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Intellectual Discourse

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Intellectual Discourse
Vol. 33, No. 2, 2025

Contents

<i>Note from the Editor</i>	323
 <i>Research Articles</i>	
The Existentialist Conception of Man: A Comparative Analysis between Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre <i>Zubaida Nusrat</i> <i>Adibah Binti Abdul Rahim</i>	331
Equal Before Allah, Unequal Before the Prophet? Ongoing Discourse on <i>Matn</i> Criticism and Its Influence on Muslim Feminist Thought <i>Nuzulul Qadar Abdullah</i>	355
Critical Thinking as a Mechanism for Situation Handling and Problem Solving: Examples from Ḥadīth Literature <i>Bachar Bakour</i> <i>Homam Altabaa</i>	385
Shifting Geopolitics: The Gaza War and the Contours of a Nascent Middle East Security Community <i>Nath Aldalala'a</i> <i>Syaza Shukri</i>	411
Power of Knowledge vs. Self-Knowledge Production: The Protagonist's Journey towards Embracing Islam in Umm Zakiyyah's <i>If I Should Speak</i> <i>Nadira Brioua</i> <i>Rahmah Binti Ahmad H. Osman</i>	437
A Muslim Female Bildungsroman: Quest for Identity and Sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's <i>Minaret</i> (2005) <i>Raihan Rosman</i>	457

Freedom as Connection to God: An Analysis of Two Novels by Muslim Women's Writers in the Western Diaspora <i>Amrah Abdul Majid</i>	475
'The Politics of Fear': How It Affects Youth Political Participation in Malaysia? <i>Norhafiza Mohd Hed</i>	497
Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis <i>Norhaslinda bt Jamaudin</i>	527
Türkiye's Climate Change Policy: An Evaluation of Its Transition to Low Carbon Policies <i>Burcin Demirbilek</i>	555
The Role of <i>Ulama</i> in Shaping Attitude, Subjective Norms, Digitalisation and Trust Towards Cash <i>Waqf</i> Behaviour <i>Gustina</i> <i>Syukri Lukman</i> <i>Muhammad Rizki Prima Sakti</i> <i>Mohamad Fany Alfarisi</i>	579
The Role of Local Wisdom in Shaping Internationalisation Strategies of Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia <i>Moh. Sugeng Sholehuddin</i> <i>Isriani Hardini</i> <i>Muhammad Jaeni</i> <i>Eros Meilina Sofa</i> <i>Thi Thu Huong Ho</i>	607
Perceptions of Three U.S. Presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden) – A Malaysian Perspective <i>Syed Arabi Idid</i> <i>Rizwanah Souket Ali</i>	635

International Students' Direct and Parasocial Contact,
and Attitude Towards Malaysian Host Nationals:
The Mediating Roles of Cultural Identification
and Islamic Identity

Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen
Aini Maznina A. Manaf
Nerawi Sedu

659

Artificial Intelligence in Sinar Harian: Embracing
Readiness or Addressing Anxiety?

Hafezdzullah bin Mohd Hassan
Rizalawati binti Ismail
Awan binti Ismail

685

Healthcare Workers' Challenges in Managing Disease
Outbreaks: A Systematic Review from an Islamic Perspective

Zeti Azreen Ahmad
Aini Maznina A. Manaf
Mazni Buyong
Sofiah Samsudin
Fuad Sawari
Hanani Ahmad Yusof

709

Faith-Based Approaches to Vaccine Misconception:
A Systematic Literature Review of Religious Messaging

Wan Norshira Wan Mohd Ghazali
Ahmad Muhammad Husni
Shafizan Mohamed
Mohd Helmi Yusoh
Kamaruzzaman Abdul Manan
Nur Shakira Mohd Nasir

731

Book Reviews

Jerome Drevon (2024). *From Jihad to Politics:
How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics.*
Oxford University Press. pp. 261.

ISBN 9780197765159.

Reviewer: *Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky*

759

Zouhir Gabsi (2024). *Muslim Perspectives on Islamophobia: From Misconceptions to Reason*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Reviewer: *Arief Arman*

762

Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ، اِ، اُ	a		آ، عَ، يَ	an
وُ	u		وْ	un
يَ	i		يِ	in
آ، اَ، اِ، عَ، يَ	ā		وْ	aw
وُ	ū		يِ	ay
يِ	ī		وْ	uww, ū (in final position)
			يِ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis

Norhaslinda bt Jamaudin*

Abstract: Child poverty is a significant topic in public policy discussions. Children who are poor face numerous disadvantages. The deprivations they face are multifaceted and often closely linked to low-income households. Children are dependent on their parents, and when parents are unable to meet their children's basic needs, it can severely hinder the children's development and overall well-being. Although low income is commonly viewed as the primary cause of child poverty, it may not be the sole factor. Child poverty can be attributed to several factors beyond parental income. Various economic and family demographic variables are associated with the overall well-being of children. This preliminary study aims to investigate the determinants of child poverty in Malaysia from the perspective of the general public. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979), public perceptions are measured quantitatively based on four key factors that exist within a multi-layered environment: state policy commitment, health, family structures, and the labour market. The findings indicate that adverse parental characteristics increase the likelihood of child poverty. Factors such as the parental education level (47.5%), household size (61.5%), and family structure – specifically *single parent* households (64.5%) – are all significant contributors to child poverty. This study enhances the understanding of child poverty and offers new insights for policymakers, urging them to adopt a child-centred approach within the existing poverty framework to better support disadvantaged children.

Keywords: Child poverty, forms of deprivation, poor parental characteristics, and public perception.

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Abstrak: Kemiskinan kanak-kanak merupakan topik penting dalam perbincangan dasar awam. Kanak-kanak yang miskin menghadapi pelbagai kekurangan. Kekurangan yang mereka alami adalah dalam pelbagai aspek, dan masalah ini sering dikaitkan dengan isi rumah berpendapatan rendah. Kanak-kanak bergantung kepada ibu bapa mereka, dan ketidakupayaan ibu bapa untuk memenuhi keperluan tersebut akan menghalang perkembangan dan kesejahteraan kanak-kanak secara serius. Walaupun pendapatan rendah biasanya dilihat sebagai punca utama, ia mungkin bukan faktor utama yang menyumbang kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak. Kemiskinan kanak-kanak boleh disebabkan oleh beberapa faktor lain seperti ekonomi dan demografi keluarga. Tujuan penyelidikan awal ini adalah untuk mengkaji faktor yang menyumbang kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak di Malaysia dari perspektif orang awam. Berpandukan teori sistem ekologi Brofenbrenner (1979), persepsi awam diukur secara kuantitatif menggunakan empat faktor utama yang wujud dalam pelbagai lapisan persekitaran iaitu komitmen dasar negara, kesihatan, struktur keluarga, dan pasaran buruh. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa faktor kemiskinan keluarga menyumbang kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak. Faktor-faktor seperti tahap pendidikan ibu bapa (47.5%), saiz isi rumah (61.5%), dan struktur keluarga - ibu atau bapa tunggal (64.5%) dilihat sebagai penyumbang utama kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak. Kajian ini membantu dalam membina pemahaman yang lebih baik tentang kemiskinan kanak-kanak dan menawarkan pandangan baharu kepada pembuat dasar dalam rangka kerja sedia ada, terutamanya dalam menangani isu kemiskinan kanak-kanak.

Kata kunci: Kemiskinan kanak-kanak, bentuk kekurangan, ciri keibubapaan yang lemah, persepsi awam

Introduction

Child poverty is defined as the lack of fundamental necessities essential for children's well-being. Due to economic insecurity, affected children often face deprivation, placing them at an elevated risk of multidimensional poverty. In this context, children in poor households are more likely to experience deprivation on almost all non-income poverty indicators relating to education, health, housing, and environmental conditions (Redmond, Praino & Siddiquee, 2016). They face numerous barriers, ranging from limited educational attainment to overall development. In many cases, children are unable to complete their years of schooling, contributing to rising school dropout rates. This precarious situation is exacerbated by poor living conditions. Health becomes a major concern, as inadequate housing conditions -

including overcrowded homes, limited living space, restricted access to clean water, and malnutrition – contribute significantly to poor health outcomes. Such deficiencies in living standards negatively affect children's overall well-being.

Malaysia is among the top five countries with a higher percentage of children vulnerable to poverty – with one out of three children affected (Farhana and Mohd Husni, 2018). Increased attention has been given to this issue following a 2018 UNICEF study on urban child poverty. The report, titled 'Children Without,' highlights the poor living conditions of children in low-income flats in Kuala Lumpur, where they are found to be both socially and materially disadvantaged (UNICEF, 2018). The study revealed that nearly 11% of children in Malaysia live in urban poverty, with 15% of children under five years of age being underweight. Approximately 22% of children are stunted, and only 50% of five- to six-year-olds are enrolled in preschool (UNICEF, 2018). Children born into impoverished households suffer considerably; some are deprived of schooling and lack hope for the future. They do not enjoy the privilege of access to quality education and a better living environment. Limited access to home literacy resources and frequent school abandonment – often caused by parents' inability to afford school related expenses – are key contributors to learning poverty and illiteracy. These impoverished conditions not only restrict educational opportunities, but also harm children's overall health and development. The report further indicates that underprivileged children are more likely to be stunted and underweight. A lack of access to adequate and nutritious food remains the primary cause of many health-related issues among these children.

Unlike adults, children are particularly vulnerable, as they lack the resources and autonomy to overcome poverty without external support. Numerous challenges place them at a disadvantage. According to Reynaert et al. (2023), child poverty constitutes a violation of children's rights, as it hinders their development, inhibits growth, and denies them access to basic life opportunities. In severe cases, poor children may face violence, abuse, or abandonment, thereby jeopardising their growth, development, and survival. As a result, early childhood poverty has a direct impact on a child's physical and socio-emotional development (Mishra et al., 2023). This is an alarming situation, as deprivation beginning in childhood can lead to a multitude of problems, including

underachievement, illiteracy, and juvenile delinquency (UNICEF, 2018).

In Malaysia, the development of child rights-oriented public policies is primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD). In policy-making, the concept of children's rights appears to be fully embraced as part of the Ministry's policy commitment in providing children with a standard of living necessary for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. As recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children's rights encompass four major dimensions: survival, development, protection, and participation. These dimensions represent three aspects of child well-being: relative, subjective, and material. The interdependence of these child-related issues has driven the MWFCD to prioritise concerns related to child protection and care, particularly child abuse and neglect. However, only one dimension – relative well-being – appears to be consistently addressed, while material and subjective well-being, including issues related to child poverty, receive comparatively less attention. Although child poverty has not featured prominently in Malaysian public policy discourse, improving children's well-being has remained a consistent priority for the government. This is demonstrated by the implementation of various national action plans aimed specifically at enhancing children's education, health, and social welfare.

Despite significant progress toward enhancing children's well-being, persistent problems remain. The growing number of children in need of protection underscores the urgency for more decisive and robust policies to combat child poverty (Free Malaysia Today, 2024). Child poverty is a root cause of numerous other child-related issues. Therefore, it is imperative to assess child poverty separately from adult poverty, as children experience poverty differently from adults. In response, effective intervention strategies should be developed based on a thorough understanding of the underlying causes of child poverty. Child poverty is influenced by a range of factors that go beyond parental income, including economic and demographic variables that are closely linked to children's overall well-being.

This preliminary study, therefore, aims to explore the perceived drivers of child poverty in Malaysia by focusing on four key

contributing factors: state policy commitment, the labour market, family structure, and health. These factors represent the complex multi-layered environments that either support or hinder child development, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. To achieve this objective, the article is structured into six sections, beginning with the introduction. A literature review on child poverty and its consequences in both general and Malaysian contexts is presented in sections two and three, respectively. Section four briefly discusses the research methodology, while the results are presented in section five. The final section discusses the issue in relation to the four identified determinants of child poverty within the Malaysian context.

Literature Review

The impacts of poverty are more pronounced on children. A mountain of evidence shows that poverty can lead to cognitive, emotional, and physical harm in children (Madrack, 2020). Children's relative, subjective, and material well-being will suffer significantly, often leading to a vicious cycle of poverty. Policymakers have struggled to support children's well-being due to the inherent complexities of policymaking. They encounter a variety of obstacles when providing support for the 'needy' child, including a lack of resources, inadequate governance, and poor policy coordination (Karadzhov, 2023). Evidence indicates that many initiatives intended to promote children's well-being are often ineffective due to organisational setbacks. In this context, inadequate policy responses profoundly impact disadvantaged children by delaying their access to healthcare, education, and other essential services. According to Wight (2014), many families with incomes above the poverty line – let alone poor households – experience food insecurity. Families earning just above the poverty threshold remain economically vulnerable and in need of assistance from authorities. As a result, boosting social benefits is viewed as the most effective means of directly lifting children and families out of poverty. A targeted family benefits initiative – particularly through cash income support and tax benefits – would improve child outcomes and reduce child poverty. However, income-based initiatives must be supplemented with non-income-based interventions. Driven by children's needs and interests, the government is expected to broaden societal engagement when developing child-centric policies. Given this importance, the quality of a state's welfare policy is a key predictor in reducing child poverty.

States that have adopted more inclusive, generous, and supportive policies have demonstrated greater success in lowering child poverty (Rodgers, 2007).

To articulate a comprehensive strategy for reducing child poverty, policymakers must evaluate the wider context of socio-cultural, structural, internal, and external factors that influence children's long-term development (Zdunek, et al., 2019). The dynamic interactions of social ecological factors significantly affect the lives of children. The socio-ecological approach acknowledges the influence of a child's environment at the family, community, and societal levels. Children's positive and negative outcomes can be attributed to these factors, particularly the roles played by family and community. Family is considered a critical determinant of children's health and education, while community conditions significantly influence a child's vulnerability to adverse childhood experiences (Baumont, et.al., 2020). The complex layers of child's environment, encompassing both the microsystem and macrosystem, shape development outcomes. In this regard, poverty can be observed in each of these systems, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The presence of poverty across multiple layers of a child's environment – including the family and community – has a direct influence on the child's development. A study by Schewcik (2017) explains how such factors such as low socioeconomic status, poor community conditions, and weak state welfare support negatively impact children's personal resources, development, and overall well-being.

Poverty significantly increases the likelihood of children's rights being violated. Children who live in poverty often suffer the worst outcomes. Poor children are particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse, abandonment, and exploitation (Gunn and Duncan, 1997). Protections through governmental interventions are considered significant, as poverty puts them in a variety of disadvantageous situations. When the basic needs of children are not satisfied, the foundational conditions for their development and growth deteriorate (Watson, et al., 2009). According to reports, children living in poverty have limited access to healthcare, education, and social services, and are more likely to live in poor quality home environments. Under such circumstances, children's well-being suffers, making it difficult for them to grow, develop, and pursue life's opportunities (Chapman, et al., 2023). Children living in

poverty rarely have a chance to go to school and have limited access to essential services such as healthcare; they also face poor housing conditions. Without adequate care and protection, many children are forced to confront juvenile delinquency, child marriage, forced labour, and other disadvantages for generations (Tran, 2023; De Schutter et al., 2023). Indeed, living in poverty has a negative impact on children's development.

The research literature primarily identifies various factors that push children into these unfortunate situations. As noted above, the literature documents that factors such as demographics, health, viability of the state economy, and inclusiveness of state welfare programs are associated with an increase in child poverty. A substantial body of research indicates that the dominant factors contributing to the increase in child poverty over time are single parenthood (Rodgers, et. al, 2007, Kutsar, 2020), sick and unemployed parents (Bradshaw, 2002; Rodgers, 2007; Watson, 2009; Boston, 2014), low parental education and ethnic minority status (Rodgers, 2007; Roelen, 2012; Cheung et al., 2018), and inadequate policy responses (Rodgers, 2007; Jonathan, 2014; Madrick, 2020). These four factors provide crucial insights into child poverty. According to a study by Cheung et al. (2018) conducted in Hong Kong, ethnic minority groups are at greater risk of child poverty. This can be attributed to cultural differences, language barriers, and inadequate policy responses. Since the needs of the Chinese majority have driven policies for reducing poverty, the needs of ethnic minority children have not been adequately addressed. Research on child poverty reveals that children are more likely to live in poverty if their parents were low achievers and possessed the lowest human capital. Low income is linked to low parental education (Kutsar, 2020). Moreover, children are at higher risk of living in poverty if they come from households with unemployed parents, single-parent families, or large families with three or more children. Wider socio-economic factors have been identified as the primary contributors to child poverty. In New Zealand, 48% of impoverished children live in households with three or more members and in workless households (Boston, 2014). It is well established that child poverty rates vary considerably by race, ethnicity, and family structures.

Many scholars argue that reducing child poverty is possible through an inclusive and comprehensive welfare plan. This relationship is

supported by Rodgers (2007), who compared child poverty rates across states in America and highlighted the importance of state policy support in controlling child poverty. The inclusiveness of state welfare policy is the major predictor of reduced child poverty rates, while other economic and parental characteristics must also be considered. The multivariate analysis reveals that unemployment, children living with a single parent, and parents without a high school degree experience higher poverty rates (Rodgers, 2007). Appropriate policy strategies can lead to significant decreases in child poverty rates because early intervention improves child outcomes (Saunders, et.al, 2019). Parents need strong incentives, combined with considerable financial support, to enter the workforce and participate in the labour market. Notably, limiting child poverty heavily depends on achieving high parental employment levels. Employment is the most effective factor to break the cycle of poverty. In addition to monetary and economic measures, more comprehensive policy initiatives should be developed by analysing the issue of child poverty from a child-centred approach. The various basic needs of children can be better understood through multidimensional poverty measurement because they are multidimensionally impoverished. This can be used to identify child-specific requirements such as education, health, housing, water, and sanitation (Roelen, 2012). The ability of children to access food, housing, education, and health is the best way to measure child poverty (Abdu, 2018). Through this method, children identified as both financially and multidimensionally impoverished can receive better assistance. Severe deprivation in all dimensions can be estimated accurately. Recognising various forms of deprivation leads to the development of more secure and stable multidimensional approaches. This is critical, as the elements of child poverty differ from those of adults.

Addressing Child Poverty in Malaysia

Malaysia has recorded remarkable achievements in poverty alleviation. National poverty rate began to decline in the 1980s and continued its downward trend into the 2000s, following the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1970-1990) and other national policies. Fighting poverty has emerged as a major focus of the national development strategy and has been consistently highlighted under different leaderships, demonstrating the importance of reducing poverty and inequality in the country.

In recent years, poverty has increased due to unexpected events, such as economic crises and pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic is a testament to this, having significantly impacted poverty. Many people have lost jobs during the pandemic, plunging them into poverty. Prior to 2020, the unemployment rate in Malaysia was 3.3% (DOSM, 2019); however, it rose to 4.1% in 2022 (DOSM, 2022). A significant drop in household income pushed the T20, M40, and B40 into lower income groups (DOSM, 2021). These categories refer to household income classifications in Malaysia: T20 represents the top 20% of Malaysian household incomes, M40 represents the middle 40%, and B40 represents the bottom 40%. The COVID-19 pandemic forced thousands of B40 households below the poverty line, with nearly 12.5% of households earning less than RM 2,500. Following the pandemic, Malaysia's national poverty rate marginally increased from 5.6% in 2019 to 8.4% in 2020 (Ririn, 2021), before steadily declining to 6.2% in 2022 due to several governmental policy measures (Sufi Muhammad, 2023). Although the poverty rate is declining, hundreds of thousands of families continue to face economic challenges. Many of them are forced into a downward spiral of poverty. The increasing number of poor families results in an increasing number of poor children, further affecting their growth and development.

Child poverty is an emerging issue in Malaysia. The prevalence of child poverty is rising due to the pandemic. Children living in poverty face multiple forms of deprivation (Norhaslinda and Maziah, 2023). A study by Redmond et al. (2016) revealed that Malaysian children living in larger households, low-income families, and rural areas experience significantly higher levels of non-income deprivation. A substantial proportion of children are vulnerable to income disparities and deprivation. This disadvantaged group continues to live in dilapidated and deteriorating homes, lack access to healthcare and education, and have limited access to basic communication tools and clean water. Likewise, a 2018 UNICEF study exposed the deprivation experienced by children living in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur. Due to economic hardship, their constitutive rights have not been adequately protected, and their health conditions have been negatively affected. It was revealed that nearly 11% of children in Malaysia live in urban poverty, with 15% of children under five being underweight. About 22% of children are stunted, and only 50% of five- to six-year-olds are enrolled

in pre-school (UNICEF, 2018). Economic disparities and deprivation therefore impact children's well-being (Noralina and Siti Hajar, 2017). The fulfilment of children's needs – measured by the degree to which material, education, health, and social service necessities are met – is indispensable for child's growth and development.

Current poverty measures focus primarily on poor households, with little attention paid to the specific needs of children. Despite Malaysia's progress in poverty elimination, childhood poverty remains prevalent as many unfortunate families and children are left behind. Slow policy development and a lack of data on child poverty in Malaysia have resulted in persistent deprivation across many child rights domains. Existing policy initiatives focus mainly on monetary solutions, with insufficient attention paid to the essential aspects of child well-being such as nutritious food and healthcare (Norhaslinda, 2023). The nature of child poverty remains largely hidden within conventional poverty policies. Deficiencies in policy-making are compounded when databases fail to reflect children's real constraints. This policy challenge arises when no specific indicators have been established to guide policy actions related to children's well-being. This policy gap must be addressed through the formulation of comprehensive social protection specifically targeting poor children. These issues have led to the current study, which assesses the determinants of child poverty from a public perspective. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, the determinants of child poverty are examined through factors that exist in the microsystem (family, school, neighbourhood, parents' workplace) and macrosystem (the larger social systems and structures, including major societal institutions such as public agencies) of a child's environment (Zdunek, et.al., 2019). These complex layers of environment are argued to have a significant impact on child development. The interaction between these different environmental layers may either support or hinder a child's development.

Research Methodology

The perceived determinants of child poverty are examined quantitatively using a survey questionnaire. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), the study investigates the multiple factors that exist within the multi-layered environments of the microsystem and macrosystem. The complex environment layers were categorised into

four key factors: state policy commitment, health, family structure, and the labour market.

Survey questionnaires were administered among the public in Selangor, Malaysia. Respondents were asked to express their opinions on a variety of factors that influence child poverty in Malaysia. Their perceptions were assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) Not contribute at all, (2) Not contribute, (3) Slightly contribute, (4) Contribute, to (5) Most likely to contribute. The questionnaire included ten closed-ended questions representing the four identified factors – state policy commitment, health, family structures, and the labour market. Additionally, two questions were included to assess public perceptions of the impact of poverty on children and whether they believe children suffer differently from adults in poverty.

The survey was administered through an online platform. To facilitate data collection, a convenience sampling technique was used, and the survey link was distributed via social media. In total, 252 questionnaires were completed and returned. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS IBM 22, and descriptive statistical analyses were presented to investigate the perceived drivers of child poverty in Malaysia. For analysis, responses rated (4) Contribute and (5) Most likely to contribute were combined to capture respondents’ perceptions of the key determinants of child poverty. To strengthen the analysis, a data triangulation technique was applied, combining both quantitative data and secondary data analysis.

In terms of data quality, a reliability test was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the items used to measure each construct. Table 1 shows the results of the reliability analysis. As shown in the table, the constructs exceeded the minimal acceptable standards for internal consistency. Evidently, all items comprising the scales are internally consistent, with overall Cronbach’s Alpha values above .5

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Variables	Cronbach’s Alpha (α)	N of items
Determinants of Child Poverty	.777	10

Note: Reliability test indicates that the scale has reliability above $\alpha=.50$

Findings

Demographic data

Table 2 presents the demographic data for 252 respondents who participated in the study. The majority were female (71.8%) with males comprising 28.2%. In terms of education, a majority of the respondents had pre-degree qualifications (57.5%), 19.0% held a degree, 13.9% had no formal education, and another 9.5% of respondents pursued postgraduate studies. Regarding employment, 44.0% were students, followed by 16.3% working in the private sector, 17.9% in the public sector, 13.1% unemployed, 7.9% self-employed, and 0.8% retired. In terms of household dependents, 34.5% had four to seven dependents, 35.3% had either a dependent or none, 25.4% had two to three dependents, and 4.8% had eight or more dependents. Respondents fell into four household income categories: 28.2% of respondents earned less than RM 5,000 monthly and are classified as part of the B40 group, of which 34.5% earned less than RM 2,500. The M40 and T20 groups represented 26.2% and 11.1% respectively. Furthermore, 26.2% of respondents reported having unemployed dependents in the household, highlighting a significant decline in household income and the potential adverse effects on children’s well-being.

Table 2: Demographic Information for 252 Respondents

Variable	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	28.2
	Female	71.8
Education	No Formal Education	13.9
	Pre-Degree	57.5
	Degree	19
	Postgraduate Level	9.5
Employment Status	Student	44
	Private Sector	16.3
	Public Sector	17.9
	Self-Employed	7.9
	Unemployed	13.1
	Retirees	0.8

Variable	Category	Percentage
Household Dependents	4-7 dependents	34.5
	1 or none	35.3
	2-3 dependents	25.4
	>8 dependents	4.8
Household Income Categories	Less than RM 2500	34.5
	Less than RM 5000	28.2
	More than RM 5000	26.2
	More than RM 10000	11.1

Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty

A substantial majority (72.6%) agreed that the impacts of poverty has more severe consequences for children compared to adults, with 80.9% stating that children suffer differently. These perceptions underline the urgent need for child-centred policy interventions. Table 3 outlines the descriptive analysis assessing the determinants of child poverty. The determinants of child poverty are quantified using four factors derived from the complex multi-layered microsystem and macrosystem environments, namely: state policy commitment, family structure, health, and the labour market. Ten items were developed to assess the public perception of the factors influencing child poverty in Malaysia. The perceived determinants of child poverty are assessed on a five-point scale ranging from (1) Not contribute at all to (5) Most likely to contribute. As shown in Table 3, two items were developed to assess state policy commitment, two items for health factors, four items for family structures and parental characteristics, and two items for labour market factors. The discussion of the descriptive data presented in Table 3 is further supported by secondary data.

Table 3: Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Family: Children are more likely to live in poverty due to low levels of parental educational attainment	4.3%	11.9%	34.1%	26.1%	21.4%
Family: Children who are living in a large household (>3 children) would be deprived in life due to poverty	3.5%	10.7%	24.2%	37.7%	23.8%

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Family: Children who come from single parent households are more likely to experience poverty	2.0%	12.0%	21.5%	38.6%	25.9%
Family: Low-income household (< RM 2500) contributes to child poverty	3.5%	7.1%	17.0%	35.3%	36.9%
Labour Market: Parental employment is closely associated with child poverty	7.5%	10.0%	25.5%	32.7%	24.3%
Labour Market: Heightened risks of living in poverty due to low-paid parental jobs has contributed to child poverty.	3.5%	5.5%	14.6%	40.8%	35.3%
Health: The pandemic pushed thousands of children into poverty due to unemployed parents	3.1%	5.9%	3.1%	27.3%	60.3%
Health: Bereaved children who lost their parents due to the pandemic are more likely to experience child poverty	2.7%	6.7%	5.1%	27.3%	57.9%
State Policy: A lack of inclusiveness in state policies when dealing with child poverty has contributed to the increasing child poverty rate	2%	3.1%	15.1%	53.2%	26.6%
State Policy: Inadequate attention by policymakers has contributed to the increasing child poverty rate	2.4%	4.8%	11.9%	57.9%	23.0%

Descriptive analysis reveals public perception on the determinants of child poverty. As shown in Table 3, respondents generally agree that family structure and parental characteristics are the main causes pushing thousands of children to the brink of poverty. Similarly, the labour market also plays a contributing role in this context. 57% of respondents concur that parental employment is closely associated with child poverty, particularly for parents working in semi-skilled and low skilled sectors, earning low-paid jobs (76.1%). Regarding the health factor, the emergence of the pandemic has worsened the situation faced by poor children. In general, 87.6% believe that the pandemic intensified the situation due to parental unemployment, and 85.2% agree that many children were living in impoverished conditions after losing their parents to the pandemic. Since the impacts of poverty are most pronounced on children, the government is expected to alleviate the situation by providing support and assistance to affected groups,

particularly children living in poverty. However, the public believes that government policies are not inclusive enough in addressing child poverty in Malaysia (79.8%), and 80.9% agree that this issue has been largely unattended by the government, thereby contributing to a rise in child poverty in the country.

To further discuss the findings, the following discussion on descriptive analysis is substantiated with secondary data. Poor parental characteristics appear to provide significant insights into child poverty. By combining scales (4) Mostly contribute and (5) Most likely to contribute, the results show that factors such as parental education level (47.5%), larger household size (61.5%), and single-parent family structure (64.5%) are all likely contribute to child poverty. Comparatively, children from single-parent households face a higher risk. This suggests that children raised by single parents are perceived to be far more likely to live in poverty, as single parents confront greater economic insecurity than other family types (Paroline and Emma, 2022). As the sole provider, the single-parent is likely to face multiple limitations that restrict their ability to provide substantial financial support to their children. A study by UNICEF (2024) reveals that parents are becoming increasingly concerned about their children's future possibilities, particularly in terms of educational accessibility and quality, especially as the cost of providing education has risen significantly. These economic challenges are more pronounced for single parents, since a paid job does not necessarily imply that a household can meet all the needs of a child.

The descriptive analysis reveals that the incidence of child poverty is considerably influenced by family structure, including household size (61.5 %). This has been confirmed by research conducted by Redmond et al. (2017), which found that children living in larger households with seven or more people experience significantly higher non-income deprivation compared to children in households with six or fewer people. The number of children per household significantly affects the probability of being poor (Bardshaw, 2002; Fusco, 2020). In the case of Malaysia, the average household size shrank from 4.3 in 2010 to 3.8 in 2020. As reported, more developed states tend to have smaller household sizes, with Penang and Kuala Lumpur recording the lowest average of 3.5 persons per household (Adib, 2022). However, two of Malaysia's poorest states, Kelantan and Sabah, recorded the highest average household sizes of 4.9 and 4.7 persons respectively. Worsening

the situation, these two states also recorded the highest incidence of absolute poverty. The absolute poverty rate in Sabah is 19.2%, followed by Kelantan at 13.2% (MOE, 2024). The poorest families with more children and larger household sizes were especially worse off. One possible contributing factor to the decline in their standard of living is a lack of sufficient income. This has raised significant concern over the effects of poverty on children. Clearly, children are impacted by these circumstances, as they face limited access to education, healthcare services, and decent living standards.

Previous research has shown that families with a parent who did not complete high school tend to have greater rates of poverty (Rodger, 2007; Inoue, 2023). There is a strong correlation between parental participation in the labour force, education attainment, and children's living conditions (Smith, 2018). The current research findings indicate that 57% of respondents believe parental employment is closely related to child poverty, and 76.1% think children are at increased risk of poverty when their parents have low-paying jobs. There is a clear correlation between household income and education, where lower education attainment increases the risk of living in poverty. Supporting this argument, a study by the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI) reveals that household heads with a degree earn 3.6 times the income of those without a degree (KRI, 2018). In Malaysia, only a third of employed people hold a degree. Due to low education levels, many families face economic insecurity by working in semi-skilled and low-skilled occupations. As shown in Table 3, 47.5% of respondents perceived low education as a dominant factor contributing to child poverty. This situation is especially prevalent in Malaysia where the majority of the workforce is employed in both semi-skilled and low-skilled jobs (Faiqah, 2024), which are associated with higher risks of being financially insecure (Roelen, 2012). These factors deprive children in various ways, and such deprivation may hinder families' ability to enjoy even basic pleasures (Saunder, 2019).

It can be argued that the micro system is the most immediate environment influencing children's development. In this regard, the environment in which children live significantly impacts their development and socialisation. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system theory states that a child's development is influenced by complex layers of environment (Eriksson, et al., 2018). The interaction of

family, community, institutions, and other situational factors plays a critical role in shaping children's development. Within this context, situational health factors such as parental loss and the pandemic may have had compounding effects on children's lives. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected societal well-being in general, and children's well-being in particular. Projections estimate that nearly 400,000 Malaysian families were pushed into poverty due to the pandemic. Children, particularly bereaved children, faced severe challenges during the pandemic. As shown in Table 3, 87.6% of respondents agreed that bereaved children are the most affected group, as they are more likely to suffer following the sudden loss of one or both parents. As of 2021, 4,422 children had lost a parent, both parents, or guardian due to COVID-19 (Loheswar, 2021). The absence of parents results in children assuming greater household responsibilities, and in many cases, these challenges are exacerbated due to a lack of financial resources. The rise in child poverty and the growing number of unemployed households due to the pandemic are deeply concerning. As a result, there has been an increased number of households living below the poverty threshold due to loss of income. The current study also reveals that 87.6% of respondents agreed that the pandemic pushed thousands of children into poverty through parental unemployment. This affects hundreds of thousands of B40 households now at the risk of falling into poverty due to pandemic-related disruptions. The pandemic has impacted all income groups and created many "new poor" households in Malaysia (DOSM, 2021).

The government is facing immense challenges due to the multifaceted needs of impoverished children. The issue is further complicated by its inextricable links to other household and parental factors. Due to its complexities, current policies fail to address the diverse needs of disadvantaged children adequately. Children's needs are multidimensional and require a comprehensive strategic plan that accounts for all elements of their well-being. Unfortunately, child poverty appears to be insufficiently prioritised. In Malaysia, childhood poverty is typically addressed within the broader framework of adult poverty, despite the unequal distribution of resources within households. The well-being of children risks being overlooked when policy-making disregards factors such as household size, composition, and parental characteristics. Descriptive analysis in Table 3 shows

that 79.8% of respondents agreed that the lack of inclusiveness in state policies has contributed to rising child poverty rates. Even now, the role of child poverty in setting the policy agenda has been, for the most part, inadequate. Even though child poverty is acknowledged by the government, this recognition has yet to lead to meaningful policy interventions. A distinct lack of state policy commitments is regarded as a key factor in understanding the persistence of child poverty. In fact, 80.9% of respondents agreed that insufficient attention from policymakers has contributed to the increasing rates of child poverty. Early policy intervention is essential, as childhood poverty drives various other issues affecting children. Recognising the problem and raising awareness among policymakers are the first crucial steps toward making child poverty a policy priority.

Discussion

Poverty is a prime example of a policy dilemma. Most problems associated with poverty have multiple causes. It is linked to a variety of factors, including unemployment, migrant status, household income, low educational attainment, and the cost of living. There are countless factors that contribute to poverty, and just when we believe we have a firm grip on the problem, something new emerges. The multifaceted nature of poverty warrants multidimensional strategies, as no single approach or solution can adequately address the issue. Each factor is too broad and complex to address in isolation. As a result, understanding the causes does not necessarily lead to successful solutions, because the context and circumstances of poverty change frequently. Many analyses begin with income, but poverty is about both social and economic ties (Spicker, 2016). The ever-changing nature of poverty implies that no single, definitive solution can be developed to have the same long-term impact, as some actions may become obsolete over time.

When there are many different groups with different needs impacted by poverty, especially children, the difficulty of managing poverty becomes more apparent. Children born into poor families are more vulnerable to poverty. Early exposure to poverty increases the risk of being trapped in a cycle of generational poverty. In Malaysia, nearly 6.2% of households live in poverty (Demery, 2024). These figures show that thousands of children are deprived, and that such deprivation will most certainly result in violations of their fundamental rights. The

well-being of children is connected to many features, including access to education, social services, a safe and decent home environment, adequate healthcare, clean water and sanitation, opportunities to express themselves, psychological and emotional support, as well as overall safety. These elements cover the tangible and intangible factors that significantly impact their daily living conditions.

Compared to adults, children experience poverty differently. Children who live in impoverished conditions do not have access to education, learning devices, healthcare, nutritious food, and other essentials. When these basic needs are unmet, children suffer deprivation, and their overall well-being deteriorates. There are a variety of factors that contributed to this situation. The study categorised these factors into four: the state's welfare policy, the labour market, health, and family structure. According to the findings, the public perceives these four factors as primary contributors to child poverty. Unmet basic needs may arise from poor parental characteristics, but the root cause is often economic precarity. Children pay a heavy price due to their parents' financial difficulties. A parent's inability to provide adequate care and support has a direct adverse effect on the child's well-being and development. This inability is closely associated with the labour market or the type of employment held. Economic hardship occurs due to low-paid job or, in some cases, unemployed parents. The greater the financial hardship faced by parents, the more severe the suffering experienced by their children.

Deprivation among poor children comes in numerous forms. Factors such as lack of nutritious food and parents' inability to provide proper healthcare led to growth problems, underweight, stunting and malnutrition. This parental inability is often driven by increasing economic precarity stemming from income and employment issues. Data from Ministry of Health (MOH) revealed that, the prevalence of underweight, stunting, and wasting among children under five years of age increased between 2015 to 2019 (VNR, 2021). To tackle the problem of under-nutrition, the first National Nutrition Policy was introduced in 2003 with the goal of ensuring that everyone has adequate access to nutritious and quality food. The severity of the issue has necessitated the continuation of the national plan through the implementation of the third phase of the National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Malaysia III, 2016-2025, aimed to provide optimal nutritional well-being of mothers,

infants, and young children in Malaysia. Integrating nutrition objectives into the National Development plan is a crucial step in renewing commitments to improve children's well-being.

The current research also perceived that poor parental characteristics – including low educational attainment, larger household size, and single parenthood – mainly contribute to the poor academic achievement. Study has shown that children in poverty are more likely to experience learning difficulties (Naven et al., 2019). This has led to increased illiteracy among children, particularly at the primary school level. In the case of Malaysia, the high rate of 'learning poor' among school children is alarming, and this situation has been further exacerbated by poverty and the pandemic, since economic hardships limit access to education (Letchamanan, 2022). The health crisis increased unemployment and worsened the poor conditions faced by children. Research findings reveal that the majority of respondents perceived health-related factors – particularly those linked to the pandemic – as exacerbating the issue, especially for children who lost their parents. Without financial support and care, children were reported to be living on their own, and some were forced to work at an early age. School attendance was no longer feasible when daily survival became the primary concern. Under such circumstances, learning opportunities were hindered, and this learning poverty may perpetuate generational poverty. There have also been reports of a significant increase on the number of Malaysian children who are unable to read and understand simple texts by the age of ten (Hana Naz and Qistina, 2024). Increased illiteracy is an indication of learning poverty which in turn increases the likelihood of dropping out of school. According to a World Bank study conducted in 2023, learning poverty in Malaysia is a serious concern, with over 40 percent of children from low-income and marginalised groups affected (Nurfarhana, 2024).

Studies have also shown that childhood poverty is linked to many negative outcomes beyond poor academic achievement, including a higher likelihood of child marriage, juvenile delinquency, forced labour, and exploitation. Approximately 1,500 cases of child marriage were documented in Malaysia between 2007 to 2017 (UNICEF, 2021), and this concerning figure is compounded by a worrying upward trend in child exploitation, abuse cases, and juvenile delinquency. Reports indicate a significant 10.5% increase in the number of children involved in crime in 2020, which is a higher rate than in previous years. Specifically, first-

time offences increased by 4,916 cases. In terms of child labour, the 2018 Employment Survey estimated that 33,600 children were involved in child labour in Malaysia, with Sabah and Sarawak recording the highest proportions (UNICEF, 2024). Many child poverty studies (Gunn and Duncan, 1997; Bradshaw, 2002; Chapsman, et al, 2023), confirm that poverty is a strong predictor of child development outcomes and there are many negative outcomes associated with childhood poverty. Children are exposed to high-risk environments when they are financially deprived. Financial limitations often leave their needs unmet, making it nearly impossible to lift children out of poverty.

The risk of child poverty is much higher in households with three or more children (Bradshaw, 2002). The size of the household is significant because larger households experience greater levels of deprivation. Not only are low-income families affected, but even higher income families may face relative deprivation due to household size. Thus, it can be inferred that a certain income level does not necessarily guarantee that a household can meet all of a child's needs. The study's findings indicate that economic and demographic factors play a role in influencing this issue. While economics plays a major role, studies have also shown that income-based poverty correlates with poor parental characteristics (Cheung et al, 2018; Inoue, 2023). Children from large households, single-parent's families, bereaved children who have lost their parents, and those with parents struggling with alcohol or substance abuse are more likely to experience relative deprivation. Deprivation can be classified into two categories: material and social. According to Saunders (2019), material deprivation impacts objective well-being. In such cases, children may eat fewer than three meals per day, lack adequate nutrition, have parents unable to afford basic school necessities such as uniforms and school equipment, and live in overcrowded housing conditions. In contrast, social deprivation primarily affects emotional and mental well-being, or a child's overall subjective well-being. Socially deprived children may lack toys, home internet access, opportunities to go on holidays or school trips, and may be left alone at home because parents work long hours. Children who experience both forms of deprivation are said to be multidimensionally impoverished.

Multidimensional poverty implies that children are increasingly at risk of being deprived in non-monetary aspects of their well-being when they experience monetary poverty (Roelen, 2012). Addressing child

poverty is becoming more difficult due to its complexity. In Malaysia, the issue of child poverty remains hidden and under-prioritised. One of the main obstacles to protecting vulnerable and marginalised children has been the fragmented nature of policy initiatives aimed at improving the various dimensions of children's well-being. There are significant challenges to adopting a centralised and child-focused approach in tackling child poverty. The public believes that a lack of state policy commitments and inclusiveness in policy actions in dealing with child poverty are among the contributing factors. Currently, most initiatives aimed at promoting children's well-being are conducted independently by various government agencies. It is important to note that no specific action plan has been formulated explicitly under the name of 'child poverty.' The complexity of the issue has prompted the government to adopt a phased approach, which has been the main policy framework. However, current measures are far from adequate, with slow and piecemeal progress. Since poverty is the chief contributor to many child-related issues, a more inter-sectoral collaboration and a centralised policy framework are necessary. The lack of policymaker attention suggests broader lack of political will to advocate for more sophisticated, nuanced, and credible strategies to combat child poverty.

Conclusion

Poverty, particularly child poverty, is too harmful to ignore. Children, as the most vulnerable victims of poverty, have extremely limited ability to improve their situation on their own. To lift them out of poverty, policy support from the government is essential. Understanding this issue is thus the first step for policymakers to adopt proactive measures in addressing child poverty, as ignorance is the most significant impediment to successful policymaking. By investigating the drivers of child poverty, this study provides deeper insights into the realities of child poverty and various aspects of children's wellbeing that might be jeopardised by poor living situations. It is hoped that this knowledge will spur intense interest from the government to effectively address issues related to child poverty.

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Chapter in a Book

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Alias (2009)

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Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

Journal Article

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The Qur'ān

In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:

The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth

In-text:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible

In-text:

Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:

The new Oxford annotated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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In This Issue

Note from the Editor

Research Articles

Zubaida Nusrat & Adibah Binti Abdul Rahim

The Existentialist Conception of Man: A Comparative Analysis between
Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre

Nuzulul Qadar Abdullah

Equal Before Allah, Unequal Before the Prophet?
Ongoing Discourse on *Matn* Criticism and Its Influence on Muslim Feminist Thought

Bachar Bakour & Homam Altabaa

Critical Thinking as a Mechanism for Situation Handling and Problem Solving:
Examples from Ḥadīth Literature

Nath Aldalala'a & Syaza Shukri

Shifting Geopolitics: The Gaza War and the Contours of a Nascent Middle East Security Community

Nadira Brioua & Rahmah Binti Ahmad H. Osman

Power of Knowledge vs. Self-Knowledge Production:
The Protagonist's Journey towards Embracing Islam in Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*

Raihan Rosman

A Muslim Female Bildungsroman:
Quest for Identity and Sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005)

Amrah Abdul Majid

Freedom as Connection to God: An Analysis of Two Novels
by Muslim Women's Writers in the Western Diaspora

Norhafiza Mohd Hed

'The Politics of Fear': How It Affects Youth Political Participation in Malaysia?

Norhaslinda bt Jamaudin

Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis

Burcin Demırbilek

Türkiye's Climate Change Policy: An Evaluation of Its Transition to Low Carbon Policies

Gustina, Syukri Lukman, Muhammad Rizki Prima Sakti & Mohamad Fany Alfarisi

The Role of *Ulama* in Shaping Attitude, Subjective Norms, Digitalisation and
Trust Towards Cash *Waqf* Behaviour

Moh. Sugeng Sholehuddin, Isriani Hardini, Muhammad Jaeni, Eros Meilina Sofa & Thi Thu Huong Ho

The Role of Local Wisdom in Shaping Internationalisation Strategies of
Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia

Syed Arabi Iddid & Rizwanah Souket Ali

Perceptions of Three U.S. Presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden) – A Malaysian Perspective

Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, Aini Maznina A. Manaf & Nerawi Sedu

International Students' Direct and Parasocial Contact, and Attitude Towards Malaysian
Host Nationals: The Mediating Roles of Cultural Identification and Islamic Identity

Hafezdzullah bin Mohd Hassan, Rizalawati binti Ismail & Awan binti Ismail

Artificial Intelligence in Sinar Harian: Embracing Readiness or Addressing Anxiety?

**Zeti Azreen Ahmad, Aini Maznina A. Manaf, Mazni Buyong, Sofiah Samsudin, Fuad Sawari
& Hanani Ahmad Yusof**

Healthcare Workers' Challenges in Managing Disease Outbreaks:
A Systematic Review from an Islamic Perspective

**Wan Norshira Wan Mohd Ghazali, Ahmad Muhammad Husni, Shafizan Mohamed, Mohd Helmi Yusoh,
Kamaruzzaman Abdul Manan & Nur Shakira Mohd Nasir**

Faith-Based Approaches to Vaccine Misconception: A Systematic Literature Review of Religious
Messaging

Book Reviews

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