

Lived Experience of Married Women in Yazd Regarding Childbearing and Parenting with Emphasis on the Educational Conduct (Sirah) of Imam Reza (A.S.)

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Article info

Abstract

Article type:
Research Article

Received:
5 May 2025

In Revised form:
11 August 2025

Accepted:
4 October 2025

Published:
29 November 2025



The fertility process is influenced by a wide range of factors. In this regard, a comprehensive understanding of women's perceptions of the challenges of childbearing and the contextual grounds facilitating it can effectively contribute to formulating population policies. The primary objective of this research is to understand Yazdi women's perceptions of the challenges of childbearing and how they confront this phenomenon. A qualitative research design of the phenomenological type was used to collect research data. Participants were 25 married women from Yazd, selected through purposive and theoretical sampling. Data were collected over a four-month period from the beginning of Shahrivar to the end of Azar 1397 (August-December 2018), using semi-structured interviews as the instrument. Data analysis was conducted using the Van Manen method, employing holistic, selective, and detailed approaches to extract themes from the text. The main categories of the research included the value of children, perceived risks, and strategies of parenting and childbearing. The results of this study indicated that attitudes towards childbearing among married women in Yazd are a combination of traditional values and modern considerations. Childbearing is influenced by concepts such as life meaning, generational continuity, and psychological security, as well as factors such as economic status, women's employment, cultural-religious developments, and communication technologies. Given socio-economic and religious transformations, supportive policymaking in the realm of childbearing -particularly support for working mothers, ensuring economic security, enhancing child-rearing and educational services, and utilizing the Sirah (conduct) of Imam Reza (A.S.) in child upbringing- can play an effective role in improving the processes of .childbearing and parenting

Keywords: Childbearing Challenges, Value of Children, Sirah of Imam Reza (A.S.), Lived Experience, Women of Yazd City.

Reference: Alimondegari, Maliheh, Jafari Naeimi, Fatemeh. (2025). Lived Experience of Married Women in Yazd Regarding Childbearing and Parenting with Emphasis on the Educational Conduct (Sirah) of Imam Reza (A.S.). *Imam Reza (A.S.) and Contemporary Sciences*. 3(9).77-110.

Publisher: Imam Reza (A.S) International University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22034/ijs.2025.521494.1592>



1. Introduction

Recent demographic changes in Iran, including a significant decline in the fertility rate, indicate profound shifts in attitudes and behaviors related to childbearing in society. Despite experiencing similar trends, Yazd province still maintains a higher fertility rate compared to the national average, suggesting the persistence of distinctive cultural and social patterns in this region. In this context, the role of women as the primary agents in the domain of fertility lies at the intersection of traditional values (such as finding meaning in life through motherhood) and the demands of modern life (including employment and higher education). This conflict can lead to the formation of psychological, economic, and social challenges on the path to childbearing and parenting. Recognizing this complexity, the present research investigates the lived experience of married women in Yazd regarding the phenomena of childbearing and parenting, and in this journey, also utilizes a religious perspective based on the educational conduct (sirah) of Imam Reza (A.S.) as a meaning-giving and identity-forming framework. The main objective is a deeper understanding of the challenges, values, and strategies of these women in confronting issues related to fertility and child-rearing within the specific cultural-social context of Yazd.

2. Research Objectives

This research was conducted with the general aim of discovering and explaining the lived experience of married women in Yazd in the domain of childbearing and parenting, and pursues the following specific objectives:

- Identifying and analyzing the challenges faced by Yazdi women in the decision-making process and action for childbearing.
- Investigating the values and meanings women attribute to children and the role of motherhood.
- Identifying strategies adopted by these women to manage childbearing and parenting issues under current conditions.
- Examining how the lived experiences of women interact and contend with religious and educational teachings derived from the sirah of Imam Reza (A.S.).
- Providing a comprehensive analysis of these experiences within the framework of modern demographic theories and religious guidance.

3. Methodology

This research used the qualitative research method and the phenomenological approach as a suitable paradigm for deeply discovering and describing the subjective experiences of the participants. The research field was the city of Yazd, selected due to its relative cultural homogeneity and specific socio-economic indicators.

-Research Population and Sample: Participants included 25 married women from Yazd, aged 20 to 55, selected through purposive sampling considering criteria such as a minimum of three years of marriage and diversity in educational and occupational status.

-Data Collection Tool: Data were collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews over a four-month period (Shahrivar to Azar 1397 / August-December 2018).

