

Factors Influencing the Decision to Have Children in Iranian Military Families: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study was conducted to explain the dynamics of military families and the factors influencing childbearing within the context of Iranian society.

Methods and Materials: This study was conducted using a qualitative approach based on grounded theory, employing the Strauss and Corbin paradigmatic model. The participants were selected from military families residing in Tehran, Iran. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling with 18 members of military families. The data were analyzed in three stages of coding (open, axial, and selective) and categorized into main themes.

Findings: Analysis of the participants' interviews led to the identification of 13 selective categories, 38 axial categories, and 156 subcategories. Childbearing among military families is influenced by numerous inhibiting and encouraging factors, including economic costs, family support networks, generational continuity and national authority, commitment to the leadership discourse system, faith-based action, parents' psychological capacity, parenting experience, organizational and occupational structure, coherence of population policies, transformation of contemporary lifestyles, and institutionalization of structural support.

Conclusion: The findings of the study can assist policymakers and social planners in shifting their focus from general factors toward key and realistic components involved in the childbearing decision-making process and in designing supportive policies aimed at increasing family satisfaction and enhancing parents' inclination and motivation toward childbearing.

Keywords: Military families, childbearing, grounded theory, spiritual factors, psychological factors.

1. Introduction

Military families constitute one of the most influential social institutions within the structure of modern societies because they simultaneously operate at the

intersection of national security, social stability, demographic sustainability, and family development. The family, particularly within military contexts, is not merely a private unit of emotional and reproductive relationships but also a strategic institution that influences national resilience,

social continuity, and defense capacity. In recent decades, declining fertility rates and changes in reproductive behavior have emerged as major global concerns, prompting policymakers and scholars to examine the determinants of childbearing decisions from social, psychological, cultural, and political perspectives (United Nations Department of & Social Affairs, 2023). Population aging, reduction in replacement fertility, postponement of marriage and childbirth, and declining motivation for larger families have transformed fertility from an individual matter into a strategic issue associated with long-term societal sustainability (McDonald & Kippen, 2025). These demographic concerns become even more critical in societies where military preparedness and national security are closely linked to population dynamics and the continuity of younger generations (Khoramshad et al., 2019; Koulivand, 2024).

In many countries, military families encounter unique conditions that distinguish their reproductive experiences from those of civilian populations. Occupational instability, geographic relocation, prolonged separation due to military missions, exposure to stress, and institutional demands can directly influence family formation and childbearing intentions (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018; Burke & Miller, 2018). Military occupations often impose considerable psychological and social pressures on service members and their spouses, affecting emotional wellbeing, marital relationships, and long-term family planning (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2025; Steenkamp et al., 2018). Research has shown that military-related stressors, including operational pressures and occupational uncertainty, can influence perceptions regarding family expansion and the compatibility between parenting responsibilities and military service (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2025). Moreover, the repeated relocation of military personnel may negatively affect spouses' careers, economic stability, and social support systems, thereby shaping fertility-related decisions within military households (Burke & Miller, 2018).

The psychological dimensions of military family life also play a significant role in reproductive decision-making. Military spouses experience higher rates of psychological distress, anxiety, and emotional burden compared with many civilian populations due to the cumulative impact of occupational stressors and family responsibilities (Steenkamp et al., 2018). In addition, military families often face difficulties accessing specialized mental health and behavioral support services, particularly in geographically isolated military installations (Cantor & Tong, 2023). These

factors may influence parenting self-efficacy, emotional resilience, and perceptions of readiness for childbearing. Studies on military personnel indicate that non-deployment-related stressors, including family strain and occupational uncertainty, significantly affect psychological wellbeing and family functioning (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018). Consequently, childbearing decisions in military families cannot be understood solely through economic or demographic frameworks but require attention to emotional, relational, and psychological experiences.

Another important dimension concerns reproductive healthcare and institutional support within military systems. Military women frequently encounter distinctive challenges related to pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum experiences because of occupational demands, deployment schedules, and healthcare accessibility (Iobst et al., 2021). Qualitative investigations of reproductive experiences in military healthcare systems have highlighted concerns regarding institutional support, continuity of care, and the compatibility between military obligations and family life (Musilli et al., 2025). Similarly, issues related to fertility preservation, reproductive autonomy, and family planning among diverse groups of military personnel illustrate the complexity of reproductive decision-making in military contexts (Lee et al., 2025). These findings suggest that reproductive behavior among military families is shaped not only by personal preferences but also by organizational structures, healthcare systems, and institutional cultures.

The concept of fertility intention has increasingly been examined through sociological and cognitive-social perspectives. Fertility behavior is no longer interpreted merely as a biological or economic phenomenon but as a multidimensional process influenced by social capital, cultural values, symbolic meanings, and lived experiences (McDonald & Kippen, 2025). Recent research among military veterans demonstrated that fertility intentions are associated with identity formation, social expectations, emotional experiences, and perceptions regarding family continuity (Racila et al., 2026). Bourdieu's social theory further emphasizes that reproductive choices are shaped by cultural and symbolic resources embedded within social structures (McDonald & Kippen, 2025). Therefore, childbearing decisions among military families may reflect broader ideological, cultural, and existential meanings beyond practical considerations alone.

In the Iranian sociocultural context, fertility and family formation possess substantial religious, cultural, and political significance. Iran has experienced considerable

demographic transformation during recent decades, particularly following the rapid fertility decline that occurred after the implementation of population control policies in the late twentieth century. Although these policies initially aimed to regulate population growth, concerns regarding population aging, declining fertility, and future labor shortages have shifted policy priorities toward encouraging childbearing and family expansion (Khoramshad et al., 2019; United Nations Department of & Social Affairs, 2023). The Iranian leadership has repeatedly emphasized the strategic necessity of population growth and the importance of strengthening family structures as part of national development and cultural continuity (Office of the Supreme Leader of, 2014). These macro-level policy orientations have contributed to renewed public discourse surrounding fertility and family values in Iranian society.

Nevertheless, despite these pronatalist policies, fertility intentions among Iranian families continue to decline due to a complex interaction of economic pressures, changing lifestyles, shifting gender expectations, and evolving cultural norms (Alidousti et al., 2021; Khojeh et al., 2024). Research conducted among Iranian couples has shown that socioeconomic conditions, employment concerns, housing insecurity, and educational aspirations significantly affect attitudes toward childbearing (Alidousti et al., 2021). Similarly, studies examining fertility tendencies among Iranian women have identified spiritual health, cultural beliefs, and health literacy as important factors influencing reproductive intentions (Zadeahmad et al., 2020). These findings indicate that childbearing decisions emerge through the interaction of material realities and psychological or ideological meanings.

Military families in Iran occupy a distinct social position because their experiences are shaped simultaneously by military institutional culture, national-security responsibilities, and religious-ideological values. Compared with civilian populations, military families may demonstrate stronger orientations toward national continuity, sacrifice, and collective responsibility. Research on police personnel in Tehran indicated that occupational identity, institutional conditions, and social values significantly affect tendencies toward childbearing among security-related occupations (Kazemnejad et al., 2015). Furthermore, demographic-security analyses in Iran emphasize that population decline may weaken national security capacities by reducing the future workforce and military potential (Khoramshad et al., 2019; Koulivand, 2024). Consequently, reproductive behavior among military families in Iran may be strongly

connected to concepts such as national authority, defense preparedness, ideological commitment, and religious identity.

Religious and spiritual factors represent another influential dimension of fertility behavior in Iranian society. Childbearing within Islamic culture is often associated with spiritual fulfillment, moral responsibility, and continuity of religious values across generations. Pronatalist religious narratives emphasize the importance of family formation, intergenerational continuity, and raising morally committed children (Office of the Supreme Leader of, 2014). Previous studies in Iran have shown that spiritual beliefs and religious commitment positively influence fertility tendencies and perceptions of ideal family size (Zadeahmad et al., 2020). In military families, where institutional identity is frequently intertwined with ideological and religious commitments, these spiritual dimensions may exert even greater influence on reproductive decision-making.

At the same time, contemporary transformations in lifestyle and family structure have introduced competing cultural models that influence fertility attitudes. Urbanization, consumerism, individualism, and exposure to globalized media have reshaped perceptions regarding marriage, parenthood, and ideal family size (Khojeh et al., 2024). Many younger couples increasingly prioritize economic stability, personal achievement, and quality-of-life considerations over larger family formation (Akram et al., 2020; Brough & Sheppard, 2022). These transformations are not limited to Western societies but are increasingly evident in developing countries and Middle Eastern contexts as well. The coexistence of traditional pronatalist values and modern individualistic lifestyles creates tension in reproductive decision-making processes, particularly among educated and occupationally active families.

Qualitative approaches provide an especially valuable framework for understanding the lived experiences and subjective meanings underlying fertility behavior. Since reproductive decisions are deeply embedded within personal narratives, emotional experiences, social interactions, and cultural beliefs, quantitative methods alone may not fully capture the complexity of these processes. Grounded theory and phenomenological approaches enable researchers to explore how individuals interpret and negotiate fertility-related experiences within their social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Englander & Morley, 2023). Recent qualitative studies on fertility decision-making have emphasized the importance of understanding emotional motivations, symbolic meanings, and relational dynamics

that shape reproductive choices (Brough & Sheppard, 2022; Musilli et al., 2025). Such approaches are particularly relevant for military families because their experiences are influenced by institutional cultures, occupational demands, and collective identities that may not be adequately reflected in standardized survey measures.

Despite the growing literature on fertility behavior, limited research has specifically examined the lived experiences and childbearing decisions of military families within the Iranian context. Existing studies have primarily focused on general populations, socioeconomic determinants, healthcare challenges, or demographic trends (Alidousti et al., 2021; Khojeh et al., 2024). Furthermore, most available military-family research has been conducted in Western societies and has concentrated on psychological wellbeing, healthcare access, or occupational stress rather than the broader social and ideological dimensions of childbearing (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018; Cantor & Tong, 2023; Opie et al., 2024). There remains a substantial gap in understanding how military families in Iran interpret childbearing within the intersections of national identity, religious values, institutional culture, and personal life experiences.

Additionally, demographic concerns in Iran have heightened the need for context-sensitive investigations into fertility behavior among strategically important social groups. Population aging and declining fertility rates are increasingly recognized as long-term challenges affecting economic sustainability, workforce continuity, and national security (Koulivand, 2024; United Nations Department of & Social Affairs, 2023). Understanding the factors that encourage or inhibit childbearing among military families may therefore contribute not only to family studies and reproductive psychology but also to broader policy discussions regarding demographic sustainability and social resilience. Identifying the psychological, cultural, spiritual, and organizational dimensions of fertility decision-making may help policymakers develop more effective and contextually appropriate support strategies for military households.

Moreover, the experiences of military families are inherently multidimensional because they involve interactions between private family life and institutional expectations. Childbearing decisions may be shaped simultaneously by emotional attachment, perceived parenting competence, occupational limitations, ideological commitments, social support networks, and future-oriented concerns regarding the nation and family continuity. These

interconnected dimensions require an integrative conceptual framework capable of capturing the dynamic relationships among contextual, causal, and intervening factors. Grounded theory is particularly suitable for this purpose because it facilitates the development of explanatory models derived directly from participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Englander & Morley, 2023).

Therefore, considering the demographic challenges facing Iranian society, the strategic importance of military families, the limited qualitative evidence in this field, and the multidimensional nature of fertility decision-making, the present study aimed to explain the dynamics of military families and identify the factors influencing childbearing decisions among military families in Iran using a grounded theory approach.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study was a qualitative investigation employing a grounded theory approach and was conducted during 2024–2025. Considering the relatively underexplored nature of childbearing among military families and the necessity of examining this issue within the context of Iranian society, the grounded theory approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin was utilized (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The statistical population included employed military personnel (married men and women with children) residing in Tehran, Iran. Since sample selection in qualitative research is based on the objectives of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016), purposive sampling was employed in the present research. Theoretical saturation was achieved after 16 interviews; however, to ensure greater confidence, the interviews continued until 18 cases were completed. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being married, (2) being between 20 and 50 years of age, (3) having at least one child, and (4) at least one parent being military personnel. The exclusion criteria included unwillingness to respond or providing incomplete answers to the research questions. All interviews were conducted solely in the presence of the researcher and the participant so that participants could express their experiences freely and without pressure. After obtaining informed consent from the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 to 70 minutes.

Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and a demographic information questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire included variables such as

age, educational level, occupation, number of children, and duration of marriage. The interview guide consisted of a set of open-ended and flexible questions to allow participants to freely express their perspectives and experiences. The first domain of interview questions addressed the experience, meaning, and role of children in parents' lives, as well as perceptions regarding the benefits and difficulties of having children. The second domain focused on factors influencing parents' initial decision to have children. The third domain examined the factors influencing repeated decisions regarding childbearing and the reasons for parents' inclination toward having more children despite the hardships and challenges associated with childbearing. The fourth domain concerned barriers and inhibiting factors related to childbearing, as well as parents' lived experiences and perspectives regarding the decision-making process of childbearing. Sample interview questions included: "What factors led you to decide to have children?", "What factors prevent you from having more children?", and "Despite the existing challenges, how did you decide to have another child?"

In qualitative research, the criterion of trustworthiness is used to assess validity and reliability of data (Englander & Morley, 2023). These criteria were also considered in the present study. To ensure credibility, which corresponds to internal validity, appropriate methods of inquiry, data collection, and data analysis consistent with the phenomenon under investigation and the objectives of the research were employed. Repetitive questions were also used to clarify issues and related details, to prevent researcher misunderstanding of participants' statements, and to identify possible inconsistencies. To establish transferability, which corresponds to external validity, the demographic characteristics of participants, the interview questions, the timing and details of interviews, and the methods of data analysis were described comprehensively. Dependability, which corresponds to reliability in qualitative studies, was ensured through a detailed explanation of all stages of the research process to facilitate replication by

future researchers. Confirmability was established through supervision and guidance by professors familiar with qualitative methodology and specialists in family studies throughout various stages of the research, including coding procedures, data analysis, and development of the theoretical model.

Data analysis was conducted using grounded theory based on the Strauss and Corbin method (2015). In the present study, data analysis was performed in four stages. In the first stage, which involved open coding and the development of concepts based on their characteristics and dimensions, the interview texts were coded, categorized, and conceptualized. Subsequently, to organize the data and develop the theoretical framework, contextual analysis was conducted by examining relationships among themes and identifying the conditions underlying the emergence and continuation of the core phenomenon of the study, namely the psychological, social, and spiritual factors influencing childbearing among military families, as well as the actions, interactions, and consequences associated with them. It should be noted that qualitative studies do not claim generalizability to the entire population; rather, the findings reflect part of the participants' actual perceptions and experiences. The present study is not an exception to this principle.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 18 military participants (married men and women with children). The age range of participants was between 33 and 49 years. In terms of gender, 9 participants were female and 9 were male. Regarding educational level, 8 participants held bachelor's degrees, 8 held master's degrees, and 2 held doctoral degrees. The number of children in the families ranged from 1 to 4 children. The average number of children among participants was 2. Furthermore, the mean age at marriage among participants was reported as 23 years, while the mean age at the birth of the first child was 26 years.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Characteristic	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Age	30–35 years	8	44
	36–40 years	5	28
	41–50 years	5	28
Education	Bachelor's degree	8	44
	Master's degree	8	44

	Doctoral degree	2	11
Gender	Male	9	50
	Female	9	50
Family Economic Status	Low	2	11
	Lower-middle	2	11
	Middle	9	50
	Upper-middle	4	22
	Affluent	1	6
Number of Children	1	5	28
	2	7	39
	3	5	28
	4 or more	1	6
Age at Marriage	18–23 years	9	50
	24–29 years	8	44
	30 years and above	1	6
Age at Birth of First Child	18–23 years	6	33
	24–29 years	7	39
	30 years and above	5	28

Following theoretical saturation during the interview process, data analysis resulted in the identification of 12 main categories, 32 subcategories, and 116 initial codes. Childbearing among military families was influenced by various inhibiting and encouraging factors, including economic costs, family support networks, generational continuity and national authority, commitment to the leadership discourse system, and action based on faith and religious identity. Additionally, contextual factors

(transformation of contemporary lifestyles and coherence of population policies) and intervening factors (parents' psychological capacity, reproduction of meaningful life experiences, and organizational and occupational structure) also affected childbearing among military families. Furthermore, military families viewed childbearing as an ontological investment aimed at strengthening the family structure and creating meaning in life.

Table 2

Characteristics of Codes Related to Factors Influencing Childbearing Decisions in Military Families

Main Category	Subcategory	Initial Codes
Financial and Economic Costs	High costs of pregnancy	Financial costs of childbearing, prenatal ultrasound expenses, childbirth-related medical testing costs
	Child welfare expenses	Purchasing toys for children, buying infant supplies, preparing a child's room, educational expenses
Family Support Network	Intra-family cooperative parenting system	Complementary role of children in raising one another, role of older children in caring for younger siblings, supportive role of siblings
	Distribution of parental roles	Burden of childrearing placed on the mother, increased maternal responsibility during father's absence, male participation in childcare, division of parenting responsibilities
	Spousal cooperation and synergy	Spousal support in childcare, mutual understanding between spouses, joint participation in childbearing, spouse's supportiveness, spouse's sense of responsibility
Generational Continuity and National Authority	National need for a young workforce	Need for young workforce for scientific advancement, usefulness of children for society and religion, need for young human resources, children as a factor in national survival, decline in young population
	Protection of the homeland	Need for children to defend the homeland against enemies, childbearing as a means of national defense, national defense and security needs
Commitment to the Leadership Discourse System	Belief in and support for the guardianship system	Belief in the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, obedience to leadership directives, children as supporters of the leadership system, raising soldiers for the leader
	Authority and legitimacy of leadership statements	Viewing leadership statements on childbearing as authoritative, respect for and adherence to leadership directives, authority of leadership discourse regarding childbearing, responding positively to leadership instructions, self-sacrifice for the leader
	Strategic foresight of leadership	Following leadership guidance due to long-term foresight, leadership concern regarding population aging, leadership prudence and future orientation

Faith-Based Action and Religious Identity	Formation of an Islamic civilization-building generation	Raising soldiers for the Imam Mahdi, increasing the Muslim population, religious and ideological duty
	Faith and trust in God	Belief in divine providence, increase in sustenance and blessings, belief in divine destiny regarding childbearing, trust in God, adherence to religious teachings
	Afterlife-oriented and eschatological view of children	Children as rewards in the afterlife for parents, belief in the end times and the promised savior, children as righteous and enduring deeds, children as provisions for the afterlife
Parents' Psychological Capacity	Mission of raising righteous children	Guiding children toward Islamic educational models, raising responsible and faithful children, proper scientific and Islamic upbringing, religious upbringing of children
	Parenting self-efficacy	Fear of inability to provide ideal conditions, doubts about parenting abilities, lack of self-confidence, inability to fulfill the parental role
Reproduction of Meaningful Life Experiences	Resilience	Learning patience and emotional regulation after childbirth, patience and self-sacrifice during pregnancy, increased resilience in life
	Positive parenting experience	Relief of physical and psychological fatigue through children, enjoyment of children's achievements, enjoyment of developmental stages, pleasure of parenthood, experience of motherhood
	The art of nurturing human beings	Sense of pride in the parental role, innate desire to foster another person's growth, opportunity to nurture another individual, capability of creating life
Organizational and Occupational Structure	Emotional need for children	Children as a source of peace and well-being, fulfillment of parents' emotional needs, silence and emptiness of the home without children, fear of future loneliness
	Occupational limitations	Father's absence from home due to missions, absence of father figure, occupational demands of military personnel, inherent stress of military occupation, father's absence during childbirth
	Occupational challenges for employed mothers	Need for flexible working hours for mothers, insufficient maternity leave, occupational difficulties
Coherence of Population Policies	Organizational culture	Supportive workplace attitudes toward childbearing, role of organizational climate in childbearing decisions, positive organizational attitudes toward childbearing, organizational support for parents
	Negative legacy of "fewer children" slogans	Persistent influence of smaller-family slogans, harmful effects of the "fewer children, better life" discourse, reconstruction of public beliefs, inappropriate population policies in previous decades
	Executive guarantees of population policies	Failure to fulfill childbearing incentives and promises, instability of governmental population policies, lack of implementation guarantees, failure to realize governmental financial incentives
Transformation of Contemporary Lifestyle	Westernization of family lifestyles	Promotion of pet ownership instead of childbearing, negative media portrayal of large families, promotion of Western lifestyles, lifestyle transformation
	Idealistic consumerism	Perfectionism regarding ideal conditions, increase in luxury orientation and formalities, increased comfort-seeking and material expectations
Institutionalization of Structural Support for Childbearing	Institutional support for childbearing	Establishment of childcare centers in organizations, organizational support for employed mothers, expansion of institutional support
	Expansion of governmental support and facilities	Reduction of families' financial and medical concerns by the government, necessity of governmental economic support for childbearing, necessity of practical governmental support
Child as an Ontological Investment	Re-creation of love through parenthood	Increased intimacy between spouses after childbirth, increased love and attachment between spouses, increased spousal attention to family life, improvement of marital relationships
	Family stability	Strengthening family life through children, reinforcement of family orientation, reduction of life tensions
	Meaning-making in life	Children bringing renewed meaning to life, introducing new energy into life, making life sweeter and more meaningful
	Flourishing of children's competencies	Growth of children's social interactions in large families, success of children in larger families, greater vitality in large families

Causal Conditions Influencing Childbearing Among Military Families

Analysis of the statements of the participants in the present study among military families indicates that the causal conditions influencing childbearing among them include economic costs, family support networks, generational continuity and national authority, commitment

to the leadership discourse system, and faith-based action and religious identity.

Economic Costs

One of the first economic challenges that emerges after the birth of a child is the child's welfare-related expenses. The increase in children's welfare costs, such as purchasing infant supplies, providing educational toys, and educational expenses, can directly exert a negative effect on parents'

attitudes toward childbearing. Parents experience economic pressure and concern about their inability to provide desirable standards for the growth and welfare of the child. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“In my opinion, if the government can only control inflation and rising prices and create economic stability in the country, even if it does not provide any of these forms of support, it will play an important role in increasing childbearing and the barriers will be resolved.” (Participant 3)

“Unfortunately, we are experiencing economic instability; that is, prices are constantly increasing. Well, for childbearing, you need calculation and planning. When there is economic instability, you cannot plan, and the person becomes stressed and cannot make a serious decision.” (Participant 7)

Family Support Network

Participants regarded family support as a dynamic network of kinship and spousal relationships that can make the difficulties and responsibilities of different stages of childbearing more tolerable for the mother and make positive family experiences repeatable. Moreover, mutual support among children, the division of parental responsibilities, and spousal companionship not only reduce maternal stress but also strengthen motivation for childbearing. The experience of family support leads the individual to a sense of collective assurance. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“Parents should accompany each other, especially people like us whose jobs have their own particular difficulties. When I came home from work, I did not go to rest; I helped my wife take care of our child. I mean fathers should not assume that all responsibility for raising the child falls on the mother.” (Participant 1)

“In those early days, when I had little experience and was not in a good psychological state, my mother-in-law helped and taught me, and my stress decreased. I remember I was afraid to bathe the baby myself, but my mother-in-law helped, and I was not worried because I was sure she had had children herself and knew what to do.” (Participant 2)

4. Generational Continuity and National Authority

Participants had deep concerns about demographic threats and the future of the country. Their concerns were related to the country being depleted of its young generation, the future aging of the population, and the shortage of human resources; therefore, they viewed greater childbearing as an effective and future-oriented solution. Participants believed that the country depends on the young generation for

scientific advancement and defense of the homeland; therefore, they regarded childbearing as a national duty. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“In our programs, reaching scientific peaks is one of the goals of our country, and knowledge is power. To reach scientific peaks, we need a young and scientific workforce, and this will happen through childbearing and increasing the young workforce.” (Participant 7)

“The country is at risk and is being depleted of its young generation, and the age pyramid of the population is moving toward aging. To be able to defend our country against the enemy, we need a young generation, and this young generation will be created through childbearing.” (Participant 4)

Commitment to the Leadership Discourse System

Participants described commitment to the leadership discourse system as the authority of the guardianship-based leadership. From their perspective, the authoritative nature of the Leader’s statements on childbearing and their understanding of his demographic foresight elevate this component from an individual recommendation to a revolutionary obligation. They believed that the Leader’s statements on childbearing are also acceptable according to reason, and responding positively to the Leader’s statements on childbearing is a prudent decision in response to demographic threats. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“What matters to us is how farsighted and profound His Eminence the Leader is regarding childbearing and population issues. The issues he raised years ago are what we are seeing now, and his future-oriented perspective is important to us. We listen to the words of someone we love, and we will certainly move toward having more children.” (Participant 12)

“When we listen to the Leader’s statements and assess them through reason and logic, we see that we are truly at risk demographically, and the future of our country, my children, the Revolution, and Islam is at risk.” (Participant 11)

Faith-Based Action and Religious Identity

One of the higher objectives of childbearing in Islamic culture is to raise soldiers for Imam Mahdi. This is rooted in belief in the appearance of Imam Mahdi and his role in establishing a global government of justice. By raising aware and faithful children on the path toward realizing Mahdist ideals, parents can play a key role in this great movement. One of the major challenges facing the Muslim community today is population decline. Population growth can

strengthen the position of this school of thought in the world and pave the way for the realization of long-term religious goals. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“Well, anyone who wants to decide to have children partly does it for their own heart, and it is a personal decision. Our goal was to raise a proper person who would be morally and religiously sound and to be able to raise a soldier for Imam Mahdi who would support the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist.” (Participant 18)

“God says, ‘Take one step toward Me and I will take ten steps toward you.’ Regarding childbearing, He also says, ‘I will provide for your child.’ He provided for the one who was under the sea; so, if there is faith and heartfelt belief, it will happen.” (Participant 1)

Contextual Conditions Influencing Childbearing Among Military Families

Analysis of the statements of the participants in the present study among military families indicates that the contextual conditions influencing childbearing among them include the transformation of contemporary lifestyles and the coherence of population policies.

Transformation of Contemporary Lifestyles

In recent years, major changes have occurred in families’ lifestyles and attitudes toward childbearing. These changes, which have often been influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors, have led to a decline in birth rates in many societies. One of the most important factors underlying these changes is transformation in people’s lifestyles, which has spread through media and modern communication tools, especially in developing countries. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“We constantly see celebrities promoting keeping animals; that is, instead of having a child, you keep an animal at home, and this is promoted as a lifestyle. Naturally, couples are influenced by this, and keeping an animal does not involve the difficulties of raising a child. Through such advertisements, they affect young people’s beliefs.” (Participant 7)

“Luxury orientation has now increased greatly and has caused us to neglect the essence of life. All of these things are meant for human comfort, but in fact they become disruptors of comfort, and we neglect the essentials of life. The essence of life is to live happily together and bring children into the world.” (Participant 6)

Coherence of Population Policies

Participants believed that in previous decades, incorrect population policies and related slogans, namely “fewer children, better life,” produced deeply rooted cultural effects

on families’ thinking. Despite the passage of many years, families’ decisions regarding childbearing remain influenced by this cultural mentality. Moreover, the lack of executive guarantees for policies has led to distrust among families. Participants considered gradual culture-building and the provision of real support necessary to compensate for these structural harms. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“If today we see low willingness among couples to have children, part of it is because of that slogan, ‘fewer children, better life.’ That slogan is still having an effect. I remember when my sister and brother were born, they did not give them coupons, and they created restrictions for large families. So cultural influence is gradual; therefore, we must begin culture-building for having more children from now.” (Participant 2)

“Sometimes the promises that have been made, such as giving loans or housing, have not been fulfilled in many places. I can say that we did not benefit from them, and it even became negative publicity; that is, they made promises but did not act on them, and there was no executive guarantee.” (Participant 7)

Intervening Conditions Influencing Childbearing Among Military Families

Analysis of the statements of the participants in the present study among military families indicates that the intervening conditions influencing childbearing among them include parents’ psychological capacity, parenting experience and reproduction of meaningful life experiences, and organizational and occupational structure.

Parents’ Psychological Capacity

Parents’ psychological capacity includes parenting self-efficacy, emotional resilience, and anxiety management. Participants believed that one of the barriers to the decision to have children is parenting anxiety and fear regarding childbirth and how to raise children. However, these initial fears and doubts can be overcome through psychological capacities and the acquisition of patience. From their perspective, a jihadi spirit and practical experience transform concerns into confidence and strengthen readiness for childbearing. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“One of the barriers is that the person does not have sufficient confidence in himself and cannot believe in himself. That is, he feels that he does not have the necessary ability to raise a child or manage life. This suspicion and doubt cause him to fear or withdraw from deciding to have children.” (Participant 17)

“Many people ask me why I had a third child when I already had two. Well, the reason was the jihadi spirit we had. I wanted to make a sacrifice somewhere for my country, and even for my family and my Leader. Childcare, despite all its sweetness, is very difficult, but you must have a jihadi spirit to throw yourself into this difficulty.” (Participant 8)

Parenting Experience and Reproduction of Meaningful Life Experiences

Interest in children and the experience of parenthood, as a deep human feeling, play an important role in the decision to have children. Participants believed that the experience of parental feelings, children’s achievements, and emotional exchange between parents and children had reduced and relieved the everyday fatigue of life. By activating the intrinsic pleasure of parenthood, this component strengthens the motivation for childbearing and neutralizes barriers. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“The feeling of becoming a father, from the moment the child is born, is a pleasant process and a different feeling. When you see your child growing, it cannot be replaced by any other feeling, and such a feeling encourages you to have subsequent children.” (Participant 7)

“The fact that God has given human beings the power to bring another human being into the world is very valuable. When you produce even a simple thing, you feel proud; now imagine when you can bring a human being into the world, a human who speaks and a human who may become a scientist.” (Participant 12)

Organizational and Occupational Structure

Organizational and occupational structure includes occupational limitations, occupational constraints for mothers, and organizational culture. Participants regarded these challenges as arising from the absence of military fathers, insufficient maternity leave, and occupational stress, but they identified supportive organizational attitudes as a strengthening factor. From the participants’ perspective, a positive workplace climate and organizational support moderate occupational barriers and facilitate the decision to have children. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“Considering that my wife and I are both employed and our families are not here, under these conditions it would be better for the organization and the government to establish childcare centers near offices and organizations so that we can leave our child there without worry.” (Participant 3)

“The environment and organization in which we are located can affect our decision. When there is a good mindset and spirit regarding childbearing in the

organization, you are also influenced by that spirit, and this positive climate can be helpful.” (Participant 16)

Military Families’ Strategies Regarding Childbearing

Analysis of the statements of the participants in the present study among military families indicates that the strategies influencing childbearing among them include childbearing as a compensatory–restorative strategy and the institutionalization of structural support for childbearing.

Institutionalization of Structural Support for Childbearing

One effective measure for supporting childbearing is the establishment of childcare centers in offices and organizations. Employed mothers usually face challenges such as caring for their children during working hours. The presence of childcare centers in the workplace can reduce this challenge and allow mothers to perform their occupational duties with greater peace of mind. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

“It would be very good if there were childcare centers next to the places where mothers work. I am telling you honestly, when the child is alone at home and the mother is at work, she is only physically present; a mother who is worried about her child does not perform quality work.” (Participant 4)

“One of the things that can encourage families to have children is economic support from the government; for example, a fixed amount could be deposited for each child, or at least the government could cover part of the children’s educational expenses, which would reassure families.” (Participant 18)

Consequences of Childbearing Among Military Families

Childbearing as an Ontological Investment

The birth of a child and the child’s presence in the family, despite parenting responsibilities, provide a suitable context for emotional interactions. Caring for the child and experiencing shared moments in parenting strengthen emotional bonds among family members. Parents reported that having children enriched the experience of married life and made parents’ emotional relationships more satisfying. Some participants stated the following in this regard:

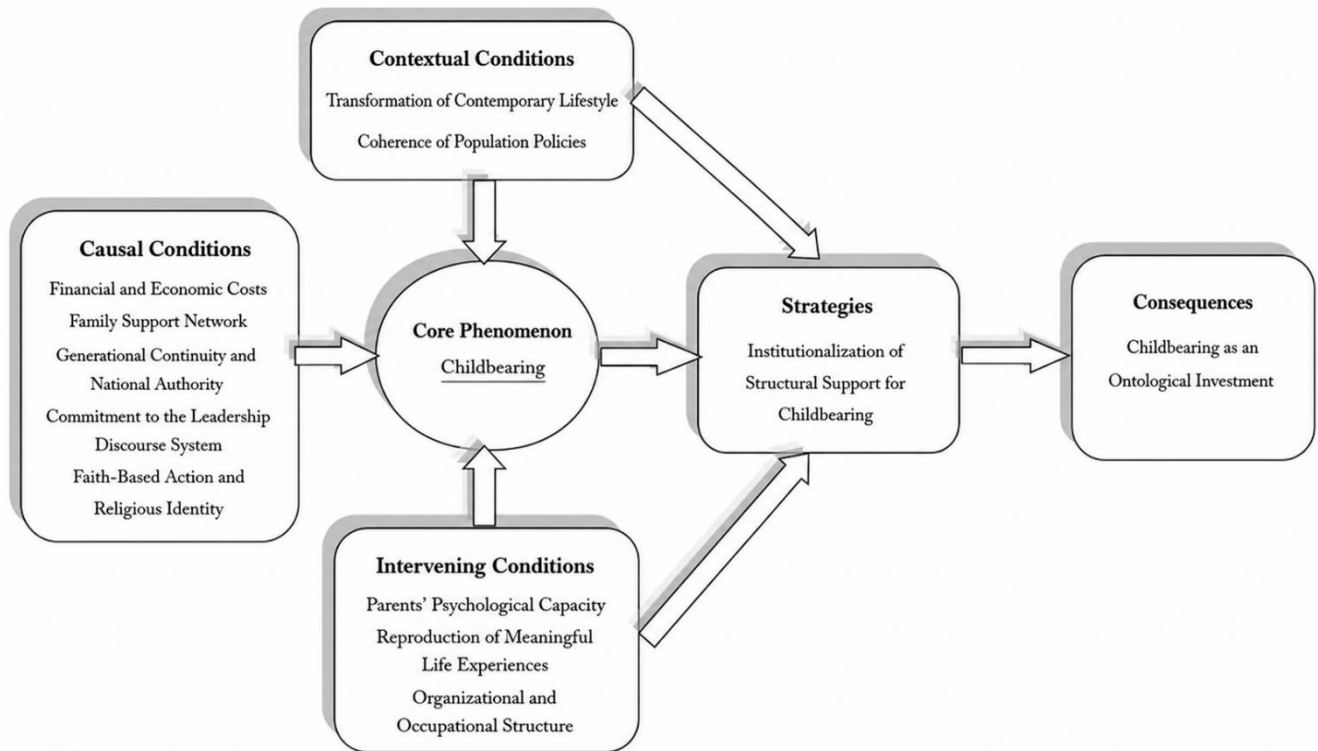
“With the arrival of the child, the stability of our life increased, and behaviorally, my wife and I became better. Those simple conflicts decreased. To put it simply, when there is a child, everyone’s attention shifts, and we became more involved with the child; the tension in our life decreased, and our relationship improved.” (Participant 1)

“With the arrival of the child, a pleasant earthquake occurred and put our life in order. I grew through the child; that is, with the arrival of the children, I changed from an

inexperienced girl who had not endured hardship into an experienced mother.” (Participant 10)

Figure 1

Paradigmatic model of factors influencing the decision to have children in military families.



5. Discussion

The present study aimed to explain the dynamics of military families and identify the factors influencing childbearing decisions among military families in Iran using a grounded theory approach. The findings demonstrated that childbearing decisions among military families are shaped by a complex interaction of causal, contextual, and intervening conditions, including economic costs, family support networks, generational continuity and national authority, commitment to the leadership discourse system, faith-based action and religious identity, transformation of contemporary lifestyles, coherence of population policies, parents’ psychological capacity, parenting experiences, and organizational-occupational structures. In addition, the findings indicated that military families perceive childbearing not merely as a biological or demographic event but as an ontological investment associated with emotional meaning, family cohesion, ideological continuity, and existential fulfillment.

One of the central findings of the present study was the influential role of economic costs and financial instability in shaping childbearing decisions. Participants emphasized inflation, economic uncertainty, educational expenses, and welfare-related costs of children as major deterrents to fertility intentions. These findings are consistent with prior studies demonstrating that socioeconomic insecurity significantly reduces childbearing motivation and contributes to delayed or limited fertility behavior (Akram et al., 2020; Alidousti et al., 2021). Economic instability weakens individuals’ sense of future predictability and increases perceived parenting burden, thereby reducing readiness for larger family formation. In military families, where occupational relocations and service-related uncertainties are already present, financial instability may intensify concerns regarding long-term family planning. The findings also align with sociological explanations of fertility behavior emphasizing the role of material resources and perceived economic capital in reproductive choices (McDonald & Kippen, 2025). Participants’ emphasis on stable economic conditions rather than temporary financial

incentives suggests that sustainable macroeconomic security may play a more influential role in fertility decisions than short-term pronatalist policies alone.

Another important finding was the role of family support networks in facilitating childbearing. Participants described emotional support, shared parenting responsibilities, and assistance from extended family members as essential mechanisms for reducing parenting stress and increasing confidence in childrearing. These findings support previous qualitative research indicating that fertility decisions are strongly embedded within relational and social-support structures (Brough & Sheppard, 2022). Family support contributes to emotional reassurance, reduces caregiving burden, and enhances perceptions of collective responsibility in parenting. In military families, where occupational absence and deployment-related separations may disrupt family routines, supportive interpersonal networks appear especially important. The findings are also consistent with studies indicating that military-related occupational stress affects family functioning and marital wellbeing (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018; Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2025). When emotional and caregiving responsibilities are shared among spouses and relatives, military families may experience greater resilience in confronting the demands of childbearing and parenthood.

The findings further revealed that concerns regarding generational continuity, national authority, and demographic sustainability significantly influenced fertility intentions among military families. Participants associated childbearing with national survival, defense preparedness, scientific development, and preservation of the younger generation. This finding reflects the strategic and collective orientation of military identity, where personal reproductive decisions are connected to broader national and societal responsibilities. These findings are congruent with demographic-security analyses emphasizing the relationship between population structure and national power (Khoramshad et al., 2019; Koulivand, 2024). Participants perceived population decline and aging as threats not only to economic sustainability but also to national security and military readiness. Such perceptions may be particularly salient among military personnel because of their institutional role in defending national integrity. The results also correspond with broader demographic concerns identified in international reports regarding the social and economic consequences of declining fertility and population aging (United Nations Department of & Social Affairs, 2023).

Commitment to the leadership discourse system emerged as another major factor influencing childbearing decisions. Participants described the statements and recommendations of national leadership regarding population growth as authoritative, rational, and future-oriented. These findings indicate that fertility behavior among military families is not solely guided by personal or economic considerations but is also shaped by ideological and political commitment. In the Iranian context, pronatalist discourse has been closely linked to national development and cultural continuity (Office of the Supreme Leader of, 2014). Participants interpreted compliance with leadership recommendations as both a rational response to demographic threats and a form of ideological responsibility. This finding illustrates how fertility behavior can function as a symbolic and political act within ideologically structured social environments. It also supports sociocultural approaches emphasizing that reproductive decisions are embedded within systems of symbolic meaning, collective identity, and moral obligation (McDonald & Kippen, 2025).

Faith-based action and religious identity also played a substantial role in motivating childbearing among participants. Many participants viewed childbearing as a religious duty, an act of trust in divine providence, and a means of raising morally committed children. These findings are consistent with studies indicating positive associations between spiritual beliefs and fertility tendencies in Iranian populations (Zadeahmad et al., 2020). Religious identity appeared to provide psychological reassurance regarding economic uncertainty and parenting difficulties, thereby reducing fear associated with childbearing. In addition, participants associated childbearing with broader Islamic and eschatological narratives, including the continuation of religious values and preparation for the future of the Muslim community. Such findings highlight the importance of spiritual frameworks in shaping reproductive motivations among military families. Unlike purely individualistic interpretations of fertility behavior, participants interpreted parenthood through collective religious meanings and transcendent values.

The findings additionally demonstrated that contemporary lifestyle transformations and cultural changes constitute important contextual barriers to childbearing. Participants criticized increasing materialism, consumerism, and the promotion of alternative lifestyles through media and social networks. These findings are aligned with prior research showing that modern individualistic lifestyles, consumer-oriented values, and changing family norms

contribute to lower fertility rates and postponement of parenthood (Akram et al., 2020; Khojeh et al., 2024). Participants believed that modern cultural narratives prioritize comfort, luxury, and personal freedom over family expansion, thereby weakening traditional pronatalist values. This result also reflects broader sociological discussions regarding the transition from collectivist family-centered cultures toward individualized lifestyles in many societies. Exposure to globalized media and changing social expectations may particularly affect younger couples' perceptions of ideal family size and parenting responsibilities.

The coherence of population policies was another important contextual factor identified in the findings. Participants emphasized that previous governmental policies promoting smaller families had produced lasting cultural effects that continue to shape fertility attitudes. Furthermore, participants reported distrust toward current pronatalist policies because of inadequate implementation and lack of institutional guarantees. These findings suggest that fertility behavior is influenced not only by current policy content but also by collective historical memory and public trust in institutions. Similar concerns regarding the effectiveness of fertility policies and the gap between governmental discourse and practical support have been identified in fertility-related research (Alidousti et al., 2021; Khojeh et al., 2024). The persistence of earlier anti-natalist narratives demonstrates that demographic policies can produce long-term cultural consequences that are difficult to reverse rapidly. Therefore, fertility promotion requires not only policy announcements but also sustained institutional credibility and social trust.

Another major finding concerned the role of parents' psychological capacity in childbearing decisions. Participants identified parenting anxiety, fear of inadequacy, emotional resilience, and self-efficacy as central psychological determinants of fertility behavior. These findings are consistent with previous military-family studies indicating that occupational stress and emotional strain significantly affect family functioning and wellbeing (Brooks & Greenberg, 2018; Steenkamp et al., 2018). Participants reported that confidence in parenting abilities and resilience against hardship reduced fear regarding additional children. In this regard, the "jihadi spirit" described by participants functioned as a psychological coping mechanism that transformed hardship into meaningful sacrifice. This finding highlights the interaction between psychological resilience and ideological identity

within military families. Emotional endurance and collective purpose may help military families tolerate the challenges associated with childrearing despite occupational and economic pressures.

The findings also revealed that parenting experiences and the reproduction of meaningful life experiences positively reinforced childbearing intentions. Participants described parenthood as a deeply rewarding emotional experience that generated meaning, pride, emotional attachment, and existential growth. These findings align with qualitative fertility studies emphasizing the emotional and symbolic dimensions of parenthood (Brough & Sheppard, 2022; Musilli et al., 2025). Participants viewed children not only as dependents requiring care but also as sources of emotional fulfillment and personal transformation. Parenthood was associated with enhanced life meaning, emotional intimacy, and self-development. Such findings support phenomenological perspectives suggesting that reproductive decisions are deeply connected to lived experiences and identity formation (Englander & Morley, 2023). In military families, where occupational pressures may create emotional fatigue, children may also function as emotional anchors that strengthen family cohesion and psychological wellbeing.

Organizational and occupational structures emerged as both barriers and facilitators of childbearing among military families. Participants highlighted occupational absence, stressful working conditions, insufficient maternity leave, and lack of childcare support as major challenges. These findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating that military occupations create significant pressures on family functioning and work-family balance (Burke & Miller, 2018; Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2025). At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of supportive organizational culture, positive workplace attitudes, and institutional childcare facilities in facilitating fertility decisions. These findings correspond with studies emphasizing the role of healthcare access and institutional support in improving reproductive experiences among military families (Iobst et al., 2021; Musilli et al., 2025). Supportive institutional environments may reduce perceived parenting burden and enhance compatibility between occupational obligations and family life.

Another important finding was the identification of institutionalized structural support as a key strategy for encouraging childbearing. Participants emphasized the need for workplace childcare facilities, governmental economic assistance, and practical institutional support. These findings suggest that fertility promotion among military families

requires structural interventions rather than solely ideological encouragement. Previous studies have similarly emphasized the importance of accessible support systems, healthcare services, and institutional responsiveness in shaping reproductive experiences among military populations (Cantor & Tong, 2023; Musilli et al., 2025). Practical support mechanisms may reduce the incompatibility between military service and parenting responsibilities while enhancing family security and wellbeing.

6. Conclusion

Finally, the findings demonstrated that military families perceive childbearing as an ontological investment associated with emotional stability, marital intimacy, and meaning-making in life. Participants reported that children strengthened emotional relationships, reduced interpersonal tensions, and contributed to personal maturity and existential fulfillment. These findings support sociological and phenomenological approaches emphasizing that parenthood functions as a source of identity formation, symbolic continuity, and emotional integration (Englander & Morley, 2023; McDonald & Kippen, 2025). Rather than perceiving children merely as economic responsibilities, participants interpreted childbearing as a transformative life experience that deepens family cohesion and enriches personal existence. This ontological perspective may explain why many participants continued to value childbearing despite economic and occupational hardships.

7. Limitations & Suggestions

One limitation of the present study was that the participants were selected only from military families residing in Tehran, which may limit the transferability of findings to military families in other regions with different cultural, economic, or organizational conditions. Another limitation was the qualitative nature of the study and reliance on self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by social desirability or participants' ideological orientations. In addition, the study focused primarily on married military personnel with children; therefore, the perspectives of childless couples or unmarried military personnel were not explored.

Future research should examine childbearing decisions among military families in different provinces and cultural contexts to identify regional similarities and differences in fertility-related experiences. Comparative studies between

military and civilian families may also provide a deeper understanding of the unique institutional and psychological dimensions of military family life. Furthermore, future investigations could employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine how changes in economic conditions, organizational support, and population policies influence fertility intentions over time.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that effective fertility promotion among military families requires multidimensional interventions addressing economic, organizational, psychological, and cultural factors simultaneously. Policymakers and military organizations should strengthen institutional support systems such as workplace childcare centers, flexible parental leave policies, and accessible psychological counseling services for military couples. In addition, improving economic stability and enhancing trust in governmental support policies may reduce anxiety regarding childbearing decisions. Cultural and educational programs emphasizing family cohesion, shared parenting responsibilities, and positive parenting experiences may also contribute to strengthening fertility motivation among military families.

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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.

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 have equally contributed to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

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