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A Qualitative Study of Factors Influencing Antinatalism from the Lived Experiences of Antinatalist Couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the factors influencing antinatalism from the lived experiences of voluntarily childfree couples in Iran.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative phenomenological design was used. The study population included antinatalist couples living in Isfahan in 2025 who had been married for at least ten years and had voluntarily remained childfree. Ten couples, including 20 participants, were recruited through snowball sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 40–60 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic network analysis in MAXQDA. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, repeated review of transcripts, data saturation, confidentiality, and written informed consent.

Findings: Analysis of interview data yielded 239 initial codes, 18 organizing themes, and 5 overarching themes. The main themes were economic factors, individual factors, family factors, socio-cultural factors, and child-related factors. Economic factors included couples' financial conditions, economic instability, emphasis on quality of life, and the gap between expectations and economic realities. Individual factors included individualism, physical and mental health, heavy parenting responsibility, and non-material values. Family factors included increased burden on women and dissatisfaction with life or marital life. Socio-cultural factors included rationalism in childbearing, risk perception, cultural rethinking, decline in religious values, media influence, and childbearing anxiety. Child-related factors included perceived harms to children and burdens children may impose on the family.

Conclusion: Antinatalism among voluntarily childfree couples was shaped by intertwined economic, personal, family, socio-cultural, and child-related concerns.

Keywords: Antinatalism, Childfree Couples, Lived Experience, Phenomenology, Qualitative Study, Iran.

Introduction

Childbearing is one of the most important aims of family formation, and its significance has been documented across diverse literatures. Existing evidence suggests that the vast majority of Iranian couples intend to have children after marriage, and multiple surveys indicate that only a very small share of Iranians regard childlessness as an ideal fertility outcome. In other words, for many Iranian families, having children carries positive value, and childlessness is not a priority (Asadisarvestani & Sobotka, 2023).

Over recent decades, however, a global trend toward childlessness—especially in developed societies—has emerged. Childlessness refers to the absence of children in one's life (Buehler et al., 2002). Two primary forms are distinguished: voluntary and involuntary childlessness. Voluntary childlessness—also termed elective or chosen childlessness—denotes a deliberate decision by individuals or couples not to have children for personal, social, environmental, and other reasons (Bagi, 2023). Involuntary childlessness, by contrast, refers to difficulty conceiving or carrying a pregnancy to term for medical or unexplained reasons. In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, childlessness is increasingly common: many couples prefer to remain childfree either by choice, due to circumstances, or based on antinatalist convictions (Foroutan & Bijani, 2021). These shifts have altered social norms and attitudes toward having children. Despite the varied reasons for childlessness, its impacts on individuals, families, and communities are substantial; it is therefore crucial to understand the experiences and perspectives of those who are childfree by choice or by constraint (Sharot et al., 2007).

Studying childlessness and antinatalism is vital for understanding family dynamics, fertility decision-making, and demographic trends. Clarifying antinatalism can also challenge social and cultural stereotypes about childfree people. Such knowledge is useful for policymakers, planners, and practitioners working with families. Antinatalism is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon with significant implications at the individual, familial, and societal levels. Interest in antinatalism has grown across sociology, demography, psychology, medicine, history, and feminist scholarship. Research has examined the characteristics of antinatalist individuals, the prevalence of childlessness across

societies, motivations for antinatalism, mental and physical health correlates, and the consequences of antinatalist positions. Some studies also investigate macro-level factors implicated in the issue (Haselton & Nettle, 2006).

A review of antinatalism studies can provide a comprehensive picture of the current state of the literature, highlighting trends, gaps, and priority areas for future research. Although antinatalism is a global phenomenon, it is shaped by the cultural, social, economic, and political contexts in which it occurs. Accordingly, examining studies from different regions is essential for understanding the broader set of factors that shape fertility and family-formation decisions (Morioka, 2021). While antinatalism has been explored extensively in developed regions, scholarship in Iran remains relatively scarce—even as declining fertility and changing childbearing patterns have drawn growing attention from researchers. This scarcity may reflect cultural contexts in which having children still carries high social value and childlessness has not yet reached levels that make it a widely perceived social “problem,” even though the trend appears to be rising (Abbasi et al., 2002).

The present study proceeds from the claim that experiences related to childbearing—from early awareness and meaning-making about children and parenthood, through the decision to have or not have a child, to the enactment of those intentions—are constructed through psychological and semantic processes embedded in social, economic, and cultural life. Thus, understanding beliefs about childbearing requires understanding the subjective meanings shaped by people's lived contexts. The aim of this study is to qualitatively examine the factors influencing antinatalism from the lived experiences of antinatalist couples in Iran. Specifically, we explore individuals' and couples' reasons for antinatalism; the social, cultural, demographic, and economic determinants of this stance; its effects on individuals and families; and its broader consequences. Finally, by identifying gaps in the literature, we offer recommendations for future research to advance a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Accordingly, the guiding research question is: What factors shape antinatalism from the perspective of antinatalist couples' lived experiences?

