

Motherhood, Career Aspirations, and Life Goals: Exploring Young Women's Attitudes as a Factor in the Declining Fertility Rate in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The fertility rate in Sri Lanka has gradually declined over the last few decades. While existing literature has explored motherhood and career aspirations, few studies examine these dynamics among university students in Sri Lanka. This study aims to explore how young Sri Lankan female undergraduates perceive motherhood in relation to their career aspirations and life goals, offering a contextually grounded perspective in a Southern setting. The study adopted a mixed-method approach comprising a survey followed by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The sample comprised 300 female undergraduates from the Arts, Management, and Science faculties at the University of Colombo, including both first-year and final-year students. The study employed a pseudo-longitudinal design to compare differences in perceptions and attitudes toward motherhood across academic disciplines and stages of study. Findings indicate that the value placed on motherhood varies by discipline, with Arts and Management students generally prioritising it more than those in Science. Attitudes also shift between first-year and final-year students, as academic exposure and evolving career aspirations influence the timing and conditions under which motherhood is considered. Career goals, financial stability, and lifestyle preferences emerged as key factors shaping reproductive decisions, while concerns about balancing work and

family persist across the sample. The study highlights the complex interplay between societal expectations, personal values, and professional ambitions in shaping young women's reproductive choices in Sri Lanka. In conclusion, undergraduate perceptions of motherhood are shaped by disciplinary identity and socio-economic positioning, often leading to delayed motherhood due to anticipated role conflicts and financial constraints. Supportive policies, flexible work environments, and community-level interventions are essential to empower young women to navigate career and family while making informed reproductive choices.

Keywords: Phytosociological characterization, *Turraeantho-Heisterietum* association, Banco National Park

Introduction

The definition of 'mother' often centres on gestational capacity, emphasising the ability to experience pregnancy and give birth, which extends to nurturing roles such as caring, protecting, nursing, and tending (Mitra, 2020). In South Asian cultures, motherhood is a deeply embedded concept, shaping gender roles, employment patterns, and societal expectations. In Sri Lanka, these traditional views are evolving under the dual influence of cultural norms and increasing female participation in the workforce (Gunathilake, 2023; Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010).

The conventional male-breadwinner model has been challenged by women's growing presence in professional fields. Yet, expectations for women to balance work and childcare persist, generating significant work-family conflicts (Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). These tensions reflect a broader global trend in which maternal responsibilities constrain career advancement, particularly for working mothers (Gunathilake, 2023).

According to World Bank data (2022), Sri Lanka's fertility rate has steadily declined over recent decades. The United Nations Population Fund (2016) notes that Sri Lanka entered stage three of the demographic transition model (DTM) by the early 1960s, marking a sustained phase of fertility decline.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how young Sri Lankan female undergraduates perceive motherhood in relation to their career aspirations and life goals. It examines how traditional values and modern influences shape their attitudes toward balancing professional ambitions with family life, and how these perspectives may contribute to the ongoing decline in fertility among educated young women in Sri Lanka.

Research Problem

How do young Sri Lankan female undergraduates' career aspirations and life goals influence their attitudes toward motherhood in the context of the country's declining fertility rates?

Existing research indicates that Sri Lanka has been experiencing a sustained decline in fertility rates, which may lead to long-term demographic challenges. These include a rising dependency ratio, economic strain, workforce shrinkage, and imbalances caused by an ageing population. As a lower-middle-income country, Sri Lanka may face increased pressure to provide welfare support amid constrained resources. This demographic shift raises important questions about how evolving career goals, shifting life priorities, and changing perceptions of motherhood are influencing young women's decisions around family formation. Despite growing interest in fertility trends, there remains a limited understanding of how these societal and personal changes shape young women's attitudes toward motherhood and their willingness or ability to have children. In particular, the perspectives of female university students, the next generation of potential mothers, remain underexplored in this context.

Research Objectives

Main Objective

To examine how young Sri Lankan female undergraduates' career aspirations and life goals influence their attitudes toward motherhood across different academic disciplines.

Sub-Objectives

- To examine the perceived importance of motherhood among female undergraduates across different academic streams.
- To explore how undergraduate students balance or anticipate balancing career aspirations and motherhood.
- To investigate the influence of career goals on students' attitudes toward motherhood and family planning.
- To assess the impact of socio-economic and lifestyle factors on students' decisions regarding the timing of motherhood.

Methods

The study employed a mixed-method approach to explore and compare attitudes toward motherhood among female undergraduates in Sri Lanka. The research was designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data through a two-step process involving a survey and follow-up interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives held by participants within the respective cultural context. The study population included female students

from three faculties: Arts, Management, and Science, at the University of Colombo.

The study adopted a pseudo-longitudinal design, comparing differences in perceptions and attitudes toward motherhood between students in their first year of study and those in their final year. Given the limited three-month timeframe allocated for the project, this approach enabled an effective comparison. A survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions were utilised as the main methods of data collection for the study.

Step 01: Survey

The survey questionnaire was administered through a Google Form in all three languages (Sinhala, English, and Tamil). These methods allowed the research team to efficiently collect primary data from a large number of respondents while also enabling the simultaneous collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative techniques were used to explore attitudinal tendencies in greater depth. Students from the first and fourth years at the university are included in the sample. Table 01 shows the number of students from the respective faculties.

Table 1: Number of students from the University of Colombo in the selected faculties

Faculty	1st Year	4th Year
	No. of Students	
Arts	50	50
Science	50	50
Management	50	50
Total	150	150

Source: Survey data, 2025

Sample selection for the study was guided by practical considerations, as it was necessary to restrict the sample to a manageable size. Due to the short project duration and periods of university closure, a total of 300 students were selected. This sample included 50 students from each of the first-year and final-year batches across three faculties at the University of Colombo, resulting in 100 students from each faculty ($50 \text{ students} \times 2 \text{ batches} \times 3 \text{ faculties} = 300$).

Step 2: In-depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with Selected Respondents

Following the questionnaire survey, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with a subset of students. Twelve students were selected for these interviews ($2 \text{ students} \times 2 \text{ cohorts} \times 3 \text{ faculties} = 12$). The questionnaire included an item inviting respondents to indicate their interest

in participating in an in-depth interview and to provide their contact information. Interview participants were then chosen from those who expressed interest within the selected faculties. Among those who expressed interest, participants were selected to ensure variation across academic disciplines and year of study. The purpose of these interviews was to gain deeper insight into the factors and experiences shaping students' attitudes toward motherhood.

In addition, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each comprising 10 participants drawn from a mix of first- and final-year students across different faculties. These discussions allowed for a broader exploration of themes identified in the survey and interviews, enabling the examination of shared experiences and differences across faculties, disciplines, years of study, and cultural contexts.

Data from both phases were analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of female undergraduates' attitudes. Survey data collected via Google Forms were cleaned, coded, and analysed using SPSS, employing both univariate and bivariate statistical techniques as appropriate. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analysed thematically to identify key patterns and insights. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, thematic triangulation was employed by comparing insights from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. This allowed for cross-verification of recurring patterns and divergent views.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, it exclusively focused on female undergraduate students from the selected university, excluding male perspectives. As a result, the findings may not have fully captured the broader societal attitudes toward motherhood and fertility, particularly in relation to gender dynamics and expectations.

Second, the sample was limited to one university, which may reduce the potential for generalization to the wider student population.

Third, the research was conducted under a strict three-month timeframe, which posed significant challenges for data collection and analysis. This limited period may have restricted the depth of exploration and the ability to capture nuanced variations in attitudes across different student groups. The faculties closed for the Christmas break during these three months.

Finally, self-reported data collected via online questionnaires may have introduced response bias in spite of the Google form being anonymised. Participants might have provided socially desirable answers rather than their true perceptions, potentially influencing the accuracy of the results.

Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into female undergraduates' perspectives on motherhood and declining fertility, contributing to ongoing discussions on demographic trends and gender roles.

Results

This section presents the study's findings, outlining the demographic profile of participants and their perceptions of motherhood in relation to education, career, and lifestyle. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, it examines how Sri Lankan undergraduate women navigate the balance between professional aspirations and family planning, and identifies key factors influencing their decisions about motherhood.

The Demographic Profile of the Participants

The study sample consisted of 300 Sri Lankan female college students, primarily aged between 21 and 23 years (44.4%), followed by 24-26 years (39.2%), and a smaller proportion aged 18-20 years (16.3%). The majority of the respondents were single (72.5%), while 27.5% reported being in a relationship. In terms of religious affiliation, the sample was predominantly Buddhist (85.0%), with smaller representations of Christians (6.5%), Muslims (4.9%), and Hindus (3.6%). These demographic characteristics reflect the typical composition of Sri Lankan undergraduates of the University of Colombo from the Arts, Management, and Science Faculties of the first and fourth years, where most are within the 21-23 age range, unmarried, and Buddhism remains the dominant religion.

Perceived Importance of Motherhood in Future Plans

Motherhood remains a significant yet complex dimension of many women's life trajectories, often intersecting with educational and career ambitions in ways shaped by societal expectations, personal values, and disciplinary cultures. Prior research has long highlighted the tension between traditional gender roles, which emphasise caregiving, and modern aspirations for professional achievement (Gerson, 1985; Stone, 2007). While some women view motherhood as a central life goal, others prioritise career advancement or seek to balance both domains (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996). These divergent perspectives are further shaped by academic and professional socialisation, with fields of study influencing how individuals envision their future roles (Ceci et al., 2014). This study builds on these insights by examining how undergraduate women in Sri Lanka negotiate motherhood in relation to their educational and career trajectories.

The importance placed on motherhood varied notably across academic disciplines. Management and Arts students were more likely to consider motherhood a central aspect of their future, whereas Science students

expressed more varied perspectives. These disciplinary differences are illustrated in Table 02, which presents a crosstabulation of the perceived importance of motherhood by field of study.

Table 2: Importance of Motherhood in Future Plans by Field of Study

Field of study	How important is the idea of “becoming a mother” in your future plans?				Total
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not very important	Not Important at all	
Management	44 (44%)	41 (41%)	9 (9%)	6 (6%)	100
Science	38 (38%)	33 (33%)	19 (19%)	10 (10%)	100
Arts	54 (54%)	36 (36%)	5 (5%)	5 (5%)	100
Total	136 (45.3%)	110 (36.7%)	33 (11%)	21 (7%)	300

Source: Survey data, 2025

Among management students, 44% (44 out of 100) rated motherhood as "very important", while nine students considered it "not very important" and six "not important at all". This suggests that management students generally regard motherhood as a significant future goal. Science students, in contrast, displayed a more diverse range of responses: 38% selected "very important", 33% chose "somewhat important", and larger proportions - 19% and 10%, respectively - indicated that motherhood was less important or not important at all. The findings indicate that Science students hold mixed views on the significance of motherhood in their future plans. In contrast, Arts students demonstrated the strongest inclination toward motherhood, with 54% rating it as “very important.” Only a small proportion considered it “not very important” (5%) or “not important at all” (5%), suggesting that Arts students place greater value on motherhood compared to their peers in other disciplines.

Overall, the chi-square test ($p = .019$) confirmed a statistically significant association between the field of study and the perceived importance of motherhood.

Findings from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions reveal a marked difference between first-year and final-year students in their perceptions of motherhood as a significant life aspiration. First-year students frequently viewed motherhood as an inevitable life stage, with many of their beliefs rooted in religious and cultural expectations. One first-year Arts student described motherhood as “*the highest position a girl/woman can achieve*,” while another remarked, “*after getting married, half the duties required for our religion will be over*.” These early undergraduate perspectives reflect a strong adherence to traditional norms and familial expectations surrounding motherhood.

In contrast, many final-year students shared either conditional or delayed aspirations for motherhood. According to a fourth-year undergraduate of the science faculty:

“I prioritise finding a good job over becoming a mother. Only after that will I think about becoming a mother.”

(FGD Data, 2025)

This shift suggests that exposure to academic life, diverse peer networks, and experience-based insights into career-building influence the initial perceptions held by first-year undergraduates. Financial readiness also emerged as a key factor in decisions around motherhood. Both first-year and final-year students acknowledged the importance of financial stability before starting a family; however, final-year students framed it as a more decisive precondition. This was reflected in the statement of a fourth-year Science undergraduate:

“I am not ready to give birth to kids to throw them away or offer them to a Buddhist monastery once we start to tackle financial issues.”

(FGD Data, 2025)

First-year participants, by contrast, viewed financial readiness as a goal to be pursued rather than a barrier to motherhood.

Education, Career, and Lifestyle as Prerequisites

A considerable number of participants across Science, Management, and Arts disciplines prioritised education over starting a family. For these individuals, obtaining academic qualifications and advancing their careers were viewed as essential precursors to motherhood. Beyond education, career progression emerged as a key driver, with respondents emphasising the need to secure stable employment, achieve professional growth, and establish long-term career prospects before considering parenthood. Financial stability also played a critical role; participants in the early stages of their careers, including internships, highlighted the importance of a reliable income and the capacity to manage childcare costs. Personal freedom was similarly valued, with many expressing a desire to maintain autonomy and pursue individual interests, hobbies, and travel during their younger years. Lifestyle considerations further influenced decisions, as delaying motherhood was seen as a means of preserving a life oriented around career focus, social engagement, and ongoing self-development.

Balancing Career and Motherhood

The analysis of the relationship between field of study and confidence in balancing career and motherhood yielded notable insights. Participants responded to the question, “Do you feel confident balancing career and motherhood in the future?” with one of three options: “yes, definitely,” “I am still thinking about it,” and “no, not at all.”

The breakdown of responses shows that out of 100 management students, 51% answered "yes, definitely", 47% were "still thinking about it", and only 2% responded "no, not at all." For the science students, 51% answered "yes, definitely", 40% were still considering it, and 9% responded "no, not at all." Arts students showed a similar pattern, with 51% saying "yes, definitely", 47% still thinking, and 2% expressing uncertainty. The Chi-Square test for independence produced a Pearson Chi-Square value of 11.837 with four degrees of freedom and a significance level of 0.019 ($p < .05$), indicating a statistically significant relationship between field of study and confidence in balancing career and motherhood. The likelihood ratio also supported this result, with a value of 11.070 and a significance level of 0.026.

Most students, regardless of discipline, expressed either confidence or uncertainty about balancing career and motherhood. However, a notable difference emerged within the Science group, where 9% of students reported feeling unconfident - a higher proportion than in Management and Arts, where only two students in total expressed similar views. Management and Arts students showed comparable distributions, with most either confident or still contemplating their ability to balance both roles. This suggests that students in these fields tend to exhibit greater confidence in managing career and motherhood compared to their peers in Science.

Qualitative data further illuminated these patterns, particularly when viewed through the lens of academic progression. First-year students generally believed that career and motherhood could be balanced, often underestimating the potential for conflict. As one first-year Science undergraduate explained:

"Both studies and motherhood should be balanced. Because motherhood cannot be lost because of studies."

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

In contrast, by the final year, students had developed a more sceptical view about balancing a career and motherhood. As stated by a fourth-year science undergraduate:

"If you are going to have a nine-to-four job, then it's very hard to have a child as well."

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

These perceptions were further elaborated by fourth-year undergraduates during discussions about their workplace experiences, as many were engaged in internships. Students frequently cited hiring discrimination against pregnant women, the absence of paternity leave, and entrenched social expectations that mothers shoulder the majority of household responsibilities - concerns that were rarely voiced by first-year participants.

In Sri Lanka, career aspirations and motherhood are often at odds. Many employers hesitate to recruit pregnant women, not seeing beyond their temporary leave to recognise their long-term potential. This reality forces many women to compromise their careers for motherhood because society has rigid gender roles. Even when both partners work, household responsibilities largely fall on women. Some choose to step away from their careers entirely, not because they lack ambition but because balancing both is overwhelming. Personally, I know I wouldn't be able to sacrifice my career and social engagement. For me, career and financial independence take precedence over embracing motherhood.

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

Influence of Career Goals on Views of Motherhood

In terms of the extent of influence, a relatively small number of students reported that their career goals had a strong influence on their views of motherhood, with only 84 students across all fields indicating a strong influence. Among these, management students had the lowest number, with only 24% of students indicating a strong influence, compared to 27% each from the science and arts fields. The majority of students reported that their career goals had some influence on their views on motherhood, totalling 184 students. Management students accounted for the highest proportion in this category, with 63%, followed by science with 61% and Arts with 60%. A small number of students reported that their career goals had little influence on their views on motherhood, with only 29 students in total. The distribution here was relatively similar across all fields: 11% of the management students, 9% of science students, and 9% of arts students. Finally, only 3% of students reported that their career goals did not influence their views on motherhood, with management and science students having the fewest in this category (2 out of 100 and 3 out of 100, respectively). Arts students with a total of 4 reported no influence. The Chi-Square test results showed a Pearson Chi-Square value of 1.233 with six degrees of freedom and an asymptotic significance of 0.975, indicating no significant association between the field of study and the influence of career goals on views about motherhood. Although students from different academic disciplines expressed varied views on how career goals influence their attitudes toward motherhood, these differences were not statistically significant. Across fields, most participants acknowledged that career aspirations played at least some role in shaping their perceptions of motherhood.

These findings align with qualitative insights, where participants voiced concerns about traditional gender roles and the challenges of balancing

career and motherhood. While disciplines such as Science and Management may foster career-oriented environments, overarching societal norms around gender and family responsibilities appear to influence students across fields in similar ways. The majority of participants in both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions emphasised that career goals significantly shaped their views on motherhood, with a few explicitly prioritising career over motherhood.

I think a woman's career has a strong influence on her role as a mother. I believe it's possible to balance both studies and a career at the same time. If I have a family in the future, I will continue to manage both my family and career. If I don't have a family, I will focus on my studies and career.

(In-depth Interview Data, 2025)

Prioritisation of Career Over Family

Table 03 presents crosstabulation data illustrating students' preferences across academic disciplines regarding the prioritisation of career over starting a family. The survey included 300 participants, with responses categorised as “yes” (prioritising career), “no” (not prioritising career), and “not sure.”

Table 3: Prioritizing Career Over Starting a Family by Field of Study

Field of study	Would you prioritise your career over starting a family?			Total
	Yes	No	Not sure	
Management	34 (34%)	27 (27%)	39 (39%)	100
Science	39 (39%)	33 (33%)	28 (28%)	100
Arts	35 (35%)	40 (40%)	25 (25%)	100
Total	108 (36%)	100 (33.3%)	92 (30.7%)	300

Source: Survey data, 2025

The highest proportion of students prioritising their career over starting a family is observed among science students (39%), followed by arts (35%) and management (34%). Conversely, arts students show a stronger tendency to prioritise family over career, with 40% selecting "no". Management students exhibit the highest level of uncertainty (39%), followed by science (28%) and arts (25%). Across all fields of study, 30.7% of students are unsure about their stance on career versus family prioritisation, suggesting that uncertainty plays a significant role in decision-making. Overall, career prioritisation (36%) is slightly more common among the students than not prioritising career (33.3%), although the differences are minimal.

A chi-square test was conducted to examine the association between the field of study and career prioritisation decisions. The p-value (0.172) indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between the field of study and the decision to prioritise career over family. This suggests that

factors beyond academic discipline, such as personal values, societal expectations, or economic considerations, may have a greater influence on this decision.

While academic discipline may shape career trajectories, existing research suggests it does not have a strong direct relationship with women's prioritisation of career over family or marriage. Instead, personal values, societal expectations, and economic considerations appear to exert greater influence. For instance, Nzasi (2024) argues that gender norms and cultural expectations, rather than disciplinary affiliation, play a more decisive role in shaping women's career choices and the emphasis placed on professional advancement versus family life.

These findings align with and extend recent scholarship on fertility decision-making among young Sri Lankan women. The present study contributes original empirical evidence demonstrating that while academic discipline may influence career trajectories, it does not significantly shape motherhood intentions. Instead, as this research shows, personal values, economic precarity, and societal expectations, particularly around gender roles, play a more decisive role. This is echoed in broader consultations, such as those conducted by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Sri Lanka (Adeniyi, 2025), which underscore that declining fertility is often a pragmatic response to systemic barriers, including housing insecurity, inadequate childcare infrastructure, and gendered labour expectations, rather than a rejection of motherhood itself. Ranasinghe and Mahesh (2025) add a pandemic lens, revealing how economic instability and relationship uncertainty have reshaped reproductive timelines. Taken together, these studies affirm that young women's attitudes toward career and motherhood are not merely individual preferences but reflections of structural constraints and evolving life goals.

Discussion

The implications of this study are multifaceted, revealing discipline-related variations in young Sri Lankan female undergraduates' attitudes toward motherhood, career aspirations, and life goals within the context of declining fertility. While motherhood remains a major life goal for most respondents, its perceived importance is negotiated alongside the pursuit of higher education, career success, economic independence, and personal autonomy. This simultaneous prioritisation reflects existing research suggesting that women's reproductive decisions are increasingly shaped by competing demands between professional and familial spheres (Blair-Loy, 2003; Gerson, 1985; Hays, 1996).

Statistical analysis indicates that Arts and Management students are more likely to view motherhood as "very important" compared to Science

students, whose responses were more varied. This pattern may reflect disciplinary socialisation, particularly in science-related fields where extended training and delayed entry into stable employment often postpone family formation. Similar trends have been observed in Western contexts, where STEM professionals delay childbearing due to intensive career demands (Ceci et al., 2014).

Self-efficacy in balancing career and motherhood also varied by discipline, with Science students reporting lower levels than their peers in Arts and Management. This aligns with research on work–family conflict, which highlights how demanding career fields can diminish perceived feasibility of combining professional and maternal roles (Hochschild, 1989; Stone, 2007). However, qualitative data reveal that across all disciplines, traditional gender norms continue to exert a strong influence on reproductive choices. Notably, while career ambition shaped attitudes toward motherhood, the influence of academic discipline was not statistically significant. This suggests that broader structural and cultural forces, such as gendered labour market dynamics, economic insecurity, and entrenched family expectations, may be more influential than disciplinary affiliation in shaping reproductive intentions. McDonald (2000) similarly argues that gender equality in both public and private spheres is essential for sustaining fertility in advanced stages of demographic transition.

A noteworthy finding is the high level of uncertainty among students regarding whether to prioritise career or family. This ambivalence reflects a transitional cultural moment in Sri Lanka, where modern aspirations for self-fulfilment and economic independence coexist with enduring expectations of early marriage and motherhood (Gunathilake, 2023; Kodagoda & Duncan, 2010). Such indecision may contribute to deferred fertility, helping explain the country’s ongoing below-replacement fertility rate (World Bank, 2022).

Demographically, the attitudinal shifts observed among educated young women could have significant implications for Sri Lanka’s fertility trajectory. The sequencing of education, occupational security, and independence before childbearing mirrors patterns seen in countries that have reached advanced stages of demographic transition (Dyson, 2010). If these attitudes persist without supportive policy interventions, such as workplace flexibility, affordable childcare, and more equitable domestic arrangements, Sri Lanka may face continued fertility decline, with socioeconomic consequences including population aging, workforce contraction, and rising dependency ratios.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the limited literature on fertility intentions among university students in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to the intersections of education, career, and gender in shaping conceptualisations of motherhood. The findings underscore the need for policy

responses that align women's reproductive ambitions with their professional and personal aspirations, fostering a more integrated and sustainable demographic future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals disciplinary differences in how young Sri Lankan female undergraduates perceive motherhood in relation to career aspirations. These perceptions evolve over time, with final-year students expressing greater scepticism about balancing professional and maternal roles, shaped by academic exposure, peer networks, and workplace experiences.

Across disciplines, a consistent tendency to delay motherhood emerges, driven by anticipated role conflict and the prioritisation of financial stability. From a sociological perspective, reproductive decision-making is embedded within broader social structures. The data suggest that rising financial insecurity contributes to deferred family formation, reflecting a structural-blame narrative in which motherhood is viewed as both economically and socially demanding.

To address Sri Lanka's declining fertility rate, policy reform is essential. Participant discourse highlights the need for employment policies that empower women across disciplines, including flexible work arrangements, expanded paternity leave, and support for work-family balance. Financial mechanisms, such as scholarships, mentorship programs, and career development initiatives, are also critical.

Universities should strengthen gender focal points by maintaining updated databases on married graduates' career trajectories, informing curriculum and scholarship design. Improved access to affordable childcare and targeted subsidies for working parents would further support reproductive decision-making.

Finally, shifting sociocultural norms through community dialogue and the visibility of successful role models can foster more supportive attitudes toward women's reproductive choices. Enhancing maternal healthcare and expanding mental health support are equally vital. Implementing these recommendations will enable young women to pursue educational and career goals while making informed decisions about motherhood, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable demographic future for Sri Lanka.

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Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

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