

Tracing Generational Choices across Matrilineal Lineages: A Qualitative Exploration of the Intersections among Choice, Trauma Awareness, and Transformation

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive phenomenological study explored how women across five multigenerational matrilineal family lineages interpreted the influence of generational choices on patterns of behavior, trauma awareness, and intergenerational transformation. Existing literature has examined intergenerational trauma, resilience, and family legacy; however, limited research has explored how women consciously interpret and reshape inherited patterns through intentional decision-making. A demographic survey was initially completed by 180 respondents; after three respondents requested exclusion of their data, the final survey screening cohort consisted of 177 participants, of whom 16 participated in multigenerational, semi-structured interviews. The 16 interview participants represented five matrilineal family groups; four groups included three generations, and one group included four generations. Thematic analysis identified six recurring themes: intergenerational female strength and leadership; faith as a source of identity and resilience; educational aspiration and perseverance; relational hardship and interpersonal struggle; caregiving and familial connection; and breaking generational patterns through intentional change. Findings suggested that participants perceived women within their family lineages as playing a significant role in preserving, reinterpreting, and transforming family legacies through resilience, faith, relational awareness, and intentional choices.

Keywords

Generational Choices, Matrilineal Lineage, Patterns of Behavior, Generational Trauma Awareness, Generational Transformation

1. Introduction

Through successive generations, societal structures have reshaped the domestic, professional, and political roles of women (USAFacts, 2023). USAFacts (2023) reported that women now make up 25% of Congress and that their labor force participation grew from 34% in 1950 to 60% in 2000, with projected increases continuing through 2050. These data points illustrated not only the expansion of women's roles but also the pace of their evolution over decades. As women's responsibilities in modern society have transformed, so too have family dynamics and the ways in which women influence the development of generational behavioral patterns, trauma awareness, and family legacy (Koçak et al., 2021; Kriger, 2024).

While the term "family legacy" carries varied definitions across literature, its core elements include the transmission of family histories, knowledge, and traditions, as well as the formation of both individual and collective identities across generations (Papp, 2023). Research on intergenerational transmission suggests that family processes may contribute to similarities and differences in behavioral, relational, and developmental outcomes across generations (Branje et al., 2020; Howland & Glynn, 2024). Intergenerational transmission theory provided a framework for understanding these patterns by explaining how behaviors, both adaptive and maladaptive, are passed from parents to children (Branje et al., 2020; Guillemot, 2018). Researchers such as Howland and Glynn (2024) emphasized the importance of continued study in this area, noting that intergenerational transmission occurs across several interconnected biological, behavioral, and relational levels. This theoretical perspective provides a foundation for examining how generational choices have contributed to and will continue to contribute to transformative legacies. For purposes of this study, generational choices are defined as decisions or actions made by individuals that participants perceive as influencing the experiences, behaviors, values, relationships, or opportunities of subsequent generations (Hou et al., 2023). This construct distinguishes an individual's or family member's decision or action from inherited conditions, values, circumstances, or recurring behavioral patterns that may shape, but do not themselves constitute, a choice.

A body of research highlighted the influence of choice on human functioning. Critical thinking plays a fundamental role in decision-making across personal, educational, and professional endeavors (Young, 2023). Studies further demonstrated that choice, whether present or limited, shapes motivation, task performance, and overall life satisfaction (Misuraca et al., 2024). While scholars explored women's roles, family legacies, the intergenerational effects of trauma, and the psychology of choice, few studies examined how women within matrilineal lineages intentionally transform inherited behavioral patterns through conscious, deliberate decision-making. This gap underscores the importance of examining generational choice as a means to break cycles, shape identity, and redefine a family's legacy.

Purpose of the Study

Generational patterns often reveal the interconnectedness among behavioral

choices, lived experiences, and legacies. Within many families, particularly along the matrilineal line, women's decisions shaped not only the course of their own lives but also the behavioral, emotional, and spiritual trajectories of future generations. While literature addressed intergenerational trauma and resilience (Figley & Burnette, 2017), less was known about how women themselves have made and make sense of the choices that have shaped their family narratives, choices that may either perpetuate cycles of instability, stagnation, and pain or catalyze transformation and healing as generations evolve.