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach focused on the lived experiences of anti-natalist couples. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of the structures of lived experience and consciousness surrounding a phenomenon from the perspective of first-person accounts. This method was introduced in philosophy through the works of Edmund Husserl. With the expansion of this approach, it has found non-philosophical applications and is now used as a qualitative research method. Phenomenology, literally meaning “the study of phenomena,” seeks to describe them by considering the way they appear or manifest themselves—prior to any evaluation, interpretation, or value judgment (Husserl & Moran, 2012).

In this study, due to the importance of childbearing, the research population consisted of anti-natalist couples living in Isfahan city in 2025 who had been married for at least ten years and had voluntarily chosen not to have children. The sample size in this study, considering its qualitative nature and based on the suggestion of (Husserl & Moran, 2012), was determined to be ten couples (twenty individuals). Sampling was carried out using the snowball method and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Participants were recruited through social networks and anti-natalist groups.

The inclusion criteria included: being married and voluntarily childfree for at least ten years after marriage, residing in Isfahan city, having a minimum education level of a high school diploma, and willingness to participate voluntarily in the study.

Data Collection Tool

Semi-structured interviews

In semi-structured interviews, the questions are included in an interview guide focusing on the issues or domains that need to be covered, as well as the directions that should be pursued. The order of the questions is not necessarily the same for all participants and depends on the course of the interview and each participant's responses. However, the interview guide ensures that the researcher collects similar types of data from all informants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In this type of interview, while the interviewer maintains control over the process of obtaining information, they

also have the freedom to follow new paths that emerge based on the participant's responses. Therefore, the interview begins with broad, general questions, proceeds with exploratory ones, and continues with probing questions designed to encourage participants and obtain deeper information. Relevant literature and scientific texts were also reviewed to inform the development of the interview questions.

Some of the interview questions included: “What factors led you to decide to join the anti-natalist movement?”, “If there are no children, how can human survival be ensured?”, and “What personal life experiences influenced your tendency toward childlessness?”. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes, depending on the participants' conditions and willingness. All interviews were digitally recorded and immediately transcribed verbatim.

To enhance the validity and reliability (trustworthiness) of the qualitative findings, close contact and communication between the researcher and participants were maintained to build trust and obtain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Participants were also asked to review the reports and clarify ambiguities in the coding process (member checking). Thus, the researcher provided parts of the interviews and codes to the participants to ensure mutual understanding of the meanings. Data saturation was also used to strengthen credibility. The consistency of findings was achieved through immediate transcription of recordings, peer debriefing, re-reading of data, and interviewing participants with varied characteristics. Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the process, including obtaining written informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and allowing participants the freedom to withdraw at any stage.

Implementation Process

The study was conducted by recruiting anti-natalist couples through social networks and anti-natalist groups who were interested in participating in research on the factors influencing anti-natalism. Ethical considerations were strictly observed. The interviewees were couples who had been married for at least ten years, had voluntarily remained childfree, and held anti-natalist beliefs. Before each interview, the purpose of the research was explained to the participants, and efforts were made to build trust and ensure their comfort. Permission to record and take notes during the interview

was obtained. The recorded interviews were transcribed and imported into the MAXQDA software for coding. After the initial coding, the qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted, and the first-level codes were formed. In the next step, the themes were identified and organized into a thematic network, which was subsequently analyzed.

Data Analysis Method

The data in this study were analyzed using the thematic network analysis method. This approach, introduced by [Attride-Stirling, \(2001\)](#), is a structured form of thematic analysis that organizes basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes into a coherent network. In this research, the basic themes consisted of the key points and initial codes derived from the textual data. By combining and summarizing these, organizing themes were developed, and the most comprehensive of these were identified as global themes. The results obtained from these themes were then illustrated across

four levels, showing the most coherent and complete themes along with their interrelationships. The entire analysis process was conducted using the MAXQDA software.

Ethical Considerations

To uphold ethical standards and protect participants' rights, the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants after explaining the research objectives. Participants were assured that all interview content would remain completely confidential, recorded anonymously, and that the integrity and confidentiality of the data would be preserved throughout the study.

Findings and Results

Demographic characteristics of participants

The following table presents the frequency distribution of the study participants according to their demographic characteristics.

Table 1

Frequency distribution and demographic characteristics of participants

Participant number	Gender	Age	Education	Duration of marriage (years)
Couple 1	Woman	35	Master's	11
	Man	39	Master's	
Couple 2	Woman	38	Master's	10
	Man	42	Bachelor's	
Couple 3	Woman	41	Associate's	13
	Man	39	Master's	
Couple 4	Woman	30	High school diploma	10
	Man	35	High school diploma	
Couple 5	Woman	51	Bachelor's	24
	Man	53	Bachelor's	
Couple 6	Woman	49	Master's	12
	Man	54	PhD	
Couple 7	Woman	56	High school diploma	26
	Man	55	Below high school diploma	
Couple 8	Woman	46	Bachelor's	18
	Man	48	Bachelor's	
Couple 9	Woman	37	Bachelor's	15
	Man	38	Bachelor's	
Couple 10	Woman	45	Bachelor's	14
	Man	46	Bachelor's	

As seen in Table 1, the demographic characteristics of the participating couples are summarized above.

Extraction of organizing and overarching themes from initial codes

After a detailed examination of interview transcripts, significant and meaning-bearing statements were condensed into initial codes, totaling 239 codes. These

codes were analyzed and organized into organizing themes, which were then consolidated into five main themes and 18 subthemes.

Economic factors

Based on participants' experiences, the first main theme identified was economic factors, which included four subthemes.

Table 2

Summary of interview results and extracted concepts and themes under the main theme of economic factors

Initial concepts	Subthemes	Main theme
Concern about economic situation	Couples' financial conditions	Economic factors
Inability to cover living expenses	Couples' financial conditions	Economic factors
Migration for better living conditions	Couples' financial conditions	Economic factors
Lack of planning for the future	Economic instability	Economic factors
High inflation rate	Economic instability	Economic factors
Focus on the future	Emphasis on quality	Economic factors
Pursuit of a higher quality of life	Emphasis on quality	Economic factors
Gap between aspirations and resources	Gap between expectations and economic realities	Economic factors
Lack of support resources	Gap between expectations and economic realities	Economic factors

As shown in Table 2, the main theme of economic factors includes four subthemes: couples' financial conditions, economic instability, emphasis on quality, and gap between expectations and economic realities, which were derived from the aggregation of participants' responses.

Financial conditions affecting life

Before deciding on childbearing, couples first assess their economic situation. Participants preferred to postpone having children until their financial conditions improved. The majority expressed concern about the inability to afford living expenses, which reduced their desire for parenthood. From an economic perspective, children were viewed as a form of expenditure that required considerable financial investment—educational, medical, and caregiving costs—all of which discouraged fertility intentions.

"I have not yet reached a financial position where I can provide a worry-free future for my child." (Male participant No. 5)

Some participants also expressed an inclination toward migration to improve their living standards before considering having children:

"I thought about migrating; I went to Turkey twice and tried hard to go abroad, but it never worked out. Some of my relatives are in the U.S. and France; they invited me, but it didn't happen. I even considered moving to bigger cities like Isfahan or Yazd, but rents there were too high, and unemployment could be an issue, so I gave up." (Male participant No. 2)

Economic instability

Living in an economically and socially uncertain society generates fear about the future for potential

parents. When there is no stability, couples feel insecure and hesitant about childbearing.

"The biggest concern of parents is their children's future. With this poor economic and social situation and the negative social norms shaping children's upbringing, what will become of them?" (Female participant No. 1)

Emphasis on quality

Another common theme was the emphasis on quality of life rather than quantity. Given the high cost of raising children, many couples preferred to invest in their own personal development to achieve a better and more meaningful life.

"The economic situation is too risky for having children. It's better not to have a child for now." (Male participant No. 5)

Gap between expectations and economic realities

The gap between expectations and realities—or the mismatch between aspirations and available resources—was another important subtheme. Couples often reported that the financial limitations in meeting their desired lifestyle discouraged them from childbearing. Economic strain led to delayed marriages, avoidance of parenthood, and an increase in women's participation in the workforce.

"It's really hard to make ends meet these days. We can't even afford simple recreation, so how could we possibly handle additional expenses?" (Male participant No. 6)

Individual Factors

Based on the participants' experiences, the second main theme identified in this study was individual factors. The analysis of the participants' narratives led to the identification of four subthemes.

Table 3*Summary of interview results and extracted concepts and themes under the main theme of individual factors*

Initial Concepts	Subthemes	Main Theme
Parental modernism	Individualism	Individual factors
Use of mass media	Individualism	Individual factors
Reduced self-sacrifice	Individualism	Individual factors
Pursuit of personal goals	Individualism	Individual factors
Sense of pain and distress due to poor mental health	Physical and mental health	Individual factors
Concerns about physical illness affecting child	Physical and mental health	Individual factors
Lack of confidence about parenting ability	Physical and mental health	Individual factors
Responsibility for child rearing	High parental responsibility	Individual factors
Involvement in parental role	High parental responsibility	Individual factors
Psychological readiness	Non-material values	Individual factors
Values such as freedom	Non-material values	Individual factors

As shown in Table 3, the main theme of individual factors consists of four subthemes: individualism, physical and mental health, high parental responsibility, and non-material values, which were derived from the aggregation of participants' initial statements.

Individualism

Individualism, which has expanded alongside modernism in contemporary societies, acts as a deterrent to childbearing. The greater the modern orientation of parents, the lower their likelihood of desiring children, as other personal concerns take precedence. Educated, media-literate individuals who embody modern characteristics hold different values and behaviors regarding parenthood compared with traditional families. Modern individuals exhibit less self-sacrifice, prioritize personal goals, value leisure time, and focus on self-fulfillment.

"Things you could do when single can't be done once you have a child. Traveling freely, spending for your own wishes — all of that changes with a kid." (Male participant No. 5) "A child prevents you from enjoying leisure and recreation." (Female participant No. 8) "A happy person is one who feels inner peace, doesn't constantly judge themselves, has secure emotional attachment, emotional maturity, and financial stability in proportion to their efforts." (Female participant No. 3)

Physical and Mental Health

Ohrnberger et al., (2017) indicated that physical and mental health play a key role in fertility decisions. These are linked with emotional expression, self-esteem, depression, loneliness, and cognitive functioning. Better physical health and higher sexual satisfaction contribute

to improved psychological well-being and relationship quality, giving individuals a greater sense of hope toward life.

"When I don't feel good about myself and my emotional connection with my husband is weak, I just don't want a baby involved." (Female participant No. 5)

Medical conditions or medications may also influence such decisions:

"Physical health is very important. If one partner isn't healthy, having a child makes no sense." (Male participant No. 3)

Mental health elements such as the absence of anxiety, worry, and depression bring calmness and satisfaction, whereas personality disorders, depression, and anxiety can lead to lack of confidence and avoidance of childbearing.

"When he's angry or depressed, I distance myself. I don't want to get close, and I certainly don't want to bring another person into this world." (Female participant No. 9)

High Parental Responsibility

With increasing awareness, couples now recognize that parenting requires significant psychological and emotional readiness. They understand that becoming a parent adds heavy responsibility to life, so they seek to ensure full preparedness before taking that step.

"Unless I see emotional and psychological readiness in myself and my spouse, I won't consider having a child." (Female participant No. 8) "A child—from birth onward—is only responsibility and trouble." (Participant No. 6)

Non-Material Values

In modern societies, non-material values such as freedom, autonomy, empathy, and personal growth have gained prominence. Psychological and attitudinal changes have made couples more cautious about reproduction. The shift toward greater awareness and self-realization influences their decision to delay or avoid childbearing.

Table 4

Summary of interview results and extracted concepts and themes under the main theme of family factors

Initial Concepts	Subthemes	Main Theme
Employment	Increased role of women	Family factors
Lack of leisure time	Increased role of women	Family factors
Reduced self-care	Increased role of women	Family factors
Quality of family relationships	Dissatisfaction with life	Family factors
Sense of happiness	Dissatisfaction with life	Family factors
Feeling of well-being	Dissatisfaction with life	Family factors

As shown in Table 4, the main theme of family factors includes two subthemes: increased role of women and dissatisfaction with life, both derived from the integration of participants' interviews.

Increase in women's share Today, women's share in family responsibilities has expanded, as many women, alongside fulfilling the role of spouse, also work outside the home. The combination of these roles has left them with less leisure to attend to their personal affairs and has eroded their sense of calm over time. Therefore, the decision to have children is more difficult for contemporary women than it was for women a few decades ago. Female participant no. 8: "I can't even imagine having a child. I work and have two shifts; my husband runs a shop, and caring for children would be hard for me—both the caregiving and the costs."

Dissatisfaction with life A concept that has been neglected in Iranian fertility studies regarding family and childbearing is the quality of intra-family relationships, or marital satisfaction. The question here is whether people who feel more satisfied with their marital life are more inclined to have children. Various theoretical reasons are offered for accepting that higher satisfaction

"I'm not yet psychologically ready to have a child. When I'm not complete myself, why should I bring another person into this world to suffer?" (Male participant No. 6)

Family Factors

Based on participants' experiences, the third main theme identified was family factors, which included two subthemes.

with life is associated with higher fertility. First, having a life partner contributes to one's life satisfaction and clearly affects fertility. A person who is satisfied with their partner experiences higher overall life satisfaction, which, through improving stability and the likelihood of family continuity, influences fertility. Second, parents generally wish to have happy children. If parents believe that happiness in life is hard to attain, the likelihood that they will choose to have children is much lower. According to (Kohler, 2001), the increase in happiness that parents anticipate as a result of having children is a key driver of their childbearing decisions. Depression, dissatisfaction, stress in marital life, and their consequences can reduce fecundity and also negatively affect fertility. "I don't feel happy, and I don't want my children to be like me." (Male participant no. 10).

Social and cultural factors Based on the participants' experiences, the fourth main theme identified in the present study was social and cultural factors, and analysis of participants' accounts led to the identification of four subthemes. The table of extracted initial concepts and their categorization into subthemes and main themes is shown.

Table 5

Summary of interview results with couples and the concepts and themes extracted under the main theme of social and cultural factors

Initial concepts	Subthemes	Main theme
Absence of utilitarian views of childbearing	Rationalism in childbearing	Social and cultural factors
Reconsidering the child's role	Rationalism in childbearing	Social and cultural factors
Impact of societal conditions	Rationalism in childbearing	Social and cultural factors
Uncertain national future	Risk perception	Social and cultural factors
Sense of insecurity in society	Risk perception	Social and cultural factors
High risk of parenting	Risk perception	Social and cultural factors
Shift from family-centered to individual-centered thinking	Cultural rethinking	Social and cultural factors
Modern lifestyle	Cultural rethinking	Social and cultural factors
Materialism	Decline in religious values	Social and cultural factors
Fading religious values	Decline in religious values	Social and cultural factors
Spread of corruption in various domains	Decline in religious values	Social and cultural factors
Agenda-setting	Media influence	Social and cultural factors
Magnifying or downplaying violence	Media influence	Social and cultural factors
Portraying an unsafe world	Media influence	Social and cultural factors
Political and social crises	Anxiety about childbearing	Social and cultural factors
Economic crises	Anxiety about childbearing	Social and cultural factors
Disordered security conditions	Anxiety about childbearing	Social and cultural factors
The demanding responsibility of having a child	Anxiety about childbearing	Social and cultural factors

As shown in Table 5, the main theme of social and cultural factors includes five subthemes: rationalism in childbearing, risk perception, cultural rethinking, decline in religious values, media influence, and anxiety about childbearing, which were extracted from summarizing the initial concepts discussed with interviewees.

Rationalism in childbearing

In the modern era, unlike the past, childbearing is a process accompanied by rethinking. Before having children, couples assess their living conditions and decide on reproduction accordingly. In the past, families viewed children as a profitable asset who could significantly contribute to household income; however, in contemporary societies, children do not have economic benefits for families and, in fact, involve considerable expenses. With societal transformations, decisions about childbearing are made in light of the family's economic and social conditions—or are not made at all. "Living expenses, especially with a child, are very high while incomes are low. For this reason, it's not possible to think about having a child." (Female participant no. 8)

Risk perception Beyond economic costs, social, cultural, educational, and parenting concerns are among parents' most important worries regarding childbearing. The vision of a desirable future is blurred by social and

cultural anxieties. A complex societal situation has turned childbearing into a process accompanied by fear and uncertainty. In a society with political and economic instability, the legitimacy of the state is at risk, and distrust of government leads to unpredictability, a sense of insecurity, and uncertainty about the future. As a result of all these high-risk issues, individuals avoid the risk of childbearing. In today's modern society, cultural concerns stand alongside economic ones. If economic values are regarded as supreme, families face difficulties in raising their children. When a classed economy prevails, classed culture follows. "Society has made life hard for us. We are not in welfare economically or socially, and now even our security is at risk. Everything has become difficult, and I can't even think about it." (Female participant no. 3).

Cultural rethinking One of the key grounds for the continuation of low fertility in the present era is the cultural shift from traditional family-centered values to individual-centered moral norms and values. Individual-centered moral values assign less importance to marriage and family and have greater acceptance of childfree families than before. The modern lifestyle has become more complex than in the past, resulting in families that no longer regard having children as a core value. This cultural shift first emerged in Europe and

then spread to many other countries. Western forms of family formation and opposite-sex friendships have, in place of commitment to marriage, shifted values from traditional and simple to modern and complex. In such conditions, young people prefer a free life without commitments over a life with commitments and their attendant problems. "Life with a child is very difficult. It only increases problems, brings no benefits, and you can't enjoy life." (Male participant no. 8).

Decline in religious values Experiences from countries facing fertility decline indicate a fading of religious values and a growing prominence of materialism in people's lives. Religious values have consistently emphasized family and social provisions, whereas materialist orientations prioritize consumerism, pursuit of comfort, and, broadly, the individual over the family. Participants who perceive the present society as high-risk fear the spread of corruption and immorality and worry about their children's future in such an environment. "Corruption has increased in our society. One of the growing concerns is corruption and immorality; my husband is always worried about this." (Female participant no. 10).

Media influence Few can deny the role of media and the breadth of information in today's societies. The media both disseminates news and shapes it. The media decides which information to amplify and which to downplay. When a society is high-risk politically, economically, culturally, and socially, dependent media try to deny the disorder or minimize it. In such contexts, independent media—especially in social networks—become particularly important for the more informed segments of society. Often, independent media, by

portraying violence and highlighting its negative manifestations, play a significant role in parents' decisions to avoid childbearing. "Social media, by showing the negative and destructive effects of social harms, has discouraged us from having children." (Female participant no. 3).

Anxiety about childbearing This concept represents an individual, action-oriented response that is constructed through various collective and contextual factors. Participants in this study had made a firm decision not to have children and attributed this decision to diverse conditions. From their perspective, childbearing is a process that is always accompanied by anxiety and, under current circumstances, remains suspended for them. Non-childbearing means that, due to the existing social and cultural crises in the country, participants feel anxious about having children. At the beginning of marriage, when couples consider their own conditions and those of society, they hesitate to have children and postpone it. This hesitation and anxiety stem from social insecurity, economic concerns, and individual motivations. "In this situation, having a child is not right at all. What would they be coming into this world to do? What have we managed to do that they would? It's all stress, pressure, and anxiety." (Female participant no. 5).

Child-related factors Based on the participants' experiences, the fourth main theme identified in the present study was social and cultural factors, and analysis of participants' accounts led to the identification of two subthemes. The table of extracted initial concepts and their categorization into subthemes and main themes is shown.

Table 6

Summary of interview results with couples and the concepts and themes extracted under the main theme of child-related factors

Initial concepts	Subthemes	Main theme
Children's misfortune	Harms to children	Child-related factors
Existence of pain and suffering for children	Harms to children	Child-related factors
Improper upbringing of children	Harms to children	Child-related factors
Parenting as a secondary role	Harms children impose on the family	Child-related factors
Restricting parents	Harms children impose on the family	Child-related factors
Limiting time	Harms children impose on the family	Child-related factors

As shown in Table 6, the main theme of child-related factors includes two subthemes: harms to children and harms that children impose on the family, which were

extracted from summarizing the initial concepts discussed with interviewees.

Harms to Children

In his theory, Steiner argues that we have a moral obligation *not* to bring a miserable human into existence, and no moral obligation to bring a happy human into existence. The reason for having a moral duty to avoid creating a miserable person is that we believe the presence of pain for those who experience it is bad, and the absence of pain is good, even if no one exists to experience that absence. Antinatalists hold that appealing to the interests of a potential child as a reason *to create* that child seems strange, whereas appealing to those same interests as a reason *not to create* the child does not. The fact that a child might be happy is not a significant moral reason for bringing them into existence; conversely, the fact that a child might be miserable is a strong moral reason *not* to create them. If the absence of pleasure were bad—even if no one existed to experience that badness—we would have a strong moral reason to create as many children as possible. However, if the absence of pain were not good—even if no one existed to experience that goodness—then we would have no moral reason to refrain from creating a child. “Children today are rude, impolite, and disrespectful, and in the end, you can’t even be sure what kind of person they’ll turn out to be.” (Female participant no. 2). “Just look around you—how

many of the children we see are really healthy, morally or psychologically?” (Female participant no. 9).

Harms Children Impose on the Family

One of the most significant effects of cultural transformation is occupational change. Parenting, which was once the primary responsibility of couples, has now become more difficult due to multiple and sometimes conflicting responsibilities. Therefore, couples, considering their many duties, may postpone taking on the parenting role. Having children can strengthen a family but simultaneously limits personal freedoms. “After my office job, if I have to do extra work in the evening, I can’t—because of my duties as a father and my wife’s workload, I have to stay with the kids, and that’s made me not even think about having another child.” (Participant no. 9). “Having children, because of the exhaustion they bring, cools marital relationships. The rhythm of life gets out of the couple’s control.” (Male participant no. 2).

Overall Summary

To answer the main research question—*What are the factors influencing antinatalism from the perspective of couples’ lived experiences, and what categories and themes does it include?*—239 initial codes were extracted. After analyzing the primary codes, organizing themes were derived and refined, which were then classified into five main themes and eighteen subthemes.

Table 7

Factors Influencing Antinatalism from the Perspective of Couples’ Lived Experiences

Subthemes	Main Themes
Financial conditions of couples	Economic factors
Economic instability	Economic factors
Focus on quality	Economic factors
Gap between expectations and economic realities	Economic factors
Individualism	Personal factors
Physical and mental health	Personal factors
Heavy responsibility of child-rearing	Personal factors
Non-material values	Personal factors
Increasing share of women	Family factors
Dissatisfaction with life	Family factors
Rationalism in childbearing	Social and cultural factors
Risk perception	Social and cultural factors
Cultural rethinking	Social and cultural factors
Decline in religious values	Social and cultural factors
Media influence	Social and cultural factors
Anxiety about childbearing	Social and cultural factors
Harms to children	Child-related factors

Subthemes	Main Themes
Harms children impose on the family	Child-related factors

As shown in the table 7, the factors influencing antinatalism were categorized into five main themes: economic factors, personal factors, family factors, social and cultural factors, and child-related factors. The subthemes were as follows: Economic factors included four subthemes — financial conditions of couples, economic instability, focus on quality, and the gap between expectations and economic realities. Personal factors included four subthemes — individualism,

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the interview data in this study indicated that the lived experience of couples with sexual satisfaction in marital relations fell into three main themes: individual indicators, couple indicators, and effective communication indicators.

Economic factors

The main theme of individual indicators included four subthemes: couples' financial conditions, economic instability, emphasis on quality, and the gap between expectations and realities. The findings of the present study are consistent with [Bagi \(2023\)](#), and [Mahmoudiani & Rafiei \(2022\)](#).

Economic risk, in practice, encompasses a wide range of economic and financial considerations regarding childbearing, including direct costs as well as the opportunity costs associated with having children now and in the future. Approaches known as the economics and value of children, in light of the present study's findings, offer one of the serious explanations for the experiences of the antinatalist participants. The findings of [Mahmoudiani & Rafiei \(2022\)](#) indicate that without adequate attention to the role of culture and cultural contexts, it is impossible to provide an accurate understanding and appropriate explanation of Iran's demographic fluctuations. However, this does not negate the importance of economic factors, which have been another major driver of demographic change in the country in recent years, especially among the younger generation.

Furthermore, the present study provides additional evidence and new research findings supporting the demographers' argument that the sustained success of

physical and mental health, heavy responsibility of child-rearing, and non-material values. Family factors included two subthemes — increasing share of women and dissatisfaction with life. Social and cultural factors included six subthemes — rationalism in childbearing, risk perception, cultural rethinking, decline in religious values, media influence, and anxiety about childbearing. Child-related factors included two subthemes — harms to children and harms children impose on the family.

any policy intervention concerning demographic issues and fertility patterns requires adequate attention to economic contexts worldwide, whether in developed or developing societies. This is clearly true for Iran as well. One of the most important factors directly and significantly affecting fertility levels and trends in society is the economic situation of families in the society at large. Investment and expenditure on children in terms of education and human capital formation—and, conversely, not spending on them and expecting profitability from children—have direct effects on fertility levels ([Mahmoudiani & Rafiei, 2022](#)). By reviewing past demographic trends and examining traditional extended families, we see that in the context of agricultural and pastoral livelihoods, children were regarded as profitable assets who could substantially contribute to household income. Today, however, especially in urban areas, this is generally no longer the case. Given households' socioeconomic standing, children are not contributors to family income; on the contrary, substantial expenses are required for schooling and continued education, leisure, extracurricular activities, and the many years during which they draw on family resources until they can secure employment and form their own families. Therefore, the transformation observed in fertility trends stems from broader social changes. Consequently, families have reconsidered childbearing and, in some cases, prefer to remain childless ([Bagi, 2023](#)).

Individual factors

The main theme of individual factors comprised four subthemes: individualism, physical and mental health, the heavy responsibility of having a child, and non-material values. The findings of the present study align

with [Mahmoudiani & Rafiei \(2022\)](#), [Lundquist et al. \(2009\)](#), and [Haselton & Nettle \(2006\)](#).

Historically in Iranian society, family formation has been closely tied to reproduction and childbearing, and one of the primary motivations for marriage was the continuation of lineage and having children. High fertility determined a woman's social and familial status, while infertility was considered sufficient justification for divorce or remarriage by the husband. Thus, the common societal expectation of couples—especially women—was to have their first child shortly after marriage (often within the first year) ([Mashayekh-Amiri et al., 2024](#)). In recent decades, however, greater access to higher education and entry into the labor market—especially in major cities—have fostered new values within households. On the one hand, these changes have cultivated new values, attitudes, and perceptions; on the other, they have reduced the desirability of the traditional female role. As a result, daughters no longer think like their mothers, and different values have replaced traditional ones—so that employment and higher education are prioritized over childbearing. This change has been so pronounced worldwide that some countries now face an issue of childlessness, and some sociologists predict that about 20 percent of women in affluent modern societies will remain childless ([Lundquist et al., 2009](#)).

A risk less noted in previous studies—but identifiable among the interviewed women as a form of “power risk”—is that many women, not necessarily explicitly or consciously, hold a conception of children that elevates their place in the family power hierarchy far beyond what it once was. This unconscious construct about children is defined through a series of interrelated concepts: a belief that children must be raised with high qualitative standards; that today's children have very high expectations; and that parents view meeting all of these expectations as an obligatory duty. These perceptions influence views on childbearing and the choice of childlessness ([Lundquist et al., 2009](#)).

Family factors

The main theme of family indicators included two subthemes: the increasing share of women and dissatisfaction with life. The findings of the present study are consistent with [Bagi \(2023\)](#) and [Tanturri & Mencarini \(2008\)](#) and [Mankekar \(1993\)](#).

The growing inclination of women to participate in the labor market has various consequences across personal and social dimensions. Women are recognized as the core of the family in Iranian society and simultaneously represent half of the country's potential workforce for economic participation and contributions to growth and development. Regardless of the reasons for women entering the labor market, the impacts of this responsibility on the family—and ultimately on society—are significant. If we consider the decision to have children as a crucial stage of marital life, it is even more consequential for a woman who is expected to assume much of the responsibility for childbearing and childrearing. Moreover, employment increases women's personal responsibilities toward both their children and society, and it can bring various positive and negative consequences ([Bagi, 2023](#)).

If a woman's aim in working and entering the labor market is to earn income and support the household economy, her inclination to have children decreases for two reasons: first, the opportunity cost of childbearing rises, and if she decides to enlarge the family, she must forgo the income derived from employment; second, adding a child brings new costs that, in themselves, reduce parents' willingness to increase family size and can lead to antinatalism or childlessness ([Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008](#)).

Social and cultural factors

The main theme of social and cultural indicators included six subthemes: rationalism in childbearing, risk perception, cultural rethinking, decline in religious values, media influence, and anxiety about childbearing. The findings of the present study are consistent with [Bagi \(2023\)](#), [Ahmadi et al. \(2019\)](#), [Jenkins \(2014\)](#), [Mahmoudiani & Rafiei \(2022\)](#), [Foroutan & Bijani \(2021\)](#), [Dewi et al. \(2018\)](#), [Bönisch & Hyll \(2015\)](#), and [Park \(2002\)](#).

Many couples in today's world prioritize career and personal ambitions over having children. They may wish to focus on finding jobs or pursuing other personal interests. Some people simply prefer the freedom and independence that come with being childfree; they enjoy the ability to travel, pursue hobbies, or engage in other activities without the responsibilities of childrearing. A group of antinatalists are concerned about overpopulation and environmental sustainability and may remain childless due to worries about the impact of

population growth on the environment and the planet's future. [Lockwood et al. \(2022\)](#) report that childlessness is more prevalent in developed countries, where environmental concerns are more salient ([Bagi, 2023](#)).

The influence of the aforementioned causal conditions on childlessness is often facilitated by certain contextual—primarily institutional and social—conditions (institutional risks). Functional changes in the institution of the family and the substitution of social roles and occupations for the maternal role, as well as the weakening of kinship influences in the experience of childbearing, have paved the way for childlessness. Whereas traditional family roles revolved mainly around reproduction and the continuation of lineage—and economic and social conditions of the past reinforced this function—today the family is undergoing major changes in the redefinition of women's/mothers' roles within the family and society. Professional and occupational roles, if not outright alternatives, at least emerge as serious rivals to the maternal role. Moreover, intergenerational experiences of high-fertility eras and the negative image of such periods in the minds of many young women encourage them to act contrary to their families' past experiences ([Dewi et al., 2018](#)).

According to the analyses, media portraying messages supportive of low fertility, alongside the diminishing influence of religion (secularization) in fertility decisions, has greatly helped create a social climate that encourages childlessness. Institutional approaches to fertility thus generally confirm the findings of the present study. It also appears that the reduction in kin pressure and support has placed the responsibility for childrearing solely on parents—especially mothers—which, given the inherently exhausting nature of this work, makes decisions about having a child (or additional children) far more cautious ([Ahmadi et al., 2019](#)).

The social acceptance of childlessness—which, given prevailing patterns in today's society, is even becoming a kind of social mandate—operates as a force that sometimes influences individuals' personal will and decision-making power. From this perspective, childlessness (in both outlook and practice) is socially constructed, an issue emphasized specifically by MacIntyre. In addition to the role of media (domestic and foreign, intentional and unintentional) in representing the Iranian family, Western nuclear-family models are

not without influence. The cultural diffusion approach, emphasizing the role of media in spreading new fertility patterns (childlessness), finds corroborating evidence in the studied context ([Bönisch & Hyll, 2015](#)).

Child-related factors

The main theme of child-related indicators included two subthemes: harms to children and harms children impose on the family. The findings of the present study align with [Alijanzadeh et al. \(2024\)](#), [Ranjbar et al. \(2023\)](#), [Yazdani \(2020\)](#), and [Bagi \(2023\)](#).

Today, with the growth of a risk culture at the societal level, the inclination to have children has decreased. Risk culture stems from social harms that lead to future anxiety and doubts about parenting. The rise of corruption and immorality, political unrest, and social insecurity—characteristic of a high-risk society—cause parental anxiety and prompt delays in childbearing. Under social insecurity, future predictability is disrupted. Some participants stated that, given such unpredictability, bearing and raising children is frightening; thus, they prefer to postpone childbearing until conditions calm down or to forgo it altogether ([Alijanzadeh et al. \(2024\)](#), [Ranjbar et al. \(2023\)](#), and [Yazdani \(2020\)](#)).

According to the risk-avoidance theory first proposed by [McDonald & Marks \(1991\)](#), when individuals decide whether to have children, they evaluate the costs and benefits of children. The theory adds an economic uncertainty dimension to decision-making processes. Individuals may have limited understanding of the opportunities and costs associated with their choices. Because future costs and benefits cannot be determined with certainty, people make decisions in ways that allow them to adjust to potential future changes in their lives. Therefore, life and childbearing decisions depend on their assessment of current and future conditions.

According to this theory, marriage and childbearing are long-term commitments that require a degree of job stability or prospects for sustainable employment and economic security. Thus, economic and income insecurity resulting from job instability or unemployment has an inevitable negative impact on childbearing decisions and behaviors. Being in such conditions heightens perceived risk; individuals then seek situations and actions (such as increasing education or obtaining stable employment) that carry fewer risks and offer better paths to avoid danger. Therefore, while

family formation and childbearing are important for many people, in the new capitalism characterized by opportunities and uncertainties, fertility intentions decline, resulting in a gap between actual and ideal fertility, delays, or even renunciation of childbearing (Ranjbar et al., 2023).

The results of this study show that today's parents' views of their children's future differ from those of the previous generation. Parents are highly concerned about their children's current and future circumstances and consider themselves committed and responsible for them throughout all stages of life. Achieving higher educational and occupational status for their children is among parents' aspirations. In the studied sample, concerns about ensuring children's access to a standard level of living were presented as a central worry. As some women participating in this research acknowledged, they have postponed childbearing—or chosen childlessness—in the hope of a better future.

Because this study revolved around the theories and views of antinatalist couples, the interviews were conducted under a set of specific guidelines. These included adherence to ethical principles, ensuring participants were not subjected to psychological pressure, and allowing them to refrain from answering any questions they did not wish to. In line with ethical principles, participants' identities were kept confidential. This has made recontacting them to gather supplementary information or address possible gaps difficult. Resistance by some couples to discussing many issues created limitations in data collection. Finding sample members who fully identified as antinatalist and had a firm lifetime decision to remain childless was challenging. Many couples were unwilling to cooperate or be interviewed.

Given the prevalence of antinatalist beliefs, this has become a serious concern, and continued efforts to find solutions are essential. Based on the results of the present study, several practical recommendations are proposed, the most important of which are as follows: a serious focus on care-related issues surrounding the physically, psychologically, and socially demanding experience of childbearing for women; implementing awareness-raising and cultural initiatives about the social benefits of childbearing; undertaking measures to reduce the costs of childbearing and reconcile them with economic-social roles; and reviewing and promoting

appropriate parenting methods to reduce the “sovereign child” problem so that the child's status is not elevated to such an extent that families, fearing they cannot align their circumstances with the child's, entirely forgo having children.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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