-Data Analysis Method: The analytical method of Van Manen was used to analyze the textual data from the interviews. In this process, utilizing three approaches—holistic, selective, and detailed—the main themes were extracted. Techniques such as member checking and comparing analyses with raw data were used to enhance the validity of the research.

-Theoretical Framework: The research utilized a combined theoretical framework including religious guidance derived from the sirah of Imam Reza (A.S.) (emphasizing the triad of “respecting elders,” “showing mercy to the young,” and “maintaining family ties”) and macro demographic theories (such as demographic transition theory, risk aversion theory, and gender equity theory).

4. Findings

Analysis of the participants’ experiences led to the identification of three main and interconnected categories:

1. The Value of Children: Women’s attitudes towards childbearing were a complex combination of emotional and existential meaning-making (such as generational continuity, creating joy, and a sense of responsibility) and cost-oriented considerations (including heavy economic pressures, opportunity costs especially for employed women, and concerns about securing their children’s future). Sometimes these two dimensions were in conflict with each other.

2. Risks of Parenting: Women faced a wide range of concerns in the child-rearing process, the most important of which were:

-Educational Challenges in the Age of Technology: Concerns about the damaging effects of cyberspace and media on children’s mental health and identity.

-Concerns about Future Employment and Marriage: Anxiety stemming from securing suitable jobs, housing, and the high costs of marriage for children.

-Generational Gap: Differences in values and attitudes between the parents’ and children’s generations, complicating educational management.

-Conflict of Gender Roles: The double pressure on employed mothers to simultaneously fulfill traditional family roles and professional responsibilities.

3. Strategies for Childbearing and Parenting: To confront the above challenges, women employed numerous adaptive strategies, categorized into three areas:

-Fertility Strategies: Such as precise planning and timing for childbearing, postponing it to achieve job or educational stability, and limiting the number of children with an emphasis on “quality over quantity.»

-Care and Maintenance Strategies: Including reliance on informal support networks (spouse, parents, relatives), using childcare services like kindergartens, or in some cases temporary or permanent withdrawal from employment.

-Educational and Future-Oriented Strategies: Such as efforts to teach life skills, monitoring children’s social and virtual interactions, and investing in their talent identification and academic-career guidance.

Interaction with the Razavi Sirah: The findings indicated that women’s efforts to manage these challenges, in many cases, aligned with principles emphasized in the teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.), such as insight and practical rationality (avoiding hasty decision-making), deliberation and planning (managing role conflicts), and faith-based patience (perseverance in the face of difficulties). However, at times, a gap was observed between these normative models (such as prioritizing ethics over wealth in marriage) and complex socio-economic realities (such as normative pressure to provide extensive financial means).

5. Conclusion

This research showed that the experience of childbearing and parenting for married women in Yazd is shaped within an identity-structural conflict. On one hand, the desire to give meaning to life and consolidate the family through motherhood, and on the other, facing objective economic obstacles, pressure from multiple roles, and educational concerns in a complex world, have created a transitional and stressful

situation for them. In this context, “success” in parenting is increasingly oriented towards the quality of upbringing, providing opportunities, and ensuring a secure future for a more limited number of children.

Considering the findings, effective policymaking in the domains of population and family should adopt a holistic and multidimensional approach that simultaneously focuses on three axes:

-Material and Institutional Support: Reducing the burden of direct and opportunity costs of childbearing through policies such as housing facilities, developing high-quality childcare centers, and expanding job support (parental leave, flexible working hours) especially for employed women.

-Redefining and Empowering Women’s Role: Creating mechanisms to reduce work-family conflict and promoting a fairer division of domestic and parenting responsibilities between spouses.

-Reconstructing Cultural Discourse: Reviving and reinterpreting the discourse on family and childbearing by relying on indigenous and religious sources of meaning (such as the sirah of Imam Reza, A.S.) in a way that simultaneously emphasizes women’s dignity, the importance of family, and the realities of modern life. The teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.), with their emphasis on combined rational and emotional upbringing and responsibility within the family, can serve as an inspiring source for this redefinition.

Suggestions

Conducting similar qualitative studies in other provinces and subcultures of Iran is necessary to discover diverse lived experiences and identify local determinants of fertility. Furthermore, a precise evaluation of the past experience of population policies and its pathology will be an essential basis for designing realistic and sustainable policies in the future.

Keywords: Lived Experience, Childbearing, Parenting, Childbearing Challenges, Adaptive Strategies, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology.