

Gender Construction And Fertility: Exploring The Relationship Between Socioeconomic Conditions And Family Size

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of gender and fertility, focusing on the relationship between socioeconomic conditions, reproductive decision-making, and family multiplicity in Surabaya. The research is motivated by the fact that fertility decisions are influenced not only by economic considerations but also by gender norms, partner relationships, cultural values, and women's bargaining power within the family. The study used a mixed methods approach, collecting data through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria being married women, residing in Surabaya, and having more than two children. The initial data collection involved six women with three to four children. Quantitative analysis was conducted descriptively, while qualitative data were analyzed using

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thematic analysis based on a sociological gender perspective. The results showed that the decision to have many children was not always a woman's initial preference. Some respondents stated that they wanted two children but later had an unplanned third or fourth child. Husbands or partners were the most frequently mentioned parties in the decision to have many children. Furthermore, 83.3% of respondents cited the value of "many children, much fortune" as a factor influencing fertility decisions. The findings show that the relationship between economic conditions and fertility is complex, economics and poverty are not the main determinants, but rather popular cultural values dominate women's decisions to have many children.

Keywords: *gender construction; fertility; poverty; women; family*

INTRODUCTION

Statistics from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Surabaya show that in 2022, the proportion of men to women was lower when aged 40 years and above (BPS, 2022). This indicates that the mortality rate for men is higher than for women, and the number of elderly women is higher than for men. This paper examines the social construction of gender and its impact on fertility rates in Surabaya, Indonesia, with a focus on the relationship between poverty and the number of children in families. Using a sociological gender approach, this study aims to understand how gender roles in poor families influence reproductive decisions and how this contributes to the dynamics of urban poverty.

Statistics from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Surabaya City show that the proportion of male and female residents has changed by age group. In the age group 40 years and above, the number of men is relatively lower than that of women (BPS, 2022). This condition indicates differences in population structure based on gender and age, which are related to mortality dynamics and the increasing proportion of women in the elderly population. This phenomenon is increasingly relevant in the context of the changing demographic structure of Surabaya City, which is moving towards a society with a larger proportion of elderly residents. Annisadina and Fernanda (2024) show that Surabaya's aging population has important implications for urban planning, social services, and development needs that are responsive to population characteristics based on age and gender. Similarly, Vibriyanti (2019) shows that Surabaya's demographic transformation towards an elderly-friendly city requires attention to the differences in men's and women's experiences in dealing with the aging process.



However, these changes in population structure cannot be separated from the fertility dynamics that shape long-term demographic structures. Fertility is not simply a matter of birth rates, but a social phenomenon influenced by economic conditions, cultural values, family norms, education, and gender relations within the household. Studies on fertility behavior in Indonesia have shown differences between urban and rural communities, indicating that socioeconomic context and residential environment play a role in shaping reproductive behavior (Chernichovsky et al., 1982). Over time, Indonesia's fertility transition has also become increasingly linked to changes in gender relations. Taebenu (2020) shows that gender equality is linked to the fertility transition process in Indonesia, while gender disparities persist in both individual-oriented and family-oriented institutions.

This perspective is important because decisions about the number of children do not essentially take place in a neutral social space. Reproductive decisions are a negotiation process influenced by the position, role, and power of each family member. In societies still influenced by patriarchal norms, women may experience limitations in determining when to have children, how many children they want, and the use of contraception. Research by Yusnida et al. (2025) shows that women's empowerment and demographic characteristics are associated with the desire to have children in Indonesia. The study confirms that low decision-making autonomy within the family can influence women's reproductive preferences. Using data from the 2017 Indonesian Demographic and Health Survey (IDHS), Taqwim et al. (2025) also found that various dimensions of women's empowerment have different relationships with the number of children, the ideal number of children, and the congruence between preferences and fertility realities. Interestingly, women's attitudes toward rejecting justifications for intimate partner violence and sexual autonomy emerged as dimensions of empowerment consistently related to fertility outcomes. These findings demonstrate that fertility needs to be understood as part of the social construction of gender, not solely because of economic considerations. Within the family context, women do not always have an equal position with men in making reproductive decisions. Kristina and Pamungkas (2025), through an intergenerational study of women's fertility decisions in rural Indonesia, demonstrated that the decision to have children is related to women's rationality, shaped by family experiences, social conditions, and changes in values across generations. Thus, the decision regarding the number of children is the result of the interaction between individual preferences and the surrounding social structure.



The relationship between fertility and economic conditions becomes even more complex when linked to poverty. Families with more children face greater needs for consumption, education, health care, and caregiving. Under conditions of limited economic resources, increasing family size can increase household economic pressures and potentially impact the quality of family life. Conversely, poverty can also influence reproductive decisions through limited access to education, reproductive health information, decent work, and family planning services. Therefore, the relationship between poverty and fertility should not be understood as a one-way causal relationship, but rather as a reciprocal relationship mediated by gender constructions.

In the Indonesian context, the relationship between gender inequality and poverty has also received empirical support. Muhammad (2024) demonstrated a link between gender inequality and poverty levels in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Mahzanallah et al. (2025) showed that gender empowerment and women's income influence poverty in Indonesia, with economic growth acting as a moderating variable. These findings strengthen the argument that women's economic position and gender equality are crucial for understanding poverty issues. Therefore, when fertility research is placed in the context of family poverty, gender analysis becomes crucial to explain how role division, access to resources, and women's bargaining power influence decisions about having many children.

The context of Surabaya provides an interesting empirical space to examine this relationship. As a metropolitan city with complex urban characteristics, Surabaya faces changes in population structure, socio-economic inequality, and changes in family patterns. Research on poor women's families in Surabaya shows that gender inequality is still evident in the distribution of production, reproduction, and community management burdens. Women in poor families can even experience a triple burden, namely the simultaneous burden of reproduction, productivity, and community management. This condition indicates that urban poverty cannot be separated from the structure of gender relations that place women in a vulnerable position.

At the same time, recent research developments indicate a significant shift in how Indonesian women's fertility decisions are understood. Recent research by Taqwim et al. (2025) shows that women's empowerment does not have a uniform influence on all fertility indicators. This means that empowerment cannot be treated as a single concept but needs to be viewed across its various dimensions, such as household decision-making, sexual autonomy, attitudes toward gender-based violence, and economic participation. This finding is important for research



on gender construction because it demonstrates that childbearing decisions are the result of multiple interacting dimensions of social relations.

More recent research on young mothers in peri-urban Indonesia also shows that fertility decisions and perceptions of ideal family size are shaped by changing socioeconomic conditions and women's subjective experiences. Aryati (2026) positions women's experiences as a crucial perspective for understanding how young mothers shape perceptions of ideal childbearing and make fertility decisions. This perspective further reinforces the need to view fertility not only through demographic indicators but also through the social experiences of women within the family. Based on this earlier research, there has been a significant shift from conventional demographic approaches to approaches that increasingly focus on women's empowerment, reproductive autonomy, and gender equality. However, there is still room for research to more deeply explain how gender constructions within poor urban family's shape decisions about having many children and how these decisions subsequently relate to the reproduction of poverty within families. Research on fertility in Indonesia generally examines demographic factors, childbearing preferences, women's empowerment, or fertility transitions separately. In contrast, research on poverty and gender has focused more on inequality in economic access and women's burdens, without specifically linking these to fertility decisions.

Therefore, this article fills this gap by positioning gender construction as a social mechanism linking fertility and poverty. The research focuses on how gender norms, the division of roles within the family, women's bargaining power, and socioeconomic conditions shape decisions regarding the number of children. Using a sociological perspective of gender, this study does not view childbearing solely as an individual choice or a family's economic strategy, but rather as a decision formed through negotiation processes, social norms, and power relations between men and women. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of sociological studies of gender and population. It also broadens discussions on poverty by demonstrating that the sustainability of family poverty is not solely related to low income, but also to how gender structures influence resource allocation, reproductive burdens, and decisions regarding the number of children. Practically, the research findings are expected to form the basis for developing policies on family planning, poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and population development that are more sensitive to gender equality.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Surabaya, as one of the largest cities in Indonesia, faces complex socioeconomic challenges, including high poverty rates and relatively high fertility rates among poor families. These phenomena are often influenced by social constructions of gender that shape women's roles and responsibilities within the family. Understanding how these gender constructions influence reproductive decisions and contribute to the cycle of poverty is crucial. In a research study, Hatton et al. (2018) found that the height of children aged 2 to 12 in the Indonesian Family Life Survey (IFLS) focused on the influence of the number of children in the family. Previous research on the trade-off between the number of children and several measures of child quality has largely focused on the endogeneity of fertility choices. Here, we use the IFLS for 1993, 1997, and 2000 to exploit some unique institutional features that have influenced fertility. We find evidence that family size is influenced by both the supply side, as represented by components of Indonesia's family planning program, and the demand side, as represented by exposure to modern media. We use these variables as instruments for family size in regressions for height z-scores. We found evidence of a significant negative effect of family size on height, despite the presence of other influences. Each additional sibling was associated with a one-third standard deviation decrease in height z-scores. This effect was stronger among families with less educated mothers and occurred in both urban and rural settings.

The social construction of gender refers to how society shapes and regulates roles, responsibilities, and expectations for individuals based on their sex. In the context of poor families in Surabaya, women's traditional role as primary caregivers can limit their access to education and employment, which in turn influences their reproductive decisions. The social construction of gender refers to the social and cultural processes through which society shapes, assigns meaning to, and regulates roles, responsibilities, behaviors, and expectations for individuals based on gender categories. Thus, the differences in roles between men and women are not solely a consequence of biological differences but are also shaped by norms, values, social institutions, and everyday life practices. Haslanger (2017) explains that gender can be understood as a social construct formed through social practices and structures that systematically place individuals in certain categories and positions. This view is reinforced by Saguy (2025), who positions gender as the result of social processes that are continuously produced and reproduced through social interactions, institutions, and norms that develop within society. In the family



context, gender construction is then manifested through the division of labor, decision-making authority, access to resources, and expectations regarding the roles of men and women.

The family is a social institution that plays a crucial role in maintaining and transforming gender constructs. Traditional role divisions generally position men as the primary breadwinners, while women are positioned as childcare providers, household managers, and those responsible for reproductive work. Ihromi (1975) points out that the concept of women's roles cannot be separated from the social and cultural background that shapes society's expectations of women. Over time, these role divisions have changed with women's increasing participation in education and economic activities. Amanda (2025) points out that modern families experience changes in the division of domestic and public roles, although these changes do not always eliminate the gender-based division of labor entirely. Even when women enter the public sphere and become breadwinners, domestic and caregiving responsibilities can still fall on them.

This phenomenon demonstrates that gender construction is dynamic and adaptable to social change. Women may assume the role of primary breadwinner, but this change is not necessarily accompanied by equivalent changes in the distribution of domestic labor and family decision-making. Chistella et al. (2025), for example, demonstrate the emergence of women as primary breadwinners in marginalized communities in Indonesia. This phenomenon demonstrates a shift in the configuration of women's economic roles, but it also demonstrates that changes in economic position do not automatically erase entrenched gender structures and norms. Therefore, changes in women's economic roles need to be distinguished from changes in gender power relations within the family.

Equality within the family is crucial because an unequal distribution of roles can impact women's access to resources and opportunities. Agustina et al. (2025) emphasize that gender equality within the family is a crucial component of social justice because it allows women and men to have more equal opportunities to fulfill their roles, access resources, and participate in family decision-making. In the context of families with limited socio-economic conditions, this inequality can become even more complex. Women who have greater domestic and caregiving responsibilities potentially have limited time and opportunities to obtain education, employment, income, or access to information. These conditions can ultimately impact women's bargaining power in making various strategic decisions within the household.

One important aspect of this bargaining position is reproductive decision-making. Decisions about when to marry, when to have children, the desired number of children, the



spacing of births, and the use of contraception are not always individual decisions for women, but can be the result of negotiations between husband and wife, influenced by gender norms, economic conditions, and power structures within the family. Research on women's empowerment and household decision-making Research in Indonesia shows that socioeconomic status is related to women's capacity to participate in household decision-making. This suggests that women's empowerment is inextricably linked to the material conditions and social position of women within the family (Women's Empowerment and Household Decision-making, 2025). In the context of poor families in Surabaya, gender construction becomes increasingly important to study because economic constraints can strengthen interdependence among family members while increasing women's reproductive and domestic burdens. When women have limited economic access and remain primarily responsible for childcare and household chores, their ability to negotiate reproductive decisions can be further limited. Conversely, women's involvement in education, employment, household income, and decision-making has the potential to strengthen their bargaining position and autonomy. Therefore, gender construction in this study is understood not only as the division of roles between men and women, but as a social mechanism that shapes access to resources, burden sharing, power relations, and reproductive autonomy within the family.

Based on this perspective, research on the construction of gender and fertility positions the family as a crucial arena in the process of reproduction and the transformation of gender inequality. Family size is not understood solely because of economic choices or individual preferences, but rather as the result of the interaction between poverty, gender norms, the division of domestic labor, women's bargaining power, and reproductive decision-making processes. This framework enables research to explain how the social construction of gender operates in the lives of poor urban families and how this construction has the potential to reinforce or open opportunities to break the relationship between poverty and high fertility.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a mixed methods approach by combining quantitative and qualitative methods (Geleta, 2015). As previously used by researchers, this method also uses a mixed methods approach to analyze gender construction and fertility decisions in families with many children in Surabaya City. The quantitative approach is used to obtain an overview of socio-demographic characteristics, socio-economic conditions, gender role divisions, and women's



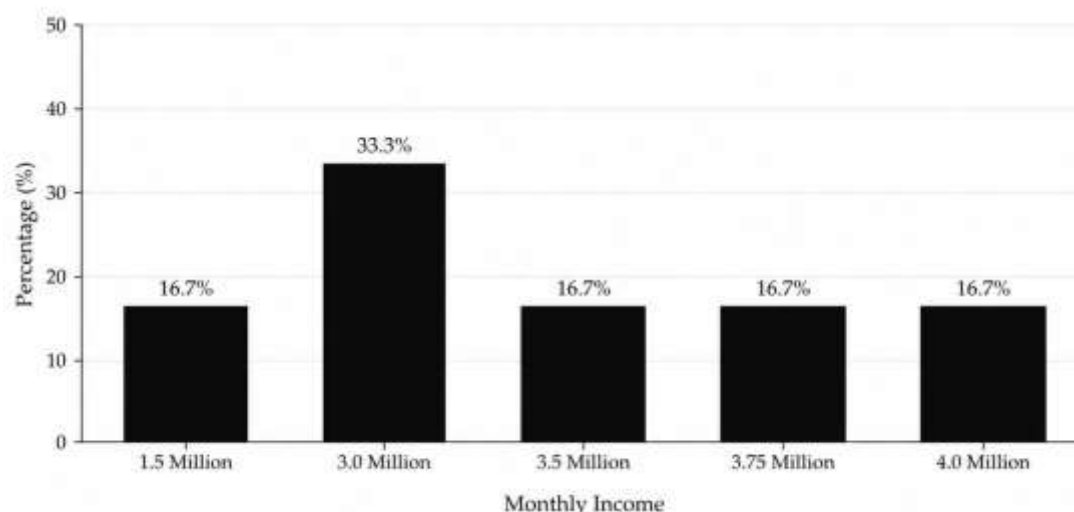
involvement in family decision-making (Acharya, 2024). The qualitative approach is used in this study to deepen understanding of women's experiences and negotiation processes in reproductive decision-making. The study was conducted in Surabaya City, East Java. The study participants were married women, domiciled in Surabaya, and had more than two children as the operational category of families with many children. The selection of participants used purposive sampling, considering variations in socio-economic conditions, education, occupation, and family characteristics.

The research was conducted in the city of Surabaya, data was taken from families who had more than 2 children, with the interpretation of more than 2 being many children due to the program. Family planning is the goal for every couple to have two children. Data were collected through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The questionnaires were used to identify the family's economic conditions, division of domestic labor and caregiving, women's economic contributions, and women's involvement in household and reproductive decision-making. In-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants to explore reasons for having many children, experiences carrying out domestic and productive roles, relationships with partners, reproductive decision-making processes, and the influence of economic conditions and gender norms on fertility. Questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively through frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-tabulations. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis through transcription, coding, categorization, and interpretation based on a sociology of gender perspective. Furthermore, both types of data were integrated to explain the relationship between gender construction, economic conditions, and the decision to have many children. Data validity was carried out through technical triangulation and member checking. The study also adhered to ethical principles by obtaining participant consent, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring data use only for academic purposes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

High fertility rates among poor families are often related to limited access to service, health, education, and family planning information. Furthermore, having many children in a family can worsen the family's economic situation, creating an intergenerational cycle of poverty. The following data sources were found by researchers to support this argument.

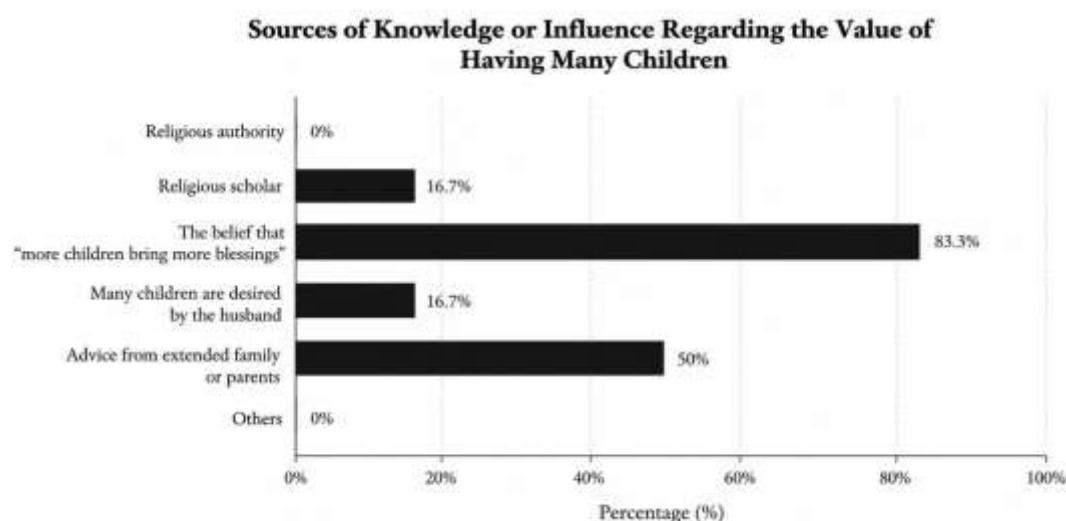




Source: Author's Data, 2026

Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents By Monthly Income

Figure 1 shows that the respondents' family income ranges from Rp1,500,000 to Rp4,000,000 per month, with two respondents reporting an income of Rp3,000,000. This variation indicates the diversity of economic conditions among families with three or four children. Meanwhile, the minimum wage for Surabaya City in 2026 is Rp5,288,796 per month. This provision was stipulated by the Governor of East Java Number 100.3.3.1/937/013/2025 (Pemprov Jatim, 2026). This shows that we cannot say that the data shows poor families if they have wages below the established minimum standard. The findings of this study do not assume that all families with many children are in the same poverty condition. Thus, the concept of poverty needs to be viewed not only from income, but also from the burden of dependents, the ability to meet family needs, access to resources, and perceptions of economic sufficiency. Although McBarnette notes that women in poor families often face the dual burden of being both breadwinners and caregivers, limiting their time and opportunities to improve family well-being, gender inequality in access to education and employment contributes to high fertility rates among poor women (McBarnette, 1988).



Source: Author's Data, 2026

Figure 2. Source of Knowledge or Influence Regarding the Value of Having Many Children

Figure 2 shows that the strongest data from this study is found in the aspect of cultural values. A total of 83.3% of respondents stated that the value of "many children, much fortune" was a value that drove or influenced the decision to have children. Furthermore, 50% of respondents cited ancestral or parental teachings as an influential value. Another 16.7% cited religious teachers' sermons and the belief that having many children is loved by the husband. No respondents directly selected "religious commandments" as the primary factor. These findings indicate that the decision to have many children is not solely shaped by economic calculations. There are cultural constructs regarding the ideal family that give positive meaning to having many children.

In the concept of social construction, related to the results of this study, the values built in society are the primary influence. Certainly, values that are repeated repeatedly become massive and common jargon among the community. These values are followed in the decision to have many children, or more than two children. Meanwhile, other based decisions such as religious orders and family nests and economic ownership have a lower percentage influence, meaning their influence is smaller. This finding indicates that the decision to have many children is not solely shaped by economic calculations. There is a cultural construction of the ideal family that gives positive meaning to many children. These open-ended responses indicate that large

families are interpreted as a source of happiness, valuable assets, and space to not make decisions alone. One respondent even explicitly linked large families with "having many children." Berger and Luckmann, in their work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), they stated that "reality" is the result of ongoing social interactions, which then shape our understanding of the social world. Our views of what is considered "male" or "female" are often influenced by social constructions, such as the view that women should care for children and men should work outside the home. Judgments about certain ethnic groups are often based on social constructions and stereotypes that exist in society, which can affect opportunities or treatment for that group. Views about sexuality and relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are shaped by the social norms that apply in a society, which vary by time and place (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This view is in synergy with Butler, where performativity is not something that is found or fixed, but is formed through continuous social actions and behaviors. Even social reality is related to gender identity which is formed from ongoing social interactions and is influenced by existing norms and culture (Butler, 1990). However, this view of social construction is rejected by the reality itself is not entirely dependent on social construction. Social structures and material phenomena have an existence that does not depend on human understanding or recognition of them (Bhaskar, 1975). Even Popper, (1972) added that our knowledge is limited, there is an objective world that exists outside our social understanding, and science aims to approach that objective reality. Searle, (1995), social reality is the result of social interaction, emphasizing that there are objective elements that remain regardless of our perception or social construction.

Sexuality is a social construct influenced by various factors such as social class, race, and culture. Our views on heterosexual and homosexual relationships are heavily influenced by the prevailing social norms of a given time and place. Seidman emphasizes that understandings of sexuality are constantly evolving along with cultural and social shifts (Seidman, 2003). Gender identity and sexuality are the result of repeated social and cultural practices. In other words, both heterosexuality and homosexuality are social constructs shaped by social norms and accepted behaviors within society. Butler argues that our sexuality is not biological or natural, but rather the result of learned and accepted norms and customs (Butler, 1990). Meanwhile, for Foucault, sexuality is not something natural and universal, but rather shaped by social constructions related to power, norms, and knowledge prevailing in a society at a given time. Foucault shows how sexuality is regulated and controlled by various social institutions, such as family, education, and religion, which change how society views sexual relations and sexual identity (Foucault, 1976).



When linking gender construction and fertility, where poverty affects the number of children in a family, some findings include First, many children are not always the result of women's preferences. The presence of respondents who initially wanted two children but ended up having three or four children indicates a gap between desired and actual fertility. Second, culture provides positive legitimacy to large families. The value of "many children, many blessings" was found in 83.3% of respondents and is a highly potential finding to explain why economic conditions do not always result in decisions to limit the number of children. Thus, poverty and fertility have a complex and non-linear relationship. Families with limited economic resources may still view children as a source of happiness, social support, and even a symbol of good luck. At the same time, having more children can increase the family's economic needs. This is where gender construction becomes an important mechanism bridging family values, reproductive decisions, and economic consequences.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that fertility in families with three to four children in Surabaya is influenced not only by economic considerations but also by gender constructs, marital relationships, contraceptive experiences, and cultural values. Some respondents stated they wanted two children but then had an unplanned third or fourth child. This indicates a discrepancy between the desired number of children and actual fertility. Reproductive decisions primarily involved the husband or partner (83.3%) and the respondents themselves (66.7%). Contraceptive use also faced various obstacles, such as hormonal or implant incompatibilities, concerns about IUDs, and variations in partner support. Cultural values also played a role in shaping views on large families. 83.3% of respondents cited the view that "many children bring many blessings," while 50% cited parental or ancestral teachings as influencing fertility decisions. Economically, respondents' incomes ranged from Rp1,500,000 to Rp4,000,000 per month. This situation indicates economic limitations but is not enough to classify all respondents as poor. Overall, gender constructions, cultural values, partner relationships, and economic conditions interact to shape fertility decisions. These findings are exploratory in nature, as they only involved six respondents and therefore cannot be generalized. Further research with a larger sample size is needed to strengthen our understanding of the relationship between gender, fertility, and family economic conditions.



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