in the past (2). It also seems necessary to examine the national context and social conditions and to create a good solution considering the social and cultural background is crucial.

The research results indicate that students, uneducated, employed, and unemployed people tend to be more childless among other ethnic groups. Also, the primary reason for men is economic costs and for women unwilling to have children. The high responsibility of the child has been expressed in both genders (3). Research results show that the reasons for not having children can be environmental concerns, financial instability, concern about one's physical health, having incompatible characteristics for raising children, and lack of interest in children or fear of pregnancy and childbirth (14). Also, according to research, higher education is associated with postponing pregnancy, and, on the other hand, it increases the intention not to have children. During the last 10 years, contraceptive methods have been more focused on women, which is derived from gender schemas and women's responsibility in having children (6).

According to the results of research by Mynarska and Rytel (7), women are more concerned about their job situation, while men are more concerned about financial limitations. Women's motivation for more pregnancy has been its emotional aspect, and for men, traditional values are more important. Also, older people rarely regret their decision not to have children (8). Not having children is more common in developed countries. Postponing childbearing causes permanent childlessness. The results of Brinton and Oh's research showed that the behavior of women with high education is related to pregnancy levels, and even if this issue does not cause them not to have children, they tend to have only one child (5). The discrepancy between having children and being employed, the lack of cooperation of men in household affairs, taking care of children, and long working hours affect the family's childbearing.

The review of the literature showed that most studies were quantitative and used predesigned instruments (15), so the explanation of the understanding and the point of view of the couples concerning the study of the causes of the reluctance to have children in the form

of an in-depth and qualitative interview has not been taken into account. Thus, it is necessary to conduct studies in this regard. Therefore, according to the mentioned issues and considering that the studies in the field of unwillingness to have children in Tehran are limited, the researchers designed the present study to explain the factors affecting the reluctance to have children in couples between the ages of 30 and 45.

Methods and Materials

The research method is qualitative and contractual content analysis. Due to the lack of studies on the causes of infertility, this method is the most appropriate to explain these causes. The participants in the research are couples aged 30 to 45 living in Tehran who voluntarily decided not to have children in 2022-2023. They were selected through snowball sampling with maximum diversity from different educations, ages, occupations, and social classes. Various economic and municipal centers, east, west, north, and south, were sampled. The sample size continued until data saturation was reached, which is ordinary in qualitative studies.

Inclusion criteria were willingness to participate in the research, the age range of 30 to 45 for the wife (there is no age limit for the men), being Iranian, not having an adopted child, willingness to participate in the study, and providing information. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data, which is suitable for qualitative research. Furthermore, due to its flexibility and depth, a semi-structured interview allows the participants to explain their experience of the conditions, and the researcher can collect data with more depth and detail. The interview included open and probing questions to achieve greater clarity. During the interview process, the key questions were asked. Then, if necessary, new questions were asked based on the participant's answers. For example, the participants are asked to express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about their unwillingness to have a child. The questions were generally about history and background, behavior/experience, opinions/values, feelings/emotions, knowledge, and awareness. When necessary, interpretive, explanatory, and confronting exploratory questions were also asked. Sampling and interviews were continued until data

saturation, i.e., until new data was added to the items in question. The necessary conditions were made regarding the time and place of the interview. An appropriate rapport and trust were established for conducting the interview, and an effort was made to be flexible with participants' responses and nonverbal cues. A total of 30 people were included in the study. Data analysis was done using Graneheim and Lundman's approach. The process was: 1) Implementation of the entire interview immediately after each interview; 2) Reading the whole text for a general understanding of its content; 3) Determining meaning units and primary codes; 4) Classification of primary similar codes in more comprehensive categories; and 5) Determining the main content of the categories (16). In this way, all recorded conversations were typed word for word, and after careful study, they

were coded and categorized. The classification process continued until a deep and general analysis. Data analysis was done using MAXQDA 2022 software. Finally, four main themes, 20 categories, and 36 subcategories were extracted.

To conduct the interview, the interviewer introduced herself, explained the research objectives to the participants, obtained informed consent to conduct the interview and record the interviews, and assured the people about the confidentiality of the interviews. The subjects at each stage were allowed to leave the study. Also, the ethical code number IR.IUMS.REC.1401.552 was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Iran University of Medical Sciences. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The characteristics of the participants in the research

Code	Gender	Age	Education	Wife/Husband's Education	Job	Family income (million toman)	Duration of marriage (year)
1	Female	38	Bachelor	M.A.	Self-employed	37	10
2	Female	45	Bachelor	Bachelor	Self-employed	20-25	15
3	Male	58	M.A.	Bachelor	Self-employed	20-23	15
4	Female	35	Bachelor	Bachelor	Employee	8-10	1
5	Female	35	M.A.	Bachelor	Employee	14	12
6	Female	40	Diploma	Diploma	Housewife	27-30	7
7	Female	30	Bachelor	Bachelor	Self-employed	30	3
8	Male	30	Bachelor	Bachelor	Engineer	30	3
9	Female	31	M.A.	M.A.	Housewife	30	2
10	Male	31	M.A.	M.A.	Coffee shop	30-40	2
11	Female	30	M.A.	Bachelor	Psychologist	45-55	9
12	Male	38	Bachelor	M.A.	Gold store	45-55	9
13	Female	42	Bachelor	Bachelor	Barber	20	10
14	Male	47	Bachelor	Bachelor	Businessman	200	20
15	Female	39	Bachelor	Technician	Housewife	-	8
16	Male	35	Technician	Bachelor	Self-employed	30	8
17	Male	35	M.A.	Bachelor	Employee	12	6
18	Female	32	Bachelor	M.A.	Housewife	-	6
19	Female	36	Bachelor	Bachelor	Employee	5	2
20	Male	36	Bachelor	Bachelor	Employee	10	2
21	Female	43	M.A.	M.A.	Employee	12	10
22	Male	48	M.A.	M.A.	Employee	3	10
23	Female	35	Diploma	Diploma	Cashier	5	8
24	Male	35	Diploma	Diploma	Employee	10	8
25	Female	30	Bachelor	M.A.	Employee	38-40	5
26	Female	30	Ph. D.	M.A.	Drug store	40-50	1
27	Female	37	Bachelor	M.A.	Bank employee	30-40	3
28	Female	36	Technician	Diploma	Lab technician	12	12
29	Female	45	M.A.	Ph. D.	Professor	10	12
30	Male	54	Ph. D.	M.A.	Professor	50	12

Results

Children are often seen as embodying happiness and contentment in our society. However, there is a growing trend among 30 to 45-year-old couples who deliberately choose not to have children. After analyzing the data in the present study, the results were categorized into four main categories: individual, social, political, and economic themes.

One of the individual factors identified in the research is the wife's perception of irresponsibility. Some couples expressed concern about their partner's ability to handle the responsibilities of raising a child. This apprehension about the spouse's ability may be caused by observations of an unstable life or a lack of psychological preparation. Idealistic criteria also play a significant role in couples' decision to remain childless. They believe that having children without proper preparation is a sign of thoughtlessness. These people have set some standards for themselves and their future families. They prioritize stability and a strong foundation before embarking on parenthood.

Emotional problems in the relationship were identified as another important factor. Some couples expressed a lack of trust in their spouse's ability to provide emotional support, which makes them hesitant to bring a child. In addition, mental health problems and

addiction were also mentioned as reasons for wanting to be childless.

A recurring theme among the participants was the fear of the future and the lack of security in today's society. Couples were found to be discouraged from starting a family because of the uncertain political climate and the high cost of education. The perception of political restrictions also adds to this fear and makes couples pessimistic about the future of their possible child.

Economic factors also play a significant role in the decision-making process. High expectations of children's expenses, fear of financial instability, and concern about hindering career advancement were frequently cited reasons. Some couples expressed concern about the negative impact of having children on women's professional role in society. The conflict between the job requirements and family responsibilities can lead couples to choose childlessness.