This study explored how women across five multigenerational matrilineal family lineages interpret and gave meaning to generational choices that have influenced patterns of behavior, trauma awareness, and transformation across three and four generations. By examining lived experiences through a qualitative lens, this research highlighted how awareness, reflection, and reinterpretation of inherited choices can foster understanding, strengthen intentional decision-making, and promote personal and relational growth. In doing so, this study contributed to the growing body of literature on generational choices, trauma awareness, and transformation, while offering a framework for understanding how foremothers' choices influence those of their daughters and subsequent generations, serving as a bridge between past decisions and more purposeful, life-affirming futures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Generational Choices

Guillemot (2018) drew upon Erikson's developmental framework in examining intergenerational transmission. Erikson's (1959) psychosocial theory conceptualized human development as occurring across the life span through successive developmental stages shaped by interactions between individual development and social experience. In an intergenerational framework, this developmental perspective provides a foundation for considering how experiences, relationships, and social contexts within families may influence development across generations (Branje et al., 2020; Guillemot, 2018; Howland & Glynn, 2024). In this theoretical framework, the multigenerational transmission process suggested that levels of differentiation directly influence life trajectories, including health outcomes, marital stability, reproduction, educational attainment, and occupational success (Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2021). Research continues to confirm that variations in differentiation across generations result in noticeable differences in the lived experiences of multigenerational family members.

While literature extensively explores intergenerational patterns, little research explicitly examines the patterns of choice, or what might be termed "generational choices," that are transmitted across successive generations (Simiyu, 2025). Ellis (2019) emphasized that many familial generational patterns emerged from conscious generational choices that shape both the quality and quantity of life. Mac (2019) similarly noted that choices have consequences, some of which occur within a single generation and others that are replicated across generations when

successive family members make similar decisions. In this study, this distinction is important because a recurring intergenerational condition or behavioral pattern was not presumed to represent a generational choice; rather, generational choice involved an identifiable decision, action, or deliberate response situated in a broader intergenerational context.

Research further suggested that although family roles, structures, and perspectives influence life-satisfaction decisions, such as marital choices, family size considerations, health behaviors, educational pursuits, and occupational paths, each generation still exercises agency in determining how these patterns continue or shift (Constant & Zimmermann, 2003; Koçak et al., 2021; Lipowicz et al., 2023). Young (2023) notes that decision-making is grounded in critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills, which enable individuals to identify issues, consider alternative perspectives, and potentially choose outcomes that are more viable than those modeled by previous generations. This body of literature underscored that while patterns persist across generations, individual and collective choices remain pivotal, reinforcing the centrality of “generational choices” in shaping intergenerational trajectories.

Within family systems, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers may exert meaningful intergenerational influence through communication, caregiving, cultural beliefs, family practices, and decision-making. Research examining grandmother-mother-granddaughter relationships have demonstrated that the values, beliefs, and communication practices of preceding maternal generations can influence younger women’s decisions. For example, Harris (2013) found that mothers’ and grandmothers’ cultural beliefs and values influenced adolescents’ reproductive decision-making. Similarly, Ladwein et al. (2009) demonstrated that adult daughters received and appropriated practices transmitted by their mothers, illustrating how familial practices may be incorporated into subsequent generations’ lives. Davies and Fitchett (2015) further examined matrilineal family narratives, identifying continuity and change in everyday practices involving caregiving, household responsibilities, and family life.

Intergenerational influence, however, is not necessarily unidirectional or limited to the reproduction of inherited practices. Washington et al. (2009) found that adult daughters contributed to their mothers’ health-related decision-making through communication, information sharing, and practical support. Together, these studies suggest that women within matrilineal family systems may influence one another’s decisions while also interpreting and responding to practices and expectations associated with preceding generations. This distinction is central to the present study’s conceptualization of generational choices. Rather than treating inherited values, circumstances, or recurring family patterns as choices themselves, the study examined how women identified and interpreted decisions and actions through which they perceived themselves or other family members as preserving, modifying, or departing from inherited patterns. By examining women across three and four generations within five matrilineal family groups, this study extends the literature through a qualitative exploration of how participants understand generational choices across multiple dimensions of family life.

2.2. Generational Trauma Awareness

Research has indicated that a woman's gendered social position, shaped by societal expectations and power dynamics, increases her vulnerability to certain forms of trauma (Harden et al., 2025). Additionally, research examined how traumatic experiences within one generation can influence the psychological, relational, and behavioral well-being of subsequent generations, a concept known as intergenerational trauma (Starrs & Békés, 2025). Starrs and Békés (2025) described intergenerational trauma as a transmission process in which the consequences of trauma are carried forward through relational patterns, emotional responses, and internalized coping strategies. Mechanisms identified in the literature included anger, anxiety, discrimination, oppression, and emotion-depleted parenting practices, all of which contributed to the continuation of trauma-related behaviors across generations. Trauma-affected parenting patterns often manifested in offspring through guilt, shame, boundary confusion, and role reversal, in which children assumed emotional or functional responsibilities for their parents. Research further indicated that parental trauma, particularly when unrecognized or unaddressed, can negatively affect a child's mental health and developmental outcomes (Anakwenze & Rasmussen, 2021). Together, these conclusions highlighted how trauma in the matrilineal line can shape the emotional climate and decision-making patterns of mothers, daughters, and granddaughters, underscoring the need for deeper awareness of how trauma is perceived and interpreted across generations (Banyard et al., 2008). While awareness of intergenerational trauma is essential, researchers emphasized the importance of identifying opportunities to build bridges between matrilineal trauma and resilience, thereby creating pathways to disrupt inherited cycles and allow for new patterns to emerge (Figley & Burnette, 2017; Sanders, 2025).

An article published by Figley and Burnette (2017) examined intergenerational trauma in connection with systemic trauma and family resilience, particularly among ethnic minority families disproportionately affected by trauma. Figley and Burnette (2017) conceptualized resilience as the capacity to adapt to challenging life circumstances and experiences. Their findings affirmed that traumatic experiences can be transmitted across generations; however, they also demonstrated that through systemic resilience interventions, families could develop pathways toward growth and healing. Their methodological conclusions suggested that, depending on existing family resources and coping mechanisms, trauma may overwhelm families or, could conversely, catalyze adaptation and transformation across generations. This interplay of trauma awareness, resilience, and adaptation laid a foundation for understanding how generational transformation becomes possible within matrilineal lines.

2.3. Generational Transformation

Generational transformation refers to the shifts that occur when patterns of choice, whether inherited, repeated, or intentionally changed, are recognized, re-

interpreted, and consciously redirected across successive generations (SThree, 2025). As women's gender roles evolve and their lived and shared experiences, including trauma, become more openly acknowledged and understood, trauma awareness functions as a critical mechanism for informed and intentional decision-making. When women gain insight into how past choices and trauma have shaped their matrilineal line, they are better positioned to engage in strength-based practices that foster healing, adaptation, positive shared experiences, and the intentional reshaping of generational trajectories (Moreno & Urraco, 2018). Existing research confirmed that individual choices have a considerable influence on others, and that women often possess the willful relational and emotional capacity to initiate transformative change within families (Washington et al., 2009). These shifts illuminate how women can consciously break from inherited patterns and foster generational outcomes rooted in resilience, growth, and purposeful transformation, phenomena that are inherently qualitative and shaped by shared and lived experiences (Moreno & Urraco, 2018).

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of women across five multigenerational matrilineal family lineages and the meanings they ascribed to generational choices. A descriptive phenomenological approach was selected because the study sought primarily to describe participants shared lived experiences and identify common meanings across their accounts while remaining grounded in participants' descriptions of those experiences (Jackson et al., 2018). Participants were affiliated with a private, co-educational faith-based university in the southeastern United States. Eligible participants were female and represented at least three living maternal generations. Data collection began with a 13-question demographic survey to aid in identifying and categorizing participants, followed by in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the qualitative data source. Sixteen participants representing five matrilineal family groups completed the interview phase; four groups included three generations, and one group included four generations. This approach facilitated the collection of descriptive narratives that revealed how generational choices shaped behavior, trauma awareness, and transformation across multigenerational matrilineal family lineages. The study was guided by the following research question:

3.2. Research Question

How do women across multigenerational matrilineal family lineages understand and interpret the ways generational choices have influenced patterns of behavior, trauma awareness, and transformation across generations?

To further explore these experiences, the following sub-questions guided the study:

Generational Choices

RQ1: How do women within multigenerational matrilineal family lineages describe the values, traits, and recurring patterns of choice that emerge across generations?

RQ2: What social, cultural, and spiritual influences do women identify as shaping repeated generational choices, and how do they perceive these choices as influencing their own life decisions?

Generational Trauma Awareness

RQ3: How do women describe experiences of hardship or trauma that have affected multiple generations within their matrilineal family line, including how these experiences have been acknowledged or left unspoken?

RQ4: How do women understand the emotional, relational, and identity-related impact of inherited trauma on themselves and across generations?

Generational Transformation

RQ5: How do women interpret the impact of past generational choices on their present lives, including responses marked by resilience, faith, or personal growth?

RQ6: How do women describe the legacy they hope to leave for future generations of women in their family, including the values, faith, or strengths they wish to pass forward?

3.3. Instrument Development and Validation

The in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol, comprising 13 demographic survey questions and six open-ended interview questions, underwent expert review to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the principles of descriptive phenomenological inquiry. The protocol was reviewed by a multidisciplinary panel of innovative research directors, a chair of an academic research committee, and the chair of a university's Health and Human Sciences Department. All reviewers had backgrounds in qualitative research and provided detailed feedback based on their areas of expertise. Their recommendations informed revisions to the wording, sequencing, and depth of the interview items prior to survey distribution and data collection. This rigorous review process strengthened the instrument's credibility and ensured that the protocol would effectively elicit the lived experiences central to the study's purpose.

3.4. Participants and Sampling

The study involved two distinct participant groups: a survey screening cohort and an interview analytic sample. A total of 180 respondents initially completed the demographic survey. Three respondents subsequently requested that their data not be included in the study; their records were removed from the dataset and excluded from analysis, resulting in a final survey screening cohort of 177 respondents (see **Table 1**). Of these respondents, 129 reported having at least three living maternal generations. Participation in the interview phase required the willingness and availability of all required generations within the matrilineal family group. Because one or more family members within many of the potential family

groups declined or were unavailable to participate, 25 respondents remained eligible for interview consideration. Of these, 16 ultimately scheduled and completed the multigenerational interviews.

The interview analytic sample consisted of 16 women representing five multigenerational matrilineal family groups. Four family groups included three participating generations, and one family group included four participating generations (see **Table 2**). Participants were purposively selected to allow multiple living generations within the same maternal family line to reflect on generational choices, lived experiences, and family narratives. Survey responses were used for eligibility screening, purposive selection, and demographic description and were not included in the thematic analysis. The interview transcripts from the 16 participants constituted the analytic dataset for the descriptive phenomenological analysis. Demographic characteristics of the survey screening cohort are presented in **Table 1**, while the family-group and generational composition of the interview analytic sample is presented in **Table 2**. Given the small size of the interview sample and the familial relationships among participants, individual demographic characteristics are not reported by family group to reduce the risk of participant identification and preserve confidentiality.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the final survey screening cohort (N = 177).

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender Identity	Female	176	99.4
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.6
Age Range	18 - 24	153	86.4
	25 - 34	9	5.1
	35 - 44	5	2.8
	45 - 54	5	2.8
	55 - 64	2	1.1
	65+	3	1.7
Race/Ethnicity	Caucasian/White	76	42.9
	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	33	18.6
	Multiracial	17	9.6
	Asian/Asian American	17	9.6
	Black/African American	16	9.0
	Caribbean Origin	13	7.3
	Pacific Islander	2	1.1
	Other	2	1.1
	Prefer not to answer	1	0.6
Religious Affiliation	Seventh-day Adventist	165	93.2

Continued

	Christian (non-Seventh-day Adventist)	5	2.8
	Spiritual but not religious	3	1.7
	No religious affiliation	2	1.1
	Baptist	1	0.6
	Catholic	1	0.6
Education Level	Some college, no degree	94	53.1
	High school diploma/GED	60	33.9
	Associate degree	16	9.0
	Bachelor's degree	3	1.7
	Master's degree	1	0.6
	Doctoral degree	3	1.7
Occupation/Status*	Full-time student	158	89.3
	Employed part-time	79	44.6
	Employed full-time	9	5.1
	Part-time student	7	4.0
	Unemployed	7	4.0
	Other/write-in status	5	2.8
Field of Study	Health Sciences	43	24.3
	STEM	33	18.6
	Social Sciences	28	15.8
	Humanities	25	14.1
	Business	18	10.2
	Education	12	6.8
	Undecided	6	3.4
	Not a student	12	6.8
Marital Status	Single	140	79.1
	In a committed partnership	20	11.3
	Married	11	6.2
	Divorced	2	1.1
	Widowed	2	1.1
	Prefer not to answer	2	1.1

*Note. A total of 180 respondents initially completed the demographic survey. Three respondents subsequently requested that their data not be included in the study; their records were removed prior to analysis. Accordingly, demographic frequencies and percentages are based on the final survey screening cohort of $N = 177$. Participants could select more than one response for occupation/status; therefore, frequencies and percentages for this variable exceed $N = 177$ and 100%.

Table 2. Composition of the interview analytic sample (n = 16).

Family Group	n	Generations Represented	Participant Generation
IT1	3	3	Daughter, Mother, Grandmother
IT2	3	4	Daughter, Mother, Grandmother, Great Grandmother
IT3	3	3	Daughter, Mother, Grandmother
IT4	3	3	Daughter, Mother, Grandmother
IT5	4	3	Daughter, Mother, Grandmother
Total	16	3 - 4 per family group	

Note. Participant-level demographic characteristics are not reported by family group to protect confidentiality due to the small, related multigenerational interview sample.

3.5. Permission and Participant Protection

This study involved minimal risk to participants, although discussions addressed sensitive or potentially traumatic experiences. Participants were recruited through an electronic demographic survey distributed via email. Eligibility required three or more living maternal generations, and an interview participation required agreement from all participating matrilineal family members. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any time without penalty. Ongoing participant communication and coordination were facilitated through email and phone correspondence. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study. Participant confidentiality was safeguarded by restricting data access to only the researchers and the authorized university committee, per the IRB’s policies (IRB Approval ID: 2025-2026-019). All data was securely stored in a password-protected electronic database and retained for five years before permanent deletion in accordance with secure digital protocols.

3.6. Data Collection

Data were collected in February 2026 from a private co-educational university in the southeastern United States. Participants were invited via email to complete an online demographic survey that gathered background information, including demographic characteristics and matrilineal lineage history, and included informed consent for continued participation. Participation was voluntary, and incentives (e.g., gift cards) were offered upon completion of both the survey and interview phases.

A total of 180 individuals initially completed the demographic survey. Three respondents subsequently requested that their data be excluded from the study, and their records were removed prior to analysis, resulting in a final survey screening cohort of 177 respondents. Of these, 129 reported having at least three living maternal generations. Interview participation required the willingness and availability of all required generations within a matrilineal family group; 25 respondents remained eligible for interview consideration. Of these, 16 participants representing five multigenerational matrilineal family groups ultimately scheduled and completed the in-

interview phase. Due to lower than anticipated participation during the initial two-week collection period, the survey window was extended by one additional week.

Interviews were conducted through an online video conferencing platform, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and followed a semi-structured protocol aligned with the study's research questions. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and prepared for qualitative analysis.

3.7. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a descriptive phenomenological approach and was conducted using Otter for transcription and qualitative coding. Following transcription, the interview transcripts were checked against the audio recordings for accuracy and corrected as needed before analysis. The 16 interview transcripts were distributed among members of the research team, who conducted the initial coding using Otter. Initial coding involved identifying significant statements and assigning codes to portions of participants' narratives relevant to the research questions and their lived experiences.

Following the initial coding, the primary researcher reviewed the interview transcripts and resulting codes and examined patterns within and across the five multigenerational family groups. Codes were reviewed and organized into meaning units reflecting recurring intragenerational and intergenerational experiences. Through this process, the primary researcher identified and refined emerging themes representing shared meanings across participants' accounts.

During analysis, narrative segments were identified as generational choices when participants described an identifiable decision, action, or deliberate response that they perceived as influencing their own lives or the experiences of subsequent generations. In contrast, descriptions of inherited conditions, circumstances, values, or recurring behavioral patterns were examined as part of participants' broader lived experiences but were not considered generational choices unless participants connected them to an individual or collective act of decision-making. This distinction allowed the analysis to differentiate between what participants experienced or inherited and the choices they described making in response to those experiences.

Differences in the interpretation, organization, or identification of emerging themes were discussed among the primary researcher and the research team. Following these discussions, the primary researcher made the final analytic decisions regarding the organization and naming of themes. The resulting coding structure and themes were subsequently reviewed by the chair of the research department of the university as an additional review of the analysis.

Several procedures were used to strengthen the credibility and reflexivity of the analysis. Transcripts were checked against the original audio recordings prior to analysis, and analytic and memo notes were maintained throughout the interpretive process. Records of coding decisions and theme revisions were also maintained as themes were refined. The primary researcher documented assumptions and analytic reflections throughout the analysis and intentionally sought to set

aside preconceived interpretations to maintain fidelity to participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences. Through iterative review, team discussions, and thematic synthesis, the analysis identified six recurring themes representing shared experiences across the multigenerational matrilineal family groups.

4. Results

4.1. Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis of interviews with 16 participants across five multigenerational matrilineal family groups identified six recurring themes: (1) intergenerational female strength and leadership; (2) faith as a source of identity and resilience; (3) educational aspiration and generational perseverance; (4) relational hardship and interpersonal struggle across generations; (5) caregiving, hospitality, and expressions of familial connection; and (6) breaking generational patterns through intentional change (see **Table 3**).

Table 3. Research questions and corresponding themes.

Research Question	Corresponding Theme(s)
RQ1: How do women within multigenerational matrilineal family lineages describe the values, traits, and recurring patterns of choice that emerge across generations?	Intergenerational Female Strength and Leadership; Caregiving, Hospitality, and Expressions of Familial Connection
RQ2: What social, cultural, and spiritual influences do women identify as shaping repeated generational choices, and how do they perceive these choices as influencing their own life decisions?	Faith as a Source of Identity and Resilience; Educational Aspiration and Generational Perseverance
RQ3: How do women describe experiences of hardship or trauma that have affected multiple generations within their matrilineal family line, including how these experiences have been acknowledged or left unspoken?	Relational Hardship and Interpersonal Struggle Across Generations
RQ4: How do women understand the emotional, relational, and identity-related impact of inherited trauma on themselves and across generations?	Relational Hardship and Interpersonal Struggle Across Generations; Breaking Generational Patterns Through Intentional Change
RQ5: How do women interpret the impact of past generational choices on their present lives, including responses marked by resilience, faith, or personal growth?	Faith as a Source of Identity and Resilience; Educational Aspiration and Generational Perseverance; Breaking Generational Patterns Through Intentional Change
RQ6: How do women describe the legacy they hope to leave for future generations of women in their family?	Caregiving, Hospitality, and Expressions of Familial Connection; Breaking Generational Patterns Through Intentional Change; Intergenerational Female Strength and Leadership

4.2. Theme 1: Intergenerational Female Strength and Leadership

Participants consistently described women in their matrilineal lineages as strong, resilient, and central leaders within the family structure. Across generations, women were characterized as providers, caretakers, decision makers, and emotional anchors during periods of hardship. Participants repeatedly described women as sustaining family stability, spiritual guidance, and perseverance through adversity. Two participants explained that “the women were the ones that seemed like they were the leaders” in their family (Participant #9 and Participant #10), while others described the women in their family as “very strong” (Participant #2), “service oriented,” and “the ones who get stuff done” (Participant #3).

Interviews revealed that leadership often emerged in response to absent or emotionally distant male figures. Participants described mothers and grandmothers carrying emotional, financial, and spiritual responsibilities within the household. One participant stated, “My mom stepped forward, she was able to carry the weight of the family on her shoulders” (Participant #3), while another participant stated that the women in her family “did everything without burdening others” (Participant #11). These accounts illustrated how female leadership became normalized and transmitted across generations as both a survival strategy and a defining family identity.

4.3. Theme 2: Faith as a Source of Identity and Resilience

Faith emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent themes across all interviews. Participants described spirituality and religious belief as influences shaping values, coping mechanisms, decision-making, and family traditions. Women across generations identified “faith in God” as central to enduring hardship and navigating uncertainty. One participant stated, “God is first, others are second, and self is last” (Participant #9) while another reflected, “trusting in God is just at the top of the list” (Participant #12).

Faith was frequently connected to resilience during periods of financial instability, single parenting, illness, and emotional hardship, with participants describing reliance on prayer, worship, and spiritual surrender during these experiences. One participant recalled, “There’s been times when I feel like I could not make a rent payment, but somehow, some way God comes through every time” (Participant #7). Another participant described leaving a higher-paying job to honor religious convictions, stating, “The Lord blessed, and He opens doors” (Participant #9).

Although denominational beliefs varied somewhat across generations, participants consistently emphasized spirituality, devotion, and belief in God as enduring components of family identity (Participant #2). Faith was discussed not only as a religious commitment but also as a framework through which participants understood suffering, purpose, sacrifice, and hope.

4.4. Theme 3: Educational Aspiration and Generational Perseverance

Educational aspirations and a strong work ethic emerged as recurring themes associated with generational advancement and perseverance. Participants connected education to opportunity, independence, confidence, and upward mobility. Women across generations described pursuing education despite financial hardship, parenting responsibilities, language barriers, and limited resources. One participant shared, “I wanted to become a nurse so that I can help when people are sick” (Participant #9), eventually advancing into leadership positions despite educational barriers.

Participants also highlighted the intergenerational transmission of work ethic and determination. One participant stated, “that work ethic comes from mom and grandma” (Participant #8), while another reflected, “I work hard for everything” (Participant #7). A participant who immigrated to the United States described returning to school while learning English and later earning a degree in computer science, explaining that education “opened up a completely new door” and provided “confidence to stand on my own feet” (Participant #10).

Younger generations also described observing maternal sacrifice and persistence. Participants referenced desires to “do better” (Participant #4), “work hard” (Participant #1), and establish “a solid foundation” for future generations (Participant #7).

4.5. Theme 4: Relational Hardship and Interpersonal Struggle across Generations

Participants identified repeated relational challenges across generations, including difficult marriages, single parenting, emotional distance, verbal harshness, and patterns of relational instability. Multiple women described family cultures characterized by emotional restraint, limited communication surrounding difficult or traumatic experiences, and endurance through hardship. One participant stated, “we don’t talk about trauma, you just live it” (Participant #15), while another described a cultural norm as teaching women “to survive in bad relationships” (Participant #14).

Participants also discussed verbal harshness and emotionally guarded communication patterns across generations. Multiple women described family interactions as “blunt,” “matter of fact,” or “emotionally stoic” (Participant #14). One participant explained, “we grew up not being able and not allowing ourselves to have emotions” (Participant #11), while others reflected that “therapy is not really a thought in anybody’s mind” (Participant #6) (Participant #15).

Despite these hardships, participants frequently framed their experiences in terms of resilience and survival rather than victimization. Participants additionally described learning strength, independence, and perseverance through adversity. Younger generations referenced emotional health, communication, and relational boundaries when discussing generational hardship (Participant #13).

4.6. Theme 5: Caregiving, Hospitality, and Expressions of Familial Connection

Caregiving, generosity, and hospitality were described as recurring family characteristics across generations. Participants emphasized nurturing behaviors, communal responsibility, and acts of service toward relatives and non-family members. One participant described women in her family as “very nurturing” (Participant #8), while another explained that family members “help everybody, even if they don’t want to help” (Participant #15).

Participants shared narratives involving caregiving practices within family culture. Stories included caring for extended family members, financially supporting relatives, hosting refugees, providing meals to community members, and opening their homes for guests. One participant recalled that her grandmother would invite individuals experiencing hardship into her home for meals and for overall care because “that was something we do” (Participant #11). Another participant emphasized that in her family, “you don’t give up on your family” (Participant #12), even amid relational strain or caregiving demands.

Participants also described food traditions, hospitality, and family gatherings as recurring family practices. Homes were described as “full of guests and people coming”, with meals and celebrations identified as recurring family experiences across generations (Participant #11).

4.7. Theme 6: Breaking Generational Patterns through Intentional Change

Although participants acknowledged enduring generational patterns, multiple women also described intentional attempts to alter relational, emotional, and behavioral patterns across generations. Younger generations referred to mental health, communication, emotional expression, and relational boundaries when discussing change. One participant stated, “patterns aren’t set in stone” (Participant #1), while another emphasized the importance of “open communication”, therapy, and emotional validation (Participant #12).

Participants described making a conscious decision to parent differently, communicate differently, and to approach relationships with greater intentionality than previous generations. One mother reflected that she intentionally avoided repeating accusatory behaviors she experienced growing up because “I didn’t want it done to me” (Participant #8). Others discussed prioritizing emotional intimacy, healthier marriages, counseling, and collaborative family relationships as departures from the emotional patterns of previous generations.

Despite these changes, participants generally viewed transformation as occurring alongside continuity rather than complete rejection of family identity. Women sought to preserve faith, perseverance, generosity, and familial loyalty while simultaneously redefining emotional health, communication, and relational expectations for future generations.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study supported existing literature suggesting that generational patterns are transmitted through relational, cultural, emotional, and behavioral processes within families, particularly through the matrilineal line (Koçak et al., 2021). Consistent with Guillemot's (2018) application of Erikson's (1959) developmental framework and multigenerational transmission theory, participants described recurring patterns related to relational dynamics, emotional coping, educational values, spiritual beliefs, and caregiving practices across generations. The findings further reinforced the literature, indicating that generational choices are not solely inherited but are also shaped by conscious and unconscious decisions that influence subsequent generations (Ellis, 2019).

A significant finding within this study was the vital role of women as carriers of relational stability, cultural continuity, emotional support, and spiritual guidance within the family system. Participants consistently described mothers and grandmothers as providers, caretakers, leaders, and decision makers, supporting existing research suggesting that women occupy influential positions in shaping family identity, values, coping strategies, and behavioral expectations across generations (Koçak et al., 2021; Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2021). The findings suggested that matrilineal influence extends beyond biological relationships and functions as a mechanism for transmitting and supporting resilience, expectations, and relational norms over time (Davies & Fitchett, 2015; Starrs & Békés, 2025).

Participants reported relational hardships across generations, including emotional restraint, verbal harshness, relational instability, and limited communication surrounding difficult experiences. Some participants explicitly interpreted these experiences through the language of trauma, while others described them primarily in terms of hardship, survival, or relational struggle. These participant accounts are consistent with literature examining how trauma and adversity may be associated with relational behaviors, emotional responses, and learned coping patterns within families (Anakwenze & Rasmussen, 2021; Figley & Burnette, 2017; Starrs & Békés, 2025). However, the present study did not independently establish the presence or transmission of trauma across generations. Rather, the findings reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations of how difficult or traumatic experiences may have influenced relationships, coping, communication, and family patterns across generations.

At the same time, participants described experiences they interpreted as resilience and intentional change across generations. Participants, particularly within younger generations, described increasing awareness of emotional health, therapy, communication, and relational boundaries. These accounts are consistent with research suggesting that awareness of inherited patterns may create opportunities for adaptation, healing, and intentional generational transformation (Figley & Burnette, 2017; Moreno & Urraco, 2018; Sanders, 2025). Rather than fully rejecting familial values, participants described efforts to preserve strengths

such as faith, perseverance, caregiving, and family connection while simultaneously seeking healthier ways to express emotions and make more intentional relational choices, particularly in selecting marital partners. Within participants' accounts, transformation was understood as occurring through the reinterpretation and modification of inherited patterns rather than complete separation from family identity.

Within this predominantly Christian, faith-based study context, faith emerged as one of the most consistent interpretive themes across participants' narratives. Participants described spirituality and belief in God as important influences on their understandings of resilience, identity, endurance, decision-making, and family life. Within participants' accounts, faith functioned as a framework through which they interpreted experiences of hardship, sacrifice, perseverance, and hope. These findings should be understood within the faith-based context of the study and are not intended to establish faith as a general mechanism of resilience or intergenerational transformation across populations.

Collectively, participants' accounts suggested that generational choices within these five multigenerational matrilineal family groups were understood in relation to inherited experiences, cultural expectations, relational dynamics, trauma awareness, resilience, and intentional decision-making. The experiences shared by participants illustrate how these women perceived themselves as both preserving and reshaping generational patterns, highlighting the complexity of continuity and transformation within their family narratives.

6. Limitations

This study was limited by its small, geographically limited sample. Participants were self-selected, which may have led to a sample more inclined toward reflection and openness about generational experiences. Additionally, requiring representation from at least three living maternal generations reduced the eligible participant pool and excluded individuals whose family structures did not align with the study criteria.

The multigenerational interview format may have introduced social desirability bias, as participants could have modified responses in the presence of family members, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as trauma, conflict, or perceived inherited generational hardships. Additionally, findings rely on retrospective self-report, which may be influenced by memory limitations and evolving personal interpretations.

Variation in participant engagement may have led to uneven response depth, and the use of broad, open-ended questions may have contributed to differences in how participants interpreted and answered interview questions. Furthermore, data were collected solely through interviews, limiting triangulation with other data sources. Finally, the study's context within a faith-based institution and the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis may limit the transferability of findings and introduce potential researcher bias.

7. Future Research

Future research should examine the role of cultural context in shaping generational choices, particularly how maternal decisions are influenced by geographic and sociocultural differences. Expanding this work across diverse settings may offer deeper insight into how environmental factors interact with patterns of behavior, trauma awareness, and transformation. Additionally, studies should explore generational choices within broader, more accessible community samples beyond faith-based contexts. Comparative analyses between faith-based and non-faith-based populations may reveal how spiritual frameworks influence decision-making and resilience. Future research should also investigate generational choices within paternal lineages and compare these findings with those from maternal lines to better understand how intergenerational influences are transmitted across family systems. Collectively, these directions for future research would deepen the understanding of generational choices by situating them in broader cultural, relational, and contextual frameworks, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive and transferable model of intergenerational influence and transformation.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlighted how women across five multigenerational matrilineal family lineages understood generational choices as influential forces shaping behavior, trauma awareness, resilience, and intergenerational transformation. The findings revealed recurring themes of female strength, faith, perseverance, caregiving, relational hardship, and intentional change, demonstrating both the continuity and evolution of family patterns over time. Participants described inherited values and experiences not as fixed circumstances, but as influences that could be preserved, reinterpreted, or intentionally changed across generations. Ultimately, the study contributