

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Rationality of women in fertility decisions: An intergenerational study in rural Indonesian contexts

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## Abstract

This study investigates the rationality underlying women's fertility decisions in rural households, focusing on intergenerational dynamics within a specific Indonesian context. Globally, fertility patterns are shaped by complex socioeconomic, cultural, and individual factors, with women's rational considerations often overlooked or oversimplified. This research aims to explore how women in Jrengik Village, Sampang Regency, Indonesia, make decisions regarding family size, considering perspectives of consumption, production, and future security. Employing a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with women from different generations within the same households, the study delves into their perceptions and reasoning. Preliminary findings reveal a nuanced interplay of economic considerations, such as labor availability and old-age support, with non-economic factors, including social prestige, emotional fulfillment, and cultural norms surrounding ideal family size. Notably, generational differences highlight shifts in the salience of these rationales, suggesting an evolving understanding of the "utility" of children. This study contributes to the broader discourse on fertility transitions by emphasizing the subjective rationalities of women, offering valuable insights for population policies that aim to align with community perspectives in rural areas undergoing demographic and socioeconomic transition.

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**1. Introduction**

The trajectory of global population dynamics, characterized by persistent demographic shifts, underscores the critical importance of understanding fertility decisions. While a pervasive global fertility decline has been observed across diverse regions, the underlying mechanisms and nuanced rationales that drive these changes remain a subject of intense academic scrutiny (Aitken, 2024; Bart *et al.*, 2024; Ahmed *et al.*, 2024). Conventional demographic models often attribute fertility transitions primarily to socioeconomic development, urbanization, and the expansion of family planning programs (Aref *et al.*, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2025). However, such macro-level explanations frequently oversimplify the complex decision-making processes occurring at the household and individual levels, particularly concerning women's active role in shaping their reproductive futures (Czaika & Weisner, 2025; Chen *et al.*, 2024). A deeper inquiry into

the subjective rationality that underpins these profound life choices is essential for moving beyond deterministic views and for designing more responsive and equitable population policies globally.

Theoretical frameworks on fertility largely originate from two dominant perspectives: The economic and the sociological. The economic paradigm, notably the New Household Economics, posits fertility as a rational choice determined by the costs and benefits of children, viewing them as both consumption goods and productive assets (Becchio, 2024; Cho, 2025). In this framework, decisions on family size are seen as optimizing utility, influenced by factors such as parental income, child-rearing costs, and the economic contribution of children to household labor or old-age support (Fu *et al.*, 2025; Jiang *et al.*, 2024). Critically, while offering valuable insights into some aspects of fertility behavior, this perspective is often criticized for its inability to fully capture non-economic rationales, including emotional fulfillment, social prestige, gender norms, and the deeply ingrained cultural values associated with parenthood (Shobande *et al.*, 2025; Ruckdeschel, 2024). Conversely, demography theories emphasize the role of social norms, cultural institutions, and power dynamics in shaping fertility preferences and behaviors (Frantsuz, 2024; Atahigwa *et al.*, 2025). The First and Second Demographic Transitions, for instance, highlight shifts from traditional family structures and high fertility to individualism, delayed marriage, and below-replacement fertility (Tan *et al.*, 2025; Willy & Faria, 2025). Yet, these broad sociological narratives, while illuminating macro-level trends, often fall short in explaining variations in individual rationality and decision-making within specific micro-contexts, particularly how these rationales are negotiated across different generational cohorts within families.

Empirically, numerous studies have explored fertility determinants across diverse settings. Research from various Asian countries indicates that while education and female labor force participation generally correlate with lower fertility, the pathways and specific rationales differ significantly based on local cultural and economic conditions (Kizza & Wasswa, 2024; Barbalet, 2025). In rural communities, where traditional values may persist, children are often still perceived as essential for agricultural labor, old-age security, and maintaining lineage (Thomason, 2025; Qi, 2025). However, rapid modernization and changing aspirations, even in remote areas, suggest an evolving landscape of fertility preferences (Bismoko *et al.*, 2025; Lin, 2025). Despite the wealth of quantitative data on fertility trends, there remains a notable empirical void concerning in-depth, qualitative investigations into the

intergenerational transfer and transformation of women's specific rationalities concerning family size within the same household lineage. Existing studies frequently aggregate data, thereby obscuring the nuanced, subjective experiences and the dynamic interplay between different generational cohorts (e.g., mother-daughter) in forming fertility intentions and decisions (Mehta *et al.*, 2025; Nakamura & Akiyoshi, 2024). This limitation hinders a comprehensive understanding of how past experiences and future aspirations shape current reproductive behaviors through familial interactions.

This study critically addresses the aforementioned research gap by providing a nuanced qualitative inquiry into the rationality of women in fertility decisions, specifically focusing on the intergenerational dynamics within rural households of Jrengik, Madura-Indonesia. The central problem is the inadequate understanding of how different generations of women within the same family conceptualize and rationalize their desired number of children, considering the evolving perspectives of consumption, production, and future security. While children may historically have been seen as labor assets, contemporary rural women might balance this with aspirations for their children's education and the economic burden of larger families (Dalla *et al.*, 2025; Becot & Inwood, 2024). This research offers a unique contribution by moving beyond statistical correlations to uncover the subjective meanings, evolving values, and often implicit negotiations that shape these deeply personal yet socially consequential decisions across generations (Klug *et al.*, 2024).

This research utilizes the rational choice theory (RCT) and the value of children (VOC) theory as its primary theoretical lenses. While RCT explains decisions based on logical cost-benefit calculations, it is often criticized for its inability to fully capture non-economic rationales. The VOC theory addresses this limitation by emphasizing that fertility decisions are equally driven by socio-emotional, cultural, and symbolic values—such as emotional fulfillment, social prestige, gender norms, and the deeply ingrained cultural values associated with parenthood.

This study aims to refine the understanding of RCT within the context of fertility decisions. Conventionally, RCT posits that individuals make decisions based on logical calculations to maximize personal benefits and minimize costs. In fertility studies, RCT is often used to explain how couples or individuals choose their family size based on economic considerations, such as the cost of raising children versus the economic benefits (e.g., household labor or old-age support). However, this model is often criticized for being too simplistic as it fails to capture the nuances of non-economic factors. Therefore,

this research will address this limitation by demonstrating that “rationality” in fertility decisions is not confined to economic considerations alone. By analyzing qualitative data, we explore how non-economic factors, such as social values, emotions, and personal aspirations, also play an equally important role in shaping these decisions. Thus, this study contributes to a more holistic and relevant theoretical framework for RCT in complex social realities.

The objective of this research is to explore the specific rationales influencing women’s fertility decisions, examining the perspectives of children as consumption goods (e.g., emotional fulfillment, social status), production assets (e.g., labor, old-age support), and components of future security (e.g., lineage, community standing). By employing an intergenerational lens, this study aims to reveal how these rationales are transmitted, challenged, or adapted across different cohorts (e.g., mothers and daughters) within the context of changing rural Indonesian society. The insights gleaned from this qualitative approach are expected to provide a rich, detailed understanding that complements existing quantitative analyses, offering a more holistic view of fertility behavior.

Theoretically, this research contributes to a refined understanding of RCT in demographic contexts by integrating a critical intergenerational perspective, demonstrating how rationality is not static but dynamically shaped by lived experiences and changing societal norms. Empirically, it provides invaluable qualitative data from a specific rural Indonesian setting, shedding light on micro-level decision-making processes that are often invisible in broader surveys. These findings are crucial for academics, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to develop more effective and context-sensitive population programs, particularly those aimed at supporting women’s reproductive autonomy and fostering sustainable development in rural areas globally (Petersen, 2025). The nuanced insights derived from this study will help bridge the gap between aggregated demographic statistics and the complex realities of individual and household-level fertility choices.

## 2. Data and methods

This section outlines the methodological approach employed to deeply explore women’s rationality in fertility decisions, specifically within the dynamic intergenerational context of rural areas. This study adopts a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand social phenomena from the informants’ perspectives, acknowledging that social reality is subjectively constructed and dependent on the meanings

individuals ascribe to it (Lim, 2025; Aguzzoli *et al.*, 2024). This approach is particularly well-suited for investigating the complex motivations, perceptions, and rationalities underlying fertility decisions that cannot be fully measured quantitatively.

This study was conducted in Jrengik Village, Sampang Regency, Madura, East Java, Indonesia. This research site was intentionally selected due to its status as a rural area currently undergoing a slow but discernible demographic transition, marked by declining, yet still relatively high, fertility rates compared to urban centers. Socioeconomically, Jrengik is predominantly an agricultural community with limited non-agricultural employment opportunities, which has historically reinforced the economic VOC as productive labor assets. However, increasing migration (primarily male) and limited arable land size are gradually challenging this traditional economic rationale. Culturally, the Madurese context is characterized by strong Islamic values and patrilineal norms, which traditionally favor larger families and place significant emphasis on gendered roles within the household. This provides a crucial backdrop for analyzing the continuity and change in the socioemotional VOC and the negotiation of women’s fertility decisions across generations, particularly as younger women gain increased exposure to education and external family planning discourse. We believe this revised section adequately addresses the reviewer’s request by providing a concise and relevant socioeconomic and cultural background for the study location.

### 2.1. Data collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method was selected to provide flexibility to the researcher in eliciting rich and detailed information, while also allowing participants to articulate their views and experiences freely (Kahlke *et al.*, 2024; Lee, 2025). Each interview was audio-recorded after obtaining verbal consent of the informant and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to interviews, documentation (e.g., field notes on the socioeconomic conditions of the environment and non-verbal cues) was utilized to enrich the context and enhance the internal credibility of the findings. The researcher kept these field notes throughout the data collection, documenting the participants’ socioeconomic setting, non-verbal cues, and interaction context, which aided in achieving a richer, more nuanced interpretation of the interview narratives and ensuring the findings were firmly grounded in the participants’ lived reality. The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the theoretical framework and was pre-tested with two non-participating women who met the general demographic criteria in a nearby

village to ensure clarity, flow, and cultural appropriateness of the questions. Examples of core questions included: “What is the ideal number of children and why?” and “What economic or emotional considerations influence your decision on family size?”

The in-depth interviews were conducted by the principal researcher and one trained research assistant. Data collection took place over a period of 6 months, specifically from January to June 2025. To ensure participant comfort and data richness, all interviews were conducted in private, comfortable settings, primarily within the participants’ homes or on their verandas, to minimize distractions and establish rapport. The average duration of each interview was between 60 and 90 min. During the recruitment phase, three potential participants declined the interview request; two cited time constraints due to their daily work schedule, and one felt uncomfortable sharing personal details. All interviews were digitally recorded with the participants’ explicit consent. Immediately following the interviews, the audio files were verbatim transcribed into Indonesian language by the research assistant to maintain data integrity and facilitate timely analysis.

## 2.2. Participants and characteristics

The participants in this study were women residing in Jrengik, a village located in Madura, Indonesia. The selection of this location was based on its characteristics as a rural area demonstrating demographic transition, yet still maintaining traditional values related to family and children. Selection criteria of participants in this study include: (a) married women who have children, and (b) adult women who have a biological mother or adult daughter in Jrengik village, thereby enabling the exploration of intergenerational dynamics. There was a total of 15 participants in the current study, consisting of five mother-daughter pairs and five other women representing middle generations or having unique experiences in fertility decisions. To maintain privacy and research ethics, all informants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., “Mrs. Siti,” “Rina,” “Mrs. Ani,”). Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to identify women who met the study’s specific intergenerational criteria. Initial contact was made with community leaders in Jrengik to explain the research’s purpose and obtain their permission. Following this, the first participants were identified through personal networks and referrals from trusted local gatekeepers. These initial participants then helped to identify other potential participants, particularly mother-daughter pairs, from their own networks, ensuring the sample was representative of the target demographic within the village.

The intergenerational characteristics in this study form the core of the analysis. Participants were divided into two main categories: The mother’s generation (typically aged 45 years and above), who grew up and made fertility decisions in an era with strong extended family support and different socio-economic conditions, and the daughter’s generation (typically aged 20–40 years), who face more modern economic realities and have more educational opportunities and access to information. The primary reason for focusing on intergenerational characteristics is to identify how socio-cultural and economic factors influence the shift or continuity of rationality in fertility decisions from one generation to the next within the same household context (Amin *et al.*, 2025; Samakya, 2024). This approach allows the researcher to observe the evolution of ideas about the “utility of children”—whether as productive assets, sources of consumption, or future security—that differ across generations due to changing social and economic contexts (Baigabulov, 2024; Okafor *et al.*, 2021).

The number of informants (15 women) was decided based on the principle of data saturation, which is a key criterion in qualitative research for determining sample size. Saturation was assessed during the analysis process, where the research team continuously reviewed interview transcripts. We determined that data saturation was reached when no new themes, concepts, or significant insights emerged from successive interviews, particularly concerning the core research questions on economic, socioemotional, and old-age security rationalities. The inclusion of five mother-daughter pairs was a deliberate choice to provide a robust foundation for the intergenerational analysis, while the additional five women from the category of “middle generations or with unique experiences” were included to provide a broader context and ensure a diversity of perspectives beyond the direct mother-daughter dynamic.

## 2.3. Phenomenological method and analytical techniques

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach for data analysis (Squires, 2023). IPA aims to deeply explore individuals’ lived experiences and how they make sense of those experiences. This aligns with the research objective of understanding the subjective rationality behind fertility decisions. The data analysis process involved the following steps: (i) repeatedly reading transcripts to become familiar with the data, (ii) making initial notes and marginal comments, (iii) developing emergent themes from the initial notes, (iv) searching for connections between themes and grouping them into superordinate themes, and (v) constructing a coherent

narrative of informant experiences based on the identified themes (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

The analysis process followed a rigorous inductive thematic coding procedure, primarily executed by the principal researcher. The steps included repeated reading to achieve immersion; initial annotation and the creation of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual codes; and the transformation of these codes into emergent themes. These themes were then grouped and linked to form superordinate themes that were mapped to the study's theoretical lenses (RCT and VOC). To enhance credibility and rigor, the thematic framework and initial codes were independently reviewed by a trained research assistant, and any differences in interpretation were discussed until a consensus was reached, ensuring inter-coder reliability and grounding the final thematic structure firmly in the participants' raw data.

The main theoretical analytical lenses used in this research are a modified RCT (Zhi-Xuan *et al.*, 2024) and the VOC theory (Xia *et al.*, 2024; Murray *et al.*, 2025). RCT allows for an analysis of how individuals weigh costs and benefits in decision-making, while VOC theory provides a framework for understanding the diverse values attributed to children, whether economic (labor contribution, old-age security), social (status, continuation of lineage), or psychological (happiness, personal satisfaction). By integrating these two theories, this research can identify how women's rationality in fertility is not solely based on economic calculations but also on the construction of social and emotional values that change across generations.

## 2.4. Validation of findings

Validation of findings was conducted through methodological triangulation, involving the use of observation and documentation in addition to in-depth interviews, to ensure data consistency and richness (Schlunegger *et al.*, 2024). Validation of findings was conducted to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Triangulation of data sources was achieved by combining in-depth interviews with extensive field documentation. Specifically, observation was used during interviews to note participants' non-verbal cues (e.g., body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice). These observations helped to validate or contextualize their verbal responses, serving as a check for internal consistency and the truthfulness of the findings. Furthermore, member checking was performed by presenting a summary of findings to selected informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations were accurate and represented their experiences (Lloyd *et al.*, 2024). Peer debriefing with fellow qualitative researchers was also conducted to

gain external perspectives and enhance the objectivity of interpretations. The credibility of the study is also upheld through a thick description of the informants' context and experiences, allowing readers to assess the transferability of the findings (Bang, 2024). It is important to note that, given the qualitative, in-depth nature of this study, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all rural Indonesian contexts. Instead, the rich, detailed narratives provide insights that are transferable to settings with similar socioeconomic and cultural characteristics. The study's limitations in transferability are a deliberate consequence of its focus on deep, subjective understanding rather than broad quantitative measurement, which is a common characteristic of interpretive phenomenological research.

## 3. Results

This section presents the key findings of the research concerning women's rationality in fertility decisions in Jrengik, with a focused lens on intergenerational dynamics. In-depth analysis of informant narratives reveals that women's rationality in determining family size is highly diverse and complex, extending beyond mere economic calculations to encompass evolving social, emotional, and future-oriented dimensions across generations. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: (i) Shifting economic rationality: From productive assets to consumption burdens, (ii) Socio-emotional rationality: Continuity and negotiation of values, and (iii) Future aspirations and old-age security rationality. Each theme will be critically elaborated upon and supported by direct quotes from informants, including their pseudonyms and ages, to highlight the nuanced generational perspectives.

### 3.1. Shifting economic rationality: From productive assets to consumption burdens

Findings indicate a significant generational shift in the economic rationality concerning children. The older generation (primarily late Baby Boomers or early Generation X, approximately 55–70 years old) tended to perceive children as vital productive assets, particularly within an agrarian context, and as guarantors of future family labor. In contrast, the younger generation (predominantly Generation Y or Millennials, approximately 30–55 years old) increasingly perceives children more as consumption burdens requiring substantial investment in education and healthcare, exacerbated by limited local economic opportunities and rising modern aspirations.

Mrs. Siti, aged 68 (representing the older generation), articulated a perspective deeply rooted in past economic realities:

*Back then, having many children was no problem at all; it was even better. The children could help in the rice fields, collect grass, or look after their younger siblings. So, they were like extra hands helping us. The more children you have, the more blessings you get – that’s what our elders used to say.*

Mrs. Siti

Mrs. Siti’s statement clearly frames children as “labor” and “bringers of blessings,” reflecting a production-based rationality and traditional beliefs about the economic advantages of having numerous children in an agrarian setting. This rationality emphasizes the instrumental VOC in sustaining household economy and enhancing the family productive capacity. Her view underscores a period when direct economic contributions from children were immediate and tangible. This finding strikingly reveals how deeply ingrained the concept of children as economic capital was for older generations, a rationality fundamentally shaped by the agrarian subsistence economy. Field observations noted that during the interview, Mrs. Siti’s grandchild (around 7 years old) came into the house and was immediately instructed by Mrs. Siti to go feed the chickens without being asked, demonstrating that the concept of children as readily available and non-negotiable labor remains prevalent in their household dynamics.

In sharp contrast, Rina, aged 32 (Mrs. Siti’s daughter, representing the younger generation), offered a sharply contrasting perspective:

*Now it’s different, Mom. Just having one child already gives you a headache thinking about the costs. School is expensive, private lessons, not to mention if they get sick. Maybe in the past, children could be told to help with work, but now they have to get a high education so their future is good. So, children are a huge investment, not just adding labor.*

Rina, Mrs. Siti’s daughter

Rina’s statement exemplifies the critical shift in rationality from “productive asset” to “investment burden” or “consumption burden.” She does not perceive children as adding labor but rather as long-term investments demanding significant expenditure for education and a better future. This reflects an adaptation of rationality to changing local economic structures and rising educational aspirations, where the economic output from children is no longer direct but measured by their future potential through formal schooling. Rina’s rationality is clearly dominated by the escalating costs of living and education, transforming children from potential income sources into major expenditure categories. The increasing

urbanization and exposure to globalized norms through media also contribute to this shift in aspirations, making education a non-negotiable part of child-rearing. What is particularly compelling here is the complete inversion of economic logic; children, once a means of current production, are now primarily perceived as costly conduits to future upward mobility, highlighting a profound shift in developmental aspirations. Observational data supported this statement, showing that Rina and her husband lived in a home with more modern standards (ceramic floors and newer electronic appliances) compared to her mother’s house, indicating higher consumption aspirations that directly correlate with their perception of the cost of raising children.

However, for some women of the middle generation, economic rationality did not fully shift from the productive to the consumptive model. They often navigate both perspectives. Santi (45 years old), a mother of three children, explained her dilemma:

*In the past, my parents didn’t think too much about school fees because there weren’t as many options as there are now. We went to school as we could. My children now? They have to have this and that extra lesson, and school fees are expensive. But, I still want to have more than two children, so the house isn’t quiet. Sustenance is already arranged, the important thing is that we try. If someone says children are a big expense, yes, that’s true. But they are also the ones who will help us later, so they are an investment too.*

Santi

This quote from Santi demonstrates that for the middle generation, children are viewed as a combination of a long-term investment (support in old age) and a short-term financial burden. Their perspective reflects a gradual transition in economic rationality, different from the more absolute views of either the mother’s or daughter’s generation. While the mothers’ generation often saw children primarily as productive assets who would contribute to the family’s labor and economy, and the daughters’ generation perceives them as costly investments requiring significant financial outlay, the middle generation holds a more hybrid view. This duality indicates a socioeconomic middle ground, where traditional values about family size and mutual support coexist with the modern reality of rising living costs. Their willingness to embrace both a traditional belief in divine provision (“Fortune is already arranged”) and a pragmatic awareness of financial burdens highlights the complex, transitional nature of their fertility decisions. This finding underscores that the shift in economic rationality is not an

abrupt break, but a fluid, generational negotiation between past and present values.

This generational divergence is further driven by the evolving labor market in Jrengik. With decreasing agricultural land and limited non-agricultural sectors, the role of children as productive household labor has become less relevant. As agricultural land decreases and non-agricultural sectors remain limited, the role of children as productive household labor becomes less relevant. Consequently, economic rationality has transitioned from prioritizing “quantity” to “quality” of children, where investment in education is seen as the primary pathway to improving future socioeconomic status, despite the higher financial implications. This dynamic illustrates a critical adaptation where economic rationality directly mirrors the changing opportunity structures in rural areas, pushing families toward a “quality over quantity” approach, a significant departure from traditional norms.

### 3.2. Socioemotional rationality: Continuity and negotiation of values

Beyond economic dimensions, socio-emotional rationality plays a crucial role in fertility decisions, though with varying emphases across generations. For the older generation, having many children was often intertwined with social status, lineage continuity, and fulfilling community expectations. In contrast, the younger generation tends to prioritize personal happiness, familial bonds, and the experience of parenthood, rather than succumbing solely to social pressure or status considerations.

Ibu Ani, aged 58 (older generation), emphasized the importance of children in maintaining family reputation:

*Having sons is important, dear. To continue the family lineage, the family name. If there's no son, it feels incomplete. And if you have many children, people won't say strange things about our family, it feels more established.*

Ibn Ani

Mrs. Ani's statement vividly illustrates a strong social rationality, where children—especially sons—are seen as guarantors of lineage continuity (a symbolic future) and indicators of social status within the community. This is a form of rationality where fertility is not solely about internal family needs but also about how the family is perceived externally. The number and gender of children become a reflection of social success and compliance with communal norms. This expectation places significant social pressure on women to produce certain outcomes, even if it contradicts personal desires. This profound attachment to lineage and social validation through fertility highlights

how deeply collective identity and community perception previously shaped individual reproductive choices. The fact was reinforced by non-verbal observation; when Mrs. Ani spoke about the importance of having sons and the family lineage, her husband (who was sitting nearby) nodded in agreement with his eyes closed, suggesting that this rationality is strongly supported and maintained by the family's patriarchal structure.

Devi, aged 28 (Mrs. Ani's daughter, younger generation), offered a perspective leaning more toward emotional aspects:

*My husband and I just want two children, that's enough. The important thing is that we can take good care of them, give them full affection, and we are happy. It doesn't matter if they are boys or girls, as long as they are healthy. What the neighbors say, well, that's their business.*

Devi, Mrs. Ani's daughter

Devi's statement depicts a discernible shift from social rationality, driven by community expectations, toward an emotional rationality centered on personal satisfaction and the quality of relationships within the nuclear family. Success in fertility is no longer measured by the number of children or a specific gender, but rather by the parents' capacity to provide optimal care and foster happiness. The phrase “what the neighbors say, well, that's their business” strongly indicates an active negotiation and rejection of previously binding social norms. This is evidence of an increasingly individualistic rationality, where fertility decisions are more influenced by internal desires and parenting capacity, rather than the need to maintain an image or fulfill social expectations. This stark difference underscores a fascinating evolution in the perceived “value of children,” moving from fulfilling external societal demands to prioritizing internal family well-being and personal fulfillment, signifying a growing sense of individual agency. The researcher observed that Devi's demeanor was very relaxed and her tone firm when stating this sentence. This underscores a high level of agency in her decision-making, which reinforces the finding that her rationality is driven more by personal emotional fulfillment than external social pressure. Despite these shifts, the emotional aspect of happiness brought by children remains a robust common thread across both generations, albeit with differing intensity and priority. Children are universally perceived as sources of joy and strengthen family bonds, a timeless value transcending generational changes. This enduring emotional connection to children, despite vast changes in other rationales, provides a powerful insight into the deeply human core of fertility desires, acting as a consistent motivator across all cohorts.

While the older generation often sees children as a source of family pride and a continuation of the family name, and the younger generation tends to focus on personal fulfillment, women from the middle generation often integrate these two values. They view children as a fusion of collective pride and personal happiness. Mrs. Ema (38 years old), a mother of two who works in a factory, shared her perspective:

*My children have become a part of my life. When they succeed, I feel proud. It feels like more than just having money or a position. It's a happiness that cannot be bought. In the past, my mother said that many children were a sign of an honorable family. For me, having children is a sign that I am happy, and I can be proud to show that happiness to others.*

Mrs. Ema

This quote demonstrates that for the middle generation, the emotional VOC is rooted in tradition but also adapts to modern concepts of personal happiness and satisfaction. It shows a nuanced understanding of children not just as agents of familial honor, but also as sources of individual fulfillment and joy. Unlike the more definitive views of their mothers (focused on lineage and family status) or their daughters (focused on personal aspirations and self-actualization), the middle generation's narrative represents a bridge between these two worlds. They hold a dualistic perspective, valuing both the collective pride that children bring to the family and the profound personal satisfaction that comes from raising them well. This duality underscores the transitional nature of their experiences, where inherited cultural values are renegotiated to fit a more individualized and modern context.

Despite these shifts (in economic rationality), the emotional aspect of happiness brought by children remains a robust common thread across both generations, albeit with differing intensity and priority. Children are universally regarded as a source of emotional fulfillment and stability, serving as the primary family binding element. We found that the need for emotional support, companionship, and lineage continuity is not negotiated; rather, it is maintained but redefined in line with the higher cost of living and increased investment in quality. For the older generation, the emotional VOC is often tightly intertwined with social support and security. They viewed children as an extension of their existence and community, traditionally expressed through pride in a large family: In the past, having many children was a pride and assurance. Children were our greatest source of happiness, and they never truly left us. If one was sick, the others were there. The house feels alive when it is full of the laughter

of children and grandchildren. Conversely, the younger generation still views children as the main source of happiness, although this value is no longer associated with having a large number of children. Their focus has shifted from the "pride of quantity" to the "quality of emotion" and personal investment. They desire children for self-fulfillment, yet acknowledge that a greater investment per child yields a more focused happiness: "Of course, we want children. Without children, life feels incomplete; no one will carry on our name. But that happiness does not come from having five. I want two, so I can (give them the best education) and ensure they are happy. That is my happiness." (Participant of the Younger Generation) This transition from distributed emotional value to focused emotional value indicates that while the core VOC value—that children bring happiness—is retained, the rationality underpinning it has been reshaped by high consumption costs.

### 3.3. Future aspirations and old-age security rationality

The rationality concerning old-age security is another crucial aspect of fertility decisions, which is also undergoing generational adaptation. For the older generation, having many children was the primary strategy to ensure support and care in old age, given the absence of adequate formal social security systems. In contrast, the younger generation, while still acknowledging children's role in old-age security, is beginning to develop alternative strategies or hold more realistic expectations regarding children's support, reflecting increasing mobility and individualism among the youth.

Mrs. Kartini, aged 62 (older generation), expressed concerns typical of her cohort:

*When I'm old like this, who else will take care of me if not my children? That's why I wanted many children back then, so there would be someone to look after me, to care for me when I'm sick. If there's only one or two, they'll be busy with their own lives, who will look after us?*

Mrs. Kartini

Mrs. Kartini's statement clearly demonstrates a strong "old-age security" rationality, where children are viewed as "security assets" for the future. A large number of children serves as informal social insurance in rural communities with minimal public facilities and safety nets. This rationality is highly pragmatic, based on the fundamental need for care and support in old age within a context where formal safety nets are non-existent or inaccessible. This finding profoundly illustrates how for older generations, children were not just a blessing but an indispensable,

tangible form of future security, directly compensating for the lack of formal welfare systems. This context was validated by observation: as the interview took place, Mrs. Kartini was being cared for by one of her married daughters, and her physical movements appeared limited, visually confirming her current reliance on her children as the only system for care and old-age security.

However, Indah, aged 35 (Mrs. Kartini's daughter, younger generation), presented a more pragmatic and adaptive view:

*I understand why my mother had many children; that was just how it was. But now, children also have their own lives. I cannot entirely expect my children to take care of me later. Maybe I need to have my own savings, or hope there's some government assistance.*

Indah, Mrs. Kartini's daughter

Indah's statement reflects a rationality that begins to acknowledge the limitations of children as the sole old-age security. There is an awareness that children might have their own lives and priorities, reducing their capacity to fully care for their parents. This drives a new rationality that includes alternative strategies for old-age security, such as personal savings or reliance on formal social security systems (if available). It also indicates a higher degree of realism and independence in the younger generation, alongside social changes that promote individualism and mobility. Although the VOC as a form of security still exists, it is no longer the sole or most dominant consideration. This pragmatic view was supported by the context: Indah mentioned that her husband works outside the island (migration), justifying her feelings about the need to be financially independent and to plan for old-age security without fully depending on her children, who may also migrate. This striking shift highlights a critical evolution in how future security is conceptualized, moving from a sole reliance on familial support to a diversified strategy that includes personal financial planning and aspirations for broader social safety nets.

Collectively, these findings critically illustrate how women's rationality in fertility decisions in rural Indonesia is a multi-dimensional and continuously evolving phenomenon. The intergenerational shifts reveal adaptations to changing socioeconomic conditions, where economic considerations pivot from production to consumption, social values are being reinterpreted through emotional aspects, and old-age security is redefined by incorporation of alternative strategies. This indicates that population policies cannot assume a singular rationality but must instead comprehend the diversity and dynamics

of underlying values that inform individual fertility decisions.

## 4. Discussion

This study has provided a qualitative, intergenerational exploration of women's rationality in fertility decisions within a rural Indonesian context, revealing nuanced shifts and enduring continuities in their reproductive choices. The findings challenge simplistic interpretations of fertility decline driven solely by macroeconomic factors or broad demographic transitions. Instead, they highlight how individual rationalities are deeply embedded in dynamic socioeconomic landscapes, personal aspirations, and evolving intergenerational dialogues. This discussion critically examines the themes identified in the Results section, connecting them to established theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, and emphasizing the unique contributions of this research.

The observed generational shift from perceiving children as "productive assets" (older generation) to "consumption burdens" or "investment objects" (younger generation) significantly refines the application of RCT and the New Household Economics (NHE) in fertility studies. While NHE posits that fertility decisions are rational calculations balancing the costs and benefits of children (Matysiak & Vignoli, D. 2024; Jarosz *et al.*, 2025), our findings demonstrate that the *nature* of these costs and benefits is not static. For Mrs. Siti's generation, the economic utility of children was direct and immediate, manifested in their contribution to agricultural labor and household production, aligning with classic demographic transitions in agrarian societies (Vizuet *et al.*, 2024; Tong *et al.*, 2024). Children were indeed a form of human capital that directly supported family sustenance and prosperity.

However, Rina's perspective reveals a critical evolution. As rural economies diversify and educational aspirations rise, the "value" of children shifts from their immediate productive capacity to their long-term potential as educated individuals capable of securing non-agricultural livelihoods. This transition implies that the "cost" component in the fertility equation dramatically increases, encompassing not just basic sustenance but substantial investments in schooling, healthcare, and skill development (Dai *et al.*, 2025). This mirrors trends observed in other developing regions where rising educational and consumption aspirations lead to lower desired family sizes (Asratie *et al.*, 2024; Fauser *et al.*, 2024). The qualitative narratives powerfully illustrate that "rationality" itself adapts to changing economic realities and perceived opportunities, demonstrating that women are actively recalibrating their fertility decisions based on

these shifting economic landscapes rather than passively reacting to external forces. This nuance underscores that while economic rationality persists, its specific manifestations are highly context-dependent and evolve intergenerationally, rendering a simplistic, universal cost-benefit framework insufficient. Intriguingly, this finding critically enriches the RCT and the New Household Economics by demonstrating how the economic rationality concerning children is a dynamic, not static, construct, which is highly relevant for understanding modern fertility transitions.

The study's findings on socioemotional rationality highlight a fascinating interplay between continuity and negotiation of values across generations. The older generation's emphasis on lineage continuity, social status, and communal acceptance through fertility aligns with classic sociological interpretations of the "value of children" as a source of social recognition and fulfillment of societal expectations (Riley & Chatterjee, 2022; Thi *et al.*, 2021). Mrs. Ani's strong desire for sons to continue the family name reflects deeply ingrained patriarchal norms prevalent in many traditional societies, where male offspring secure social legitimacy and symbolic immortality (Tartakovsky & Mizrahi, 2025). This perspective demonstrates how fertility decisions are not merely individual choices but are profoundly shaped by collective social pressures and the desire to conform to community ideals.

In contrast, Devi's prioritization of personal happiness, spousal bonding, and the quality of parenting over external validation signifies a gradual, yet powerful, shift toward a more individualized socioemotional rationality. Her assertion, "What the neighbors say, well, that's their business," eloquently captures a growing sense of individual agency and a renegotiation of traditional social contracts. This finding resonates with the "Second Demographic Transition" theories, which emphasize increasing individualism, self-fulfillment, and autonomy in life choices, including reproduction (Musni & Schnor, 2025). While the emotional satisfaction derived from children remains a strong, continuous motivator across both generations (Wang *et al.*, 2024), the sources of emotional and social fulfillment appear to be diversifying. Younger women are less bound by collective social demands and more driven by intrinsic desires for a smaller, well-managed family that can be nurtured optimally. This nuanced finding is crucial, as it suggests that policies aimed at influencing fertility should not only address economic factors but also acknowledge and support women's evolving desires for personal fulfillment and their increasing capacity to negotiate traditional social pressures, fostering greater reproductive autonomy. This is highly engaging

for discussion within the lens of the Second Demographic Transition Theory, as it empirically demonstrates how post-materialistic values and individualism are gradually permeating fertility decisions at the micro-level in rural areas, even within highly communal contexts.

The dynamic around old-age security rationality represents another compelling area of intergenerational divergence. For Mrs. Kartini's generation, the decision to have many children was fundamentally a pragmatic, rational response to the absence of formal social security systems (Harris, 2025). Children were viewed as essential, tangible "security assets" for care and financial support in old age, a strategy prevalent in societies undergoing early stages of demographic transition. The fear of being uncared for in old age served as a powerful incentive for higher fertility, illustrating a clear rational calculation under conditions of vulnerability.

However, Indah's more nuanced perspective reveals a significant adaptive shift. While still acknowledging the potential role of children, her generation is actively seeking diversified strategies for old-age security, including personal savings and a nascent hope for government assistance. This indicates a growing awareness that traditional familial support systems may be strained due to children's increased mobility, individual career paths, and smaller family sizes. This transition highlights a movement away from a sole reliance on children as an "informal social safety net" toward a more complex, multi-pronged approach that reflects both changing societal structures and increased individual resourcefulness (Radey *et al.*, 2024). The emerging reliance on personal savings and the aspiration for formal social security systems align with broader development trends, where states gradually assume greater responsibility for welfare provision, and individuals play more active roles in financial planning (Agudamu *et al.*, 2025; Liang *et al.*, 2025). This evolving rationality suggests that as societies develop, the traditional "old-age security" motive for high fertility gradually weakens, paving the way for fertility decline driven by new forms of "rational" future planning. Critically, this finding enriches our understanding of old-age security rationality within the framework of RCT, demonstrating how individuals adaptively shift their "insurance" strategies from solely relying on children to diversification, reflecting changes in socioeconomic context and access to formal security mechanisms.

The central finding of this study—the intergenerational shift from the production rationality (economic benefit) to the consumption rationality (costly investment in quality)—is not unique but is significantly nuanced by the specific Madurese rural context. This pattern

aligns broadly with the global Second Demographic Transition theory, which links declining fertility to rising individualism and investment in child quality. However, our qualitative data contrasts with purely quantitative studies from other Indonesian regions by demonstrating that this shift is not linear. Our older generation still retains high socio-emotional values, which differ from highly urbanized contexts where modernization has often fully eroded the multi-utility of children. Furthermore, while quantitative studies emphasize education and income (Kizza & Wasswa, 2024), qualitative research often highlights cultural and social capital factors. We compare and extend this by showing that the younger generation's rationale is driven less by the availability of family planning and more by an aspirational rationality, the fear of failing to provide a "quality life" due to high consumption cost a finding that resonates strongly with recent qualitative work in transitional societies (Klug *et al.*, 2024). This comparative approach reinforces the novelty of our work in highlighting the dynamic negotiation of "utility" within a specific cultural lineage.

This intergenerational study critically illuminates the intricate layers of women's rationality in fertility decisions within a specific rural Indonesian context. The findings provide compelling empirical evidence that challenges reductionist views of fertility behavior. Instead, they demonstrate that women's reproductive choices are products of dynamic, adaptive rationalities shaped by profound shifts in economic realities, evolving socioemotional values, and diversifying strategies for old-age security across generations. This research underscores that "rationality" in fertility is not a static, universal concept, but a context-sensitive and historically contingent process, constantly being re-evaluated by individuals in response to changing opportunities and constraints. Understanding these deeply personal, yet socially embedded, rationalities is paramount for developing more effective, equitable, and culturally sensitive population policies that truly empower women and foster sustainable demographic futures globally. The study's unique focus on intergenerational narratives offers a vital qualitative lens, complementing existing quantitative research and enriching our theoretical understanding of complex fertility transitions.

## 5. Conclusion

This intergenerational qualitative study on women's rationality in fertility decisions in rural Jrengik, Madura, offers critical insights into the complex dynamics shaping family size. The core finding is that women's rationality in reproductive choices is not static or singularly driven by economic utility, but rather a fluid and adaptive construct that evolves significantly across generations, influenced

by changing socio-economic landscapes and cultural aspirations.

The research reveals a compelling shift in economic rationality, moving from the older generation's perception of children as indispensable productive assets to the younger generation's view of them as substantial consumption burdens. Simultaneously, the study highlights an evolution in socioemotional rationality, where the emphasis shifts from fulfilling communal expectations toward prioritizing individual happiness and the quality of parent-child relationships. These intergenerational divergences underscore that fertility decisions are continuously re-evaluated by women, reflecting their agency in response to changing societal norms and economic realities.

Ultimately, this study contributes significantly to demographic discourse by enriching the RCT and the VOC framework, providing empirical depth through nuanced qualitative data that demonstrates how these theoretical constructs manifest and transform at the micro-level within a specific cultural context.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Author contributions

*Conceptualization:* All authors

*Formal analysis:* Anita Kristina

*Investigation:* Boby Candra Pamungkas

*Methodology:* Anita Kristina

*Writing—original draft:* Anita Kristina

*Writing—review & editing:* Anita Kristina

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study, which involved human subjects, was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Trunojoyo Madura (ethics approval number B/6758/UN46.4.1/PT.01.01/2025). The committee approved the research methodology and declared it ethically appropriate according to the seven WHO 2011 standards, namely: (1) social values; (2) scientific values; (3) equal distribution of burdens and benefits; (4) risk; (5) exploitation; (6) confidentiality and privacy; (7) consent after explanation, in compliance with the 2016 CIOMS Guidelines. This is shown by the fulfillment of

the indicators for each standard. Prior to each interview, verbal consent was obtained from every participant. The participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Their willingness to be interviewed and audio-recorded was confirmed and documented by the researchers.

## Consent for publication

Verbal consent was obtained from each participant to use their interview data for research and publication purposes. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the subjects, all identifying information, including their names, has been masked or concealed by assigning pseudonyms (e.g., "Siti," "Santi"). The data presented in this article is anonymized to ensure that no individual can be identified.

## Availability of data

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the qualitative data, which contains personal and confidential narratives of human subjects. However, the data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request for academic purposes, contingent upon compliance with ethical standards protecting participant confidentiality.

## Further disclosure

This article is based on the findings from a bachelor's thesis that has been academically examined and approved. The paper has not been previously published, uploaded to a preprint server, and presented at any conference, academic meeting, or congress.

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