Housing supply problems were another concern raised by the participants. The limited availability of suitable housing can pressure couples to start a family. Lack of adequate living conditions is another inhibiting factor. Table 2 shows the subcategories associated with each class and the sample of the codes extracted from the semantic units.

Table 2. The process of achieving the main theme through semantic units, forming categories and sub-categories

Theme	category	Sub-category	Semantic unit
Individual/ Familial factors	Childhood experiences	Childhood problems and past experiences	Growing up in a large family whose children's needs were not well met. (code 21)
	Conflict between reason and emotion	logical thinking and dealing with the heart's desire and emotions	I had my own problems and sufferings as a child (code 12)
	Lack of confidence in the spouse	Spouse's irresponsibility / unreliability / Shaking of family	As an educated woman, I should not have children and selfishly have children to strengthen the foundations of marriage, I must stand in front of my heart. (code 4)
	Lack of strength in family life	Spouse addiction	My wife is not responsible. (code 2) My husband is a good man, but he is not a good husband, I don't trust him. (code 4)
	addiction	Reluctance to become a mother / idealistic personal goals / priority of personal plans	We even went as far as divorce before. (code 6) I don't have conditions for divorce, I can't go back to my father's house. (code 2)
	priority of interests and personal progress	Failure to accept responsibility/ the need to	
	lack of psychological readiness		

	Wife's unwillingness to have children	devote a lot of time to the child lack of confidence in one's ability to raise the child/ self-centeredness/ lack of self-sacrifice Difficulty raising a child Having a baby is a big crime	My husband uses drugs. (code 1) I never had a special feeling towards becoming a mother, mostly for studying I planned. (code 29) I had no desire to be a mother. I wanted to have all my time for myself. (code 5) I also had utopian criteria in mind. (code 2) I did not have the dedication of a parent. (code 5) I don't see the ability to raise a good child in myself. (code 8) Raising a child is a very difficult task. (code 9) I did not see the responsibility of raising a new human being (code 2) My wife and I really don't know if we can be a good parent for our child or not. (code 21) My wife does not want child at all and in her opinion this is a big crime. (code 2)
Political factors The role of the government and governance system	Fear of the future The necessity of facilitation of having children Solving economic and educational problems Amending the law on maternity leave	Fear of the future/Feeling insecurity/ Social tensions/ Uncertainty about future of the child The high cost of education The need for serious planning by the government for the education and provision of the child's expenses The need to create peace, security and social welfare by the government Policy-making in the field of amending the maternity leave law	We should have children when we are sure of the future, the society will be stable, we will be successful, there will be a guarantee for the future (code 28). I am afraid of the future situation of the child. (code 6) This economic situation of the country and the mental state of the people and the social tensions made me not want to have a child even before (code 25). The cost of a child's education is very high, the child wants education, and the government does not plan properly to solve the problem (code 6). The government should create peace and security for the people (code 28). Good maternity leave for both women and men is necessary. (code 12)
Economic factors	High financial expectations of children and expenses Housing supply problems Lack of job stability children as hinders career advancement	Lack of financial support from the spouse The high level of expectation of children lack of confidence in the ability to finance Not having housing	My wife does not provide financial support. The level of expectation of children now is different from the old one, fear of spending (code 5) I have a great sense of responsibility for my child's future, and with these economic problems, I am afraid that I will not be able to create a good future for him.(code 17) Not having a home is very important (code

	The conflict between having a job and childbearing for women	Negative impact on the professional role and progress of women in society	5) It is important to have a house, I rent eight million per month (code13)
		Financial problems and fear of not being able to cover expenses	Fear of losing my job and losing my own progress, (code 5) Having children has a negative effect on women's professional roles in society (code 30).
		Conflict between having a job and having children for women	Some companies do not hire women or their condition is not to get pregnant (code 12).
		Not having enough time due to too much work	It creates restrictions for working women and they have to either take leave or come to work with stress. (code 17) If I didn't go to work, maybe I would give birth to the child (code 5)
Social and cultural factors	Unhappiness	Lack of happiness in society/	because of that the lack of time due to high working hours (code 10) What has society given me? We are just running; we are not happy. (code 3)
	Lack of job satisfaction	Lack of job satisfaction	Lack of security and job satisfaction (code 28)
	Educational system		The country's social, cultural and financial conditions must be change. (code10)
	Lack of social and family support	The role of education and child upbringing Lack of social and family support and replacement of mother in her absence	I had many bad teachers, if my child is going to go through the same thing, then it is better not to. Education plays an important role. (code 8) Compared to me, my wife is less inclined to take care of the child in her absence due to her work conditions outside of Tehran and the fact that there is no one. (code 6)

Discussion

The current research investigated the factors affecting selective childlessness among men and women aged 30 to 45 in Tehran. To explain the results of the present study in the context of existing theories, developmental and psychoanalytic theories have historically shown that becoming a parent is an evolutionary achievement (17). Harrington, citing Erikson, identified childbirth as an essential part of healthy human development in adulthood and specifically classified reproduction and parenthood as virtuous and necessary components of this psychosocial stage. The same author, quoting Pines,

stated that pregnancy and motherhood are part of the individuation-separation process of women and, consequently, significant developmental achievements for entering adulthood (18).

The Pew Research Center report states that a 2009 survey found that 38% of the public believed that increased childlessness in the United States was "bad for society," an increase of 9% from a similar Pew Research Center survey conducted just 2 years earlier (19).

Various reasons were found in this study, which showed how they decided to remain childless even though having children is considered a "norm" and childlessness is a "stigma" in Iranian culture. According to the participants' statements, women's desire for their

growth and development, which was placed in the category of individual factors, was considered a factor influencing the reluctance to have children. The review of research showed that since the women's liberation movement and the progress of feminism, this issue has been one of the main reasons for the desire of women not to have children, and this issue also exists in other countries (20).

A person's decision to have children is influenced by many factors, among which are personal, social, historical, and political facets. Childbirth is considered an inevitable part of women's happiness and a complement to their femininity. In the traditional structure of the Turkish family, femininity is sanctified through childbirth, and women's status in the family and society is determined by whether or not they have children. The status of women began to change with urbanization and also due to the increasing participation of women in the workforce. In a study that examined women's preferences for voluntary childlessness based on a descriptive phenomenological plan and qualitative research method, the results showed that during interviews, participants emphasized the concepts of responsibility and care, the effects of voluntary childlessness, the decision for voluntary childlessness, social reactions to voluntary childlessness, and the dilemmas experienced when facing voluntary childlessness. It was shown that instinctive attitudes toward motherhood and childbearing persist, social pressures to be a mother are maintained, and voluntarily childless women define childlessness as freedom in many aspects of life (21).

A similar study conducted in Ireland explored the lived experiences of Irish women who choose to remain childless. A hermeneutic phenomenological research approach was used. The lived experiences of 15 voluntarily childless women living in Ireland were examined. Data analysis identified common yet distinct human experiences of fear, assertiveness, judgment, and freedom. The preliminary findings of this study suggest that fear is a positive factor in the reproductive decision-making process of the participants in this study. While voluntarily childless women are often portrayed as wanting to avoid accountability, the participants in this study experienced a sense of moral responsibility as well as

freedom in choosing to forgo motherhood (22). The results of this study were also similar to our study, despite the cultural differences between the two countries, as the majority of participants in the present study also mentioned these issues in their statements.

In some cases, the participants' testimony revealed men's reluctance to have children, and other studies have found similar results; for example, a study that explained the experiences, mental reasoning, and decision-making processes of Australian men who had voluntarily chosen to be childless revealed men's willingness to commit unquestioningly to a childless future. The sub-themes were realization, dialogue (or lack thereof), logic, and pressure. At the normative age of transition to parenthood, in general, men's childlessness decision-making process appears to be fluid and influenced by both internal and external factors. Despite changing social trends and embracing different life paths, these men are acutely aware that their intentions place them outside the norm. The researchers of the abovementioned study believe that it is essential for policy and practice to recognize the changing norms surrounding the timing of fatherhood and to voluntarily support men and childless couples in shaping their identities, life trajectories, choices, and relationships (23).

Lack of understanding between couples in deciding to get pregnant was one of the other reasons that led to the participants not having children in the present study. A similar study in Sweden, a developed country known for having a high ranking in terms of gender equality and a country with relatively high fertility, examined how women's and men's childbearing intentions in couples affect actual childbearing in subsequent years. The study used the Young Adults Panel (YAPS), which provided information on both partners' long-term childbearing goals in 2009 and followed the couples for five years. In 30% of couples, both spouses intended to have one child, of whom about three-quarters have one child. The results show that, in general, both couples must intend to have a child to do this, but women's intentions are more likely to decide to have a second or third child. This phenomenon is interpreted as a decision regarding the cost and benefit of children for women and men (24).

In a study in Poland, the relationship between motivations to have children and obstacles to bringing

children was investigated. In this study, 939 primiparous men and women aged 25 to 44 completed the childbearing questionnaire. The results showed that people worried about the negative aspects of caring for children (time, energy, financial expenses) had the least desire to have children. Other motivations were related to gender: for women, emotional aspects were important, especially about pregnancy and infancy, and for men, satisfaction with child rearing and traditional values of children was essential. The role of parents' fears and concerns was another part of the reasons for not wanting to have children (7), which was in line with the results of the present study.

Another factor mentioned in the present study that influenced the decision to remain childless was political factors. A similar study was conducted in Babol in 2023 (25). The results included nine categories (economic problems, uncertainty about future security, threatened priorities, uncertainty about continuing life, fear of becoming parents, lack of support, reduction of religious beliefs, social role models, and negative experiences). These factors indicate the forced conditions of childlessness or the decision to have only one child. The similarity of the socio-cultural environment and political conditions is the reason for the high similarity of the results of these two studies. Of course, our survey did not ask about religious beliefs.

Economic factors were a topic mentioned in almost all of the participants' statements as an influencing factor in their decision; even a person in the top decile of society in terms of income mentioned the lack of economic and income stability as an influencing factor in his decision. This finding, and women's decision to remain childless due to better job opportunities and higher education, can be explained in the New Home Economy theory. In this theory, children can be considered durable consumer goods that involve direct and indirect costs for which parents make a rational decision, the balance between the usefulness of a child and childlessness. This microeconomic approach has been widely adopted in some empirical research examining the relationship between individual socioeconomic conditions and fertility preferences and outcomes (26). Also, extensive empirical research supports this view, showing how more education,

better job opportunities and career advancement, and higher wealth influence women's fertility. For example, it was shown that higher levels of education and better job positions and income are associated with having fewer children (27, 28). Of course, most of the studies were conducted in high-income countries (29).

Conclusion

This qualitative study highlighted the complexity of the decision-making process regarding childlessness in this age group and the importance of understanding and respecting people's choices in determining their lives. Although the concept of family is complete with the presence of a child and childlessness is considered a social stigma in Iranian society, some couples choose childlessness. Couples aged 30 to 45 who choose childlessness have different reasons behind their decision. Individual factors such as perceived irresponsibility, precarious living, and idealistic standards contribute to this intention. Emotional problems, lack of self-confidence, and social concerns are crucial in decision-making. Economic factors such as high expectations, fear of financial instability, and housing problems strengthen the couples' intentions to childlessness. One of the strengths of this study was that it was conducted in Tehran, the capital of the country, and that it used a sample with maximum diversity. However, like any research, there are limitations in conducting the study. This study does not focus on people's religious beliefs, which can be the subject of separate research. For further research, we suggest that it seems better to outline the conditions of a study entitled "The decision-making process of choosing to be childless" using the contextual theory, which provides a comprehensive view of this area. Also, studying the desire to have children in large families under the same economic and social conditions will help draw a roadmap for population growth.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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