

PENANG INSTITUTE

MONOGRAPHS

#28

20 FEB 2025

# The Childfree Trend: Regional Perspectives, Socioeconomic Impacts, and Policy Responses

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Malaysia's traditional family systems are shifting as the child-free trend becomes more common among young adults, driven by economic considerations, personal autonomy, and lifestyle choices.
- Voluntary childlessness contributes to a declining birth rate, exacerbating the ageing population situation in which demands on healthcare, social security systems, and the economy continuously increase.
- In Penang, if voluntary childlessness persists alongside an already rapidly ageing demographic, it will likely intensify reliance on the healthcare system, and exacerbate population decline and labour shortages.
- Understanding the childfree phenomenon through socio-cultural and economic lenses can provide valuable insights for the formulation of national family-friendly policies that address demographic shifts and economic resilience.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Malaysia is at a critical juncture in its demographic shift towards an ageing population. Over the past two decades, the proportion of elderly individuals has risen steadily, from 4% in 2000 to 7.2% in 2022 (Jafri Malin). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), this trend is set to accelerate, with the share of citizens aged 65 and above projected to grow from 8.1% in 2024 to 14.5% by 2040.

This demographic transformation is influenced by multiple factors, including a growing childfree trend where individuals or couples choose not to have children. Choosing a childfree lifestyle is a personal decision based on concerns such as economic and financial security, the high cost of raising children, social norms, personal and medical conditions, labour market dynamics, and the family policy environment. This choice carries long-term implications. As individuals age, financial and emotional demands on government support systems increase, leading to a demographic imbalance marked by a shrinking productive-age population. This shift may, in the long term, threaten the country's economic resilience and stability. The financial burden of an aging population is already evident in the Health Ministry's budgets, which increased from RM36.3 billion in 2023 to RM41.2 billion in 2024, with RM5.5 billion allocated for medical supplies (The Edge Malaysia, 2023).

The growing trend of a childfree lifestyle underscores the need for policies that address its broader implications; proactive strategies are needed which focus on both mitigating challenges and fostering resilience.

## 2.0 Rational for the Study

In Penang, there is greater reliance on private healthcare compared to public healthcare, with the state recording the highest use of private outpatient services in Malaysia—67.2 percent—followed by Selangor at 48.1 percent and Kuala Lumpur at 48 percent (Trini, 2024). Penang is also an ageing state, with the proportion of older adults (65 and above) steadily increasing over recent decades, rising from 3.5 percent in 1970 to 9.4 percent in 2021, surpassing the national average of 7.4 percent. At the same time, the share of individuals under 15 years old has declined significantly, from 41.1 percent in 1970 to 19.3 percent in 2022 (Jiang et.al., 2023).

Demographic changes and population decline impact the workforce, economic growth, and social welfare sustainability, necessitating strategic planning. Economically, childfree individuals exhibit different lifestyle choices and spending habits. This influences markets and policies; in the workforce, they may contribute differently due to fewer parental responsibilities, leading to potential gains in productivity and career mobility.

Environmentally, some opt out of parenthood due to concerns about overpopulation and sustainability. Healthcare needs and well-being considerations also differ.

Understanding these shifts helps policymakers ensure fair access to benefits, taxation, and social support structures for both parents and non-parents.

### 3.0 Literature Review

The number of childfree adults reaching midlife has been increasing significantly around the world. A February 2024 Pew Research Center poll reported that 30% of 18- to 34-year-olds without children are uncertain about having kids, while 18% say they do not want any. This reflects an increase between 2018 and 2021 in the proportion of non-parents under 50 who described themselves as “not too likely” or “not likely at all” to have children, rising from 16% to 21% and 21% to 23%, respectively (Pew Research Centre, 2024). Childfree (voluntary childless) is when a married couple’s decision not to have children, while involuntary childlessness couples are those who cannot have children due to other factors (Trini, 2024).

In China, fertility rates and births have declined sharply, with the population peaking in 2021 and dropping in 2022. Childlessness is high especially among urban and highly educated women, and is expected to rise further with increased education levels and urbanisation (Jiang, Zhang & Zhuang, Jiang, & Zhang, 2023). Meanwhile, Hong Kong exemplifies a dramatic fertility decline, with its total fertility rate (TFR) dropping from over five children per woman in the early 1960s to around 1.1 today, one of the lowest rates in the world (Gietel-Basten & Yeung, 2023). Similarly, Thailand is also facing a rapidly aging population with a steadily declining birth rate, reaching a record low of 1.16 children per woman in 2023 (Panarat, 2024).

In Malaysia too, based on the statistics from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the national birth rate dropped by 10.2 percent, from 112,197 births in the second quarter of last year to 100,732 in the same period this year. In fact, Malaysia's total fertility rate (TFR) has been below-replacement level since 2012 (Peng, 2020). The ongoing decline in fertility rates led to a shrinking population, accelerated population aging and a labour shortage as well as an increased influx of migrant workers. In addition, life expectancy has improved—such as in Penang, from 74.5 years in 2011 to 76.1 years in 2021—this trend also presents challenges (Muhammad, 2024) like a growing aging population that places greater demands on healthcare service (Rahida Aini, 2024). This swift rise in the elderly dependency ratio also presents significant challenges to the social security system. This phenomenon is acknowledged by Sobotka (2021) who noted that in the past three decades, many economically developed countries in East Asia experienced not only extremely low fertility rates but also a significant increase in childlessness.

#### 3.1 Overview of Live Births in Malaysia

The childfree trend suggest that a growing number of individuals will enter midlife without children in the coming years, which may result in a 'fertility crisis' with significant consequences for both social development and economic stability. Low fertility rates could weaken the labour force and social structures in the near future. Table 1 below presents 2023 live birth data, categorised by state, sex, and overall ethnicity, along with a comparison of Penang’s live births to those in other states.

Table 1 depicts live births in Malaysia by state, sex, and overall numbers for the year 2023. In 2023, Penang recorded a total of 19,579 live births—9,417 females and 10,162 males. This figure is moderate compared to highly populated states like Selangor, which led with 90,535 live births, as well as Johor and Sabah, with 56,156 and 46,412 births, respectively.

The lower birth rates in Penang may reflect regional trends such as smaller family sizes, delayed parenthood, and an increasing preference for voluntary childlessness. These shifts are likely driven by rising living costs, childcare expenses, and concerns over healthcare and education affordability. While such choices align with individual family priorities, they have broader implications for workforce sustainability and long-term human capital development. Compared to states with similar or smaller populations, such as Kedah (33,811 births) and Perak (30,759 births), Penang’s lower birth rate suggests deeper socio-economic influences.

**Table 1: 2023 Annual Live Births & Population Growth by State**

State	Female	Male	Total Livebirth	Population (million)	Annual population growth rate (%)
Johor	27,081	29,075	56,156	4.1	1.8
Penang	9,417	10,162	19,579	1.8	1.7
Kedah	16,237	17,574	33,811	2.2	1.1
Kelantan	17,223	18,482	35,705	1.9	1.5
Malacca	6,612	6,971	13,583	1.0	1.9
Negeri Sembilan	8,006	8,564	16,570	1.2	1.4
Pahang	11,680	12,482	24,162	1.6	1.7
Perak	14,908	15,851	30,759	2.5	1.0
Perlis	1,846	2,032	3,878	0.3	1.0
Sabah	22,206	24,206	46,412	3.6	5.1
Sarawak	16,123	17,797	33,920	2.5	1.4
Selangor	43,736	46,799	90,535	7.2	2.2
Terengganu	12,680	13,447	26,127	1.2	1.9
W.P. Kuala Lumpur	10,507	10,935	21,442	2.0	1.9
W.P Labuan	699	710	1,409	0.1	2.6
W.P Petaling Jaya	819	894	1,713	0.1	0.9

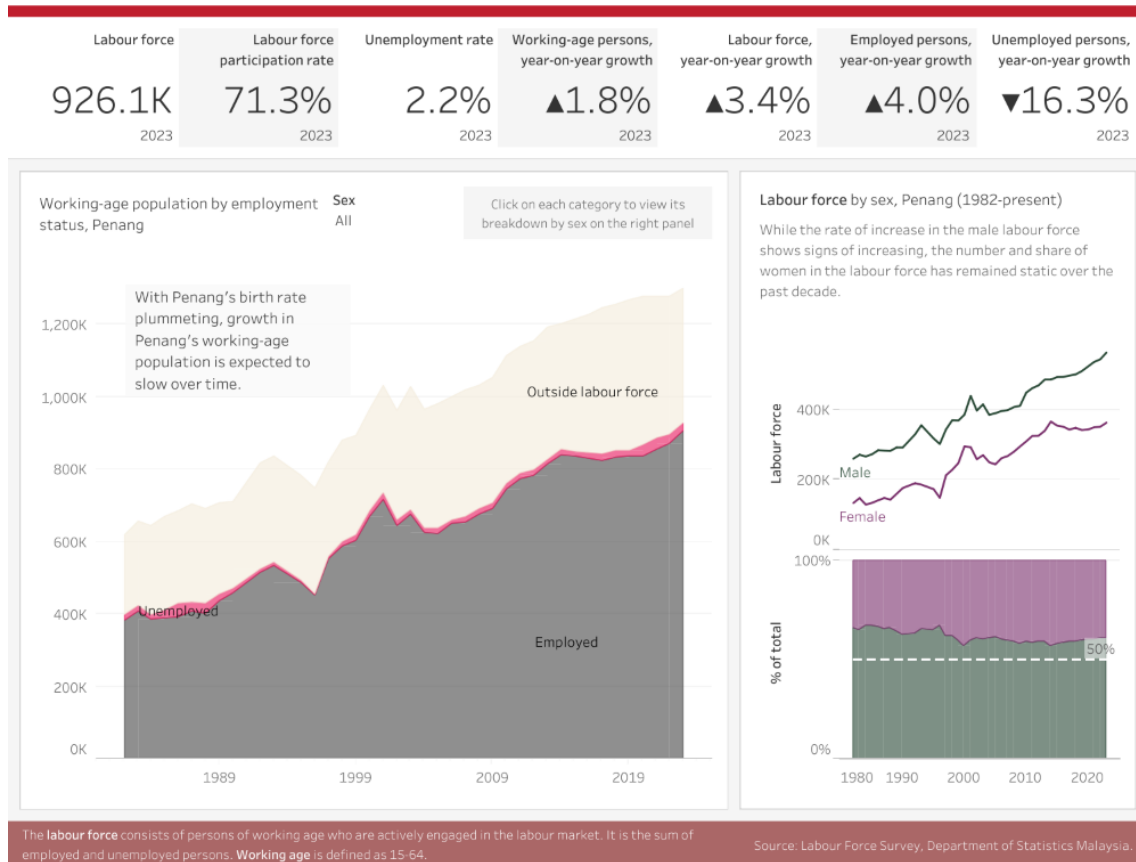
*Source: Annual Live Births by State [https://open.dosm.gov.my/data-catalogue/births\\_annual\\_state](https://open.dosm.gov.my/data-catalogue/births_annual_state) & Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2023 Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) [https://melaka.gov.my/images/artikel/media/penerbitan/polisi/anggaran\\_penduduk\\_semasa\\_malaysia\\_2023.pdf](https://melaka.gov.my/images/artikel/media/penerbitan/polisi/anggaran_penduduk_semasa_malaysia_2023.pdf)*

A closer analysis of population data reinforces these concerns. Penang's population stands at 1.8 million, with an annual growth rate of 1.7%. In contrast, Selangor, with a population of 7.2 million and a 2.2% growth rate, continues to experience strong demographic expansion. Johor (4.1 million, 1.8% growth) and Sabah (3.6 million, 5.1% growth) also demonstrate higher population growth, largely sustained by their higher birth rates. Even Perak, with a lower annual growth rate of 1.0%, recorded a significantly higher number of live births (Total live births = 30,759) than Penang. This indicates that factors beyond mere population size—such as economic conditions and shifting social attitudes—are influencing fertility trends.

Although the working-age population (15 to 64 years) in Penang has grown significantly, increasing from 55.6% in 1970 to 73.3% in 2022 and continuing to grow, its growth rate is slower compared to the rise of the old-age population (Penang Institute, 2024). Fertility rates are down as women are having children later or not at all. The low fertility rate leading to declining birth rates is influenced by

several social and economic factors, including increased female labour force participation, higher household income and spending, rising inflation, and demographic shifts within the population (Ahmad Muadz & Mazlynda, 2022).

### Penang's labour force at a glance



Source: Penang Institute's websites: <https://statistics.penanginstitute.org/dashboards/econ/labour.html>

The data above highlights a slowing growth in Penang's working-age population due to a declining birth rate, which correlates with an increase in childless couples and an aging population. With only 1.8% year-on-year growth in the working-age group and labour force participation at 71.3%, future workforce sustainability is at risk. The static trend in female labour force participation also suggests societal shifts, possibly linked to delayed childbearing or decisions to forgo parenthood. This demographic shift contributes to a shrinking younger generation, emphasising the need for policies addressing fertility rates, eldercare, and workforce rejuvenation.

## 4.0 A Pilot Study of Child-free in Penang

This study investigates the childfree lifestyle choice phenomenon in Penang, particularly within the framework of Public Choice Theory. The study explores how individual choices about being childfree intersect with broader societal and economic systems. It considers decision-making as a rational,

utility-maximising process influenced by incentives and constraints, such as career goals, financial considerations, or societal pressures.

The main issue to be addressed in this research is how the childfree phenomenon, the deliberate decision of individuals or couples not to have children, can be explained through the social, health and economic contexts found in countries like Malaysia. This is important as it will provide new insights for the academic community, the broader society and the policy makers on how lifestyle choices like being childfree can be viewed from social, health and economic perspectives.

#### 4.1 Method

This simple study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the childfree phenomenon in Penang, incorporating a literature review of journals and articles relevant to the topic and its socio-cultural context in Malaysia. It aims to provide a holistic understanding of the socio-cultural interpretations of childfree living within the Malaysian setting. The research is further enriched by qualitative data gathered through interviews with five Malaysian individuals, offering deeper insights into personal perceptions and experiences regarding the childfree lifestyle. By integrating theological, social, and cultural perspectives, this approach uncovers the multifaceted dimensions and nuances affecting the childfree phenomenon.

#### 4.2 Findings

**Table 2: Childfree Choices in Penang from a Woman's Point of View**

Respondent	Age	Childfree Reasons
Iy	31	Freedom and away from parental responsibilities
Ra	28	Focus on oneself and mental health
Saf	29	Spirit of individualism and freedom
Ri	25	cost of living, and financial constraints
Lin	27	Mental health challenges and concerns about harm to children

Iy, 31 and her husband value personal freedom and peace in choosing a childfree lifestyle. "Parenting isn't for us— we cherish quiet, value our sleep and personal time, and dislike the logistical challenges of childcare. Handling school or medical appointments, dealing with loud noises, or managing the complexities of raising teenagers doesn't align with our priorities. Financial independence is crucial, and we prefer focusing on our needs and goals rather than raising a child. We enjoy moving at our own pace and have limited patience for certain behaviours."

Ra, 28 and her husband choose not to have children due to their traumatic childhoods—her husband endured abuse from his father, while her mother abandoned her at a young age. They feared repeating such cycles and prioritised mental health and personal well-being instead. "It's not children or money that hold a marriage together," she shared. "It's love and friendship. By spending quality time, nurturing the bond, and keeping love alive, a relationship thrives." Ra believes focusing on oneself and maintaining a healthy partnership is key to a fulfilling life, rather than relying on parenthood for purpose or stability.



Saf, 29, shared her thoughts on not being ready for motherhood. “I want to explore the world and enjoy life to its fullest. Having a child comes with immense responsibilities, and I’m not ready to dedicate my time to sleepless nights, changing diapers, or nursing every few hours. I’d rather spend it pursuing my passions than playing with dolls or toy trucks. The idea of dealing with rebellious teenagers who constantly push boundaries doesn’t appeal to me either. I don’t want to go through the worrying episodes of teen pregnancies or the time spent on games. I would rather immerse myself in reading a great book. Parenthood, to me, seems like an endless cycle of monotony, and I honestly can’t understand the appeal of having children. They simply don’t excite me”.

Ri, 25, shared how the high cost of living—even with sufficient earnings—has made her hesitant about starting a family. She explained, “Starting a family in the city requires careful financial planning. There are numerous expenses to consider, from prenatal and postnatal check-ups to child delivery costs, confinement expenses, and the ongoing care for a newborn once the confinement period is over. For young married couples like me living in urban areas, these financial challenges can be overwhelming.”

Lin, 27, shared that she inherited a similar level of anxiety from her mother. "Through therapy, I’ve spent years developing strategies to manage my anxiety in healthy ways and minimise its impact on my husband and those around me. However, I’m fairly certain that having children would intensify my anxiety to an uncontrollable level, potentially placing a burden on them—much like the burden my mom’s anxiety placed on me."

#### ***4.2.1 Motivations behind the Childfree Lifestyle***

The narratives collected from the respondents in this qualitative research reveal a variety of reasons why individuals and couples choose a childfree lifestyle. Their choices are influenced by deeply personal, emotional, financial, and philosophical considerations, highlighting diverse perspectives on parenthood. This trend has potential implications for Penang’s ageing population, particularly in social, health, and economic domains.

Respondents like Iy, 31, and Saf, 29, prioritise personal freedom and lifestyle autonomy, citing the challenges and sacrifices associated with parenting. Others, such as Ra, 28, and Lin, 27, highlight mental health concerns and trauma, fearing the impact of parenthood on their well-being and relationships. Economic pressures, particularly in urban areas, also deter individuals like Ri, 25, from starting a family.

The choice to lead a childfree lifestyle emerges as a complex and multifaceted decision influenced by personal values, life experiences, financial considerations, and mental health awareness. These findings challenge societal norms surrounding parenthood and highlight the importance of respecting individual autonomy in family planning decisions. The narratives also shed light on the evolving definitions of fulfillment, stability, and partnership in contemporary life.

#### ***4.2.2 The Urgency of Tackling Fertility Rates to Mitigate the Challenges of an Ageing Population***

The growing preference for a childfree lifestyle could exacerbate the social and economic challenges associated with Penang’s ageing population. This aligns with Penang Institute’s findings in 2018: Economic success requires foresighted demographic measures, which highlighted that Malaysia’s more developed regions—such as Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Penang included—have significantly lower reproduction rates compared to other states (Ong, ISSUES 2018). Fewer children mean a shrinking future workforce and limited familial care for older generations. This shift may place greater strain on public health systems and social services to support elderly residents. Additionally, reduced birth rates could impact economic productivity and the sustainability of welfare programmes, necessitating proactive policies to address these demographic changes.

This trend underscores the need for innovative solutions, such as enhancing elder care infrastructure, promoting intergenerational community support, and addressing mental health and financial insecurities to balance individual lifestyle choices with societal needs.

### **4.3 Limitation of the Study**

This study does not specifically examine the perspectives of the three main ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—limiting the cultural insights that could have been gained, particularly in assessing whether each group is producing enough babies to sustain population replacement. Additionally, the data were collected through interviews with only five respondents, which may restrict the generalisability and depth of the insights obtained. A more comprehensive approach, such as incorporating a mixed-methods design—combining qualitative and quantitative data—would have provided a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Future research could benefit from a larger sample size, greater ethnic representation, and diverse data collection methods.

## **5.0 Regional Perspectives on the Childfree Phenomenon**

The lower birth rates in Penang may reflect regional trends, such as smaller family sizes or growing preferences for delayed parenthood and voluntary childlessness, likely influenced by rising living costs, childcare expenses, and healthcare and education costs. While these trends may align with individual family choices, they raise broader implications for the government's focus on ensuring a sustainable workforce and future human resource capacity. This highlights a need for policies that balance support for family growth with socioeconomic realities.

### **5.1 Reasons behind Childfree Lifestyle and Policy Solutions**

Existing research attributes low birth rates in Malaysia to factors such as income levels, climatic conditions and demographic shifts (Nadarajan, Muhammad Sharil, Muhammad Fariedz Daniel, Muhammad Nabil, Mohd Roslan, Muhammad Afiq, Kunasekaran & Rahimah, 2024).

Syazwan and Busro (2023) examined the dynamics behind childfree choices among Malaysian couples, identifying factors such as individual freedom, personal autonomy, and economic considerations as key influences. Greater access to higher education, career opportunities, and financial independence has significantly redefined traditional family structures for modern Malaysian women.

These shifting dynamics have contributed to Malaysia's declining fertility rate, raising concerns about long-term social and economic implications. Challenges such as retirement planning, workforce sustainability, and the need for family-friendly policies are becoming increasingly critical.

One government family-friendly initiative is to provide affordable homes primarily benefiting low-income groups, such as Rumah Mampu Milik Wilayah Persekutuan (RUMAWIP), Rumah Mesra Rakyat Plus, Perumahan Rakyat 1 Malaysia (PR1MA), Rumah Selangorku, and Program Perumahan Rakyat (PPR). However, rising property prices and stagnant salaries leave the middle-income group struggling (Hock Seng & Tham, 2024).

While government policies predominantly target low-income groups, they often overlook the housing challenges faced by middle-income individuals and families. Many in this bracket do not qualify for

low-income housing aid yet still struggle to afford suitable homes (Siti Balqis & Nur Lesya, 2024). This has forced numerous young couples to delay or reconsider starting a family. A shrinking productive-age population could threaten the nation's long-term economic resilience and stability.

Meanwhile, in South Korea, a growing number of young adults are avoiding marriage and parenthood, contributing to the country's record-low fertility rate, the lowest globally for six consecutive years (Choi & Qian, 2023). Several initiatives have been introduced to address this issue. One such measure is South Korea's childcare policy, which aims to support working families. However, the policy has fallen short due to its reliance on private day-care providers, inconsistent quality control, and inadequate budget planning. Subsidies for private providers have led to uneven service quality, prompting many families to seek informal care. Experts are now urging a shift back to public day-care funding to ensure accessible, high-quality childcare for all families' this is a move that could potentially boost fertility rates (Sung-Hee Lee, 2022). In addition to childcare policies, South Korea has invested in matchmaking services and social activities to encourage relationship-building among young adults.

In Japan, traditional gender roles contribute to delayed marriages and declining birth rates, as more women seek fulfillment beyond caregiving. Rising living costs, job insecurity, and work-life imbalance further deter couples from parenthood. Japan has the world's highest percentage of babies born through IVF (approximately 5 percent) but also one of the lowest fertility rates. To address these challenges, the government is considering policies such as affordable childcare and extended parental leave to alleviate financial and time pressures on families (Wang, 2023).

Childlessness has also risen significantly in China, contributing to its aging population since 1999. The proportion of those aged 65 and above has grown from 7% to 17.8% and is projected to reach 38.8% by 2050. Younger generations struggle to support elders financially and emotionally, while inadequate government investment in elderly healthcare infrastructure exacerbates issues like lack of care and psychological challenges (Jiaze Ni, 2024).

China's family planning policies, including the one-child policy and its successor, the two-child policy, were designed to address demographic challenges such as overpopulation, aging, and economic strain. While the one-child policy helped control population growth and improved child welfare, its societal inertia impacts the two-child policy's effectiveness. Fertility decisions now rely more on personal factors like childhood experiences, marital relationships, and resources (Zhang, 2021).

In Singapore, better-educated women have historically been more likely to remain single. To address this issue, the government replaced the two-child policy in 1972 with the "three, or more if you can afford it" policy to encourage higher birth rates among educated mothers. This shift was accompanied by a comprehensive package of procreation incentives, which has been continually updated over the years. Notable measures include "baby bonuses" for second and third births, as well as government-funded paid maternity leave for third births (Yap, 2023).

In Thailand, pessimism about the country's future, high child-rearing costs, and career priorities discourage younger generations from having children (Panarat, 2024). The nation struggles with an ageing population and insufficient welfare funding, prompting pro-natalist policies under its National Family Planning Program.

## **5.2 Impact of Childfree on Demographics**

The rising trend of remaining childfree is reshaping the global population pyramid. This shift challenges human capital productivity and increases the elderly dependency ratio, straining social security systems and necessitating urgent reforms. Below is an overview of the global perspectives on childfree lifestyles, challenges, and policy responses.

**Table 3: Global Perspectives on Childfree Lifestyles, Challenges, and Policy Responses**

Countries	Reasons for choosing childfree life-style	Challenges	Policy Suggestion	Author
China	education and careers pursuits (Jiang et. al., 2023) China's urbanisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High population in China strained social, economic, and natural resources</li> <li>- huge age gap within the society</li> <li>- younger generation does not have the time and financial abilities to care for their elders.</li> <li>- government is not providing enough financial aid for support of construction on elderly healthcare infrastructure.</li> <li>- challenges to labour productivity</li> <li>- increasing demand for medical services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The one-child policy improved access to quality education, controlled population growth, and alleviated poverty</li> <li>- The two-child policy was introduced as an alternative to address the limitations of the one-child policy (Zhang, J, 2021)</li> <li>- The three-child policy in 2021, followed by multiple children to encourage larger families (Ni, 2024)</li> <li>- the Chinese government offers incentives such as tax deductions, home purchase</li> <li>Incentives, school admissions, scholarships, healthcare subsidies, and family support</li> </ul>	<p>Jiaze Ni (2024)</p> <p>The aging population in China. <i>Highlights in Business, Economics and Management</i>, Vol. 26</p>

			<p>services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- working on reducing the child rearing costs by expanding public services in healthcare and education.</li> <li>- extended maternity leave, improved workplace protections for pregnant women.</li> <li>- promote matchmaking activities and relationship building events</li> </ul>	
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- limitations of formal sector provision of childcare and housework</li> <li>- choose to pursue educational or career success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- low fertility rate, downward trend in fertility since the 1980s</li> <li>- public campaign and limited programmes failed to produce results</li> <li>- IVF poses health risks to women or that delayed childbearing can lead to more complications during pregnancy or birth and more birth defects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- procreation incentives</li> <li>- pro-natalist incentives subsidize up to 75 percent of assisted reproductive technology treatment costs for qualifying married couples and allows them to tap into their medical accounts under the national savings program to pay for the procedure.</li> </ul>	<p>Mui Teng Yap. (2003). Fertility and population policy: The Singapore experience. <i>Journal of Population and Social Security</i> (Population), Supplement to Volume 1, 643-658.</p>

			<p>Implementation of Marriage and Parenthood</p> <p>package focusing on promoting work-life</p> <p>harmony and family-friendly work practices,</p> <p>with financial incentives such as the Baby</p> <p>Bonus Scheme and tax rebates (<i>The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2019</i>)</p>	
Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- political and economic pessimism about Thailand's future</li> <li>- reluctance to bear child-rearing costs</li> <li>- fear of negative social and political impacts on children</li> <li>- preference for lifestyle and personal freedom</li> <li>- doubts about parenting abilities</li> <li>- career prioritization</li> <li>- health challenges</li> <li>- high costs of raising children in Thailand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- rapidly ageing population, low fertility rate</li> <li>- insufficient welfare funding</li> </ul>	<p>National Family Planning Program - prevent falling fertility rate by introducing pro-natalist policies (<i>The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2019</i>)</p>	<p>Panarat Anamwathana (2024)</p> <p>Thailand's Ageing Society and Young Thais' Changing Views and Expectations, <i>ISEAS</i>, No. 28</p> <p>ISSN 2335-6677</p>
Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- academic excellence</li> <li>- self-actualization, exorbitant childcare costs</li> <li>- gender inequality in the labour market</li> <li>- gender inequality in the private sphere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of commitment to expand public childcare centres</li> <li>- disengagement from addressing gender relations critical for effective universal childcare</li> <li>- gender inequality where</li> </ul>	<p>alternative Solution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- investment in matchmaking services</li> <li>- promotion of social activities to support relationship-</li> </ul>	<p>Sung-Hee Lee (2022)</p> <p>Why the initiative of free childcare failed to be an effective policy implementation of universal</p>

		persistent expectation for women to prioritise caregiving and homemaking	building and marriage	childcare in South Korea
Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- self-fulfillment like career pursuits</li> <li>- economic considerations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- traditional culture – distinct gender roles</li> <li>- cultural attitudes surrounding marriage and child-rearing</li> <li>- men as primary breadwinners and women's status as caregivers, which is generally recognized by society, has led to late marriages and late childbearing</li> </ul>	<p>Transitioning to potential solutions - family-friendly policies, including affordable and high-quality childcare facilities and services, parental leave benefits, flexible work hours, improved job protection during leave as measures to alleviate the financial and time constraints couples contemplating parenthood face.</p> <p>- various financial support programmes such as child allowances, tax breaks for families with children.</p>	<p>Yueyue, W. (2023). Understanding the phenomenon of childlessness in Japan: causes and potential. SHS Web of Conferences</p>
Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- personal and medical conditions (having trauma in the past, not wanting the children to go through the same experience, unable to control emotions dealing with small children)</li> <li>- economic conditions</li> <li>- high living costs</li> <li>- strong work pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indonesia has no initiative in discouraging this childfree decision</li> </ul>	<p>Family Planning Programme with the establishment of the National Family Planning Institute to promote fertility welfare</p>	<p>Trini, H. (2023). The Impact of Childfree on Health and Economic, <i>International Journal of Social Science and Human Research</i>, Vol.7 (7).</p>

	- economic uncertainty			
Malaysia	- individual freedom - personal autonomy - economic considerations	- ageing nation by 2035, when 15 per cent (5.6 million) of the population are classified as senior citizens  - government have to deal with an ageing population  - various supports for older people like financial aid and rehabilitation programmes from government, non-government organisations and private businesses.  - impact of ageing is that the workers that are close to retirement age will extend their career based on certain factors, loss of skill, experience and knowledge.	- impact to the building design structure, construction workforce and industry (Abdul Rahim et.al., 2018)  - affordable housing scheme needs to be revised	Abdul Rahim Abdul Hamid, Noradawiah Muhamad, Rozana Zakaria, Eeydzah  Aminuddin, Amir Akmal Alwee & Adelynna Tok (2018). The challenges of the ageing population on the Malaysian construction industry. International PostGraduate Conference on Applied Science & Physics, 1-10.

## 6.0 Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Future

Malaysia's impending status as an ageing nation by 2035, with 15% of its population classified as senior citizens, underscores the urgency of addressing declining birth rates. A growing number of young couples are choosing to remain childfree, contributing to a “lower-fertility future” where deaths may surpass births within the next decade. This trend exacerbates fiscal pressures, as government expenditures on pensions, healthcare, and elderly services rise, while a shrinking working-age population limits public revenue.

### 6.1 For Federal Government

To encourage childbearing among young couples and promote sustainable demographic growth, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

#### 6.1.1 Enhance Financial Support for Families

- Introduce or expand child allowances, tax benefits, and subsidies for young families. The 2024 budget increases the childcare allowance tax exemption, now covering children up to age 12. This should be extended to 17 for greater family support. Extending the exemption to age 17 would better support families with older children.



- Develop affordable housing schemes specifically designed for middle-income families with children. Existing housing initiatives should be reviewed and enhanced to better meet their needs.
- Provide financial support, such as cash bonuses for each child born, and expand subsidies for education.
- Revise Income tax relieve for fertility treatment, vaccinations, and dental treatment for self, spouse, or child.
- Penang could strengthen and expand its existing Programme Anak Emas by adopting best practices from other states. Currently, the initiative provides a one-off RM200 assistance for newborns under two years old after 1<sup>st</sup> January 2011, if at least one parent is a registered voter in Penang.
- A more comprehensive and long-term financial support policy could include increased Childbirth Incentive – raising the one-off financial assistance to at least RM500 per child, aligning with national cost-of-living challenges.
- Structured Savings Plan for Children – Introduce a Penang Children's Savings Fund, similar to Selangor's Tawas, where eligible children receive RM1,500 at 18 years old to support higher education or career development.
- Parental Support Grants – Provide monthly childcare assistance for B40 families to ease the financial burden of early childhood care.

### ***6.1.2 Improve Work-Life Balance***

- Promote flexible work arrangements, including remote work options, to accommodate the needs of parents.
- Maternity leave has been extended from 60 to 98 days. Offering paid paternity leave can encourage shared responsibilities at home, but its availability depends on employer policies, leaving many fathers unable to support their partners and newborns (Sim & Han,2023).
- Establish workplace with affordable childcare facilities to support working parents, increasing women's participation in the labour market.

## **6.2 For the State Government**

With federal support, the state government can create a family-friendly environment by providing financial and social care incentives that encourage parenthood while respecting individual choices. This approach helps address demographic challenges and promotes long-term societal well-being, as outlined in the recommendations below.

### ***6.2.1 Create a Family-Friendly Environment***

- Implement community support programmes, such as parenting workshops and family counselling services.
- Highlight the societal and personal benefits of parenting through awareness campaigns.

### **6.2.2 Address Cultural and Social Barriers**

- Challenge stigmas or misconceptions surrounding parenthood, particularly regarding its impact on career prospects.
- Encourage intergenerational dialogue to foster understanding of the joys and challenges of raising children.

### **6.2.3 Empower Women Through Reproductive Health Support**

- Ensure access to comprehensive reproductive health services and education, allowing women to make informed decisions about family planning.
- Promote equal opportunities for women in the workplace to ease concerns about balancing career and family life.

### **6.2.4 Support Young Couples in Navigating Parenthood**

- Provide incentives for marriage and early parenthood, such as wedding grants or bonuses for having children early in life.

By addressing the root causes of the childfree trend and removing barriers to parenthood, Malaysia can partially foster a society where raising children is viewed as rewarding, ensuring a sustainable demographic balance for future generations.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

The shift towards voluntary childlessness reflects evolving societal norms and individual aspirations, particularly in the context of modern economic and lifestyle choices. While traditionally viewed as unconventional—especially in Asian cultures—this trend is buoyed by a change in individual values and ideas, with couples prioritising personal fulfillment, financial stability, and career advancement over parenthood. Its broader implications on population demographics, economic sustainability, and social welfare cannot be overlooked.

Governments must adopt policies that balance support for those who choose to have families. This includes initiatives such as improved work-life balance, accessible parenting education, and incentives for sustainable population growth. At the same time, addressing economic challenges linked to declining birth rates requires strategic workforce planning and family-friendly policy reforms.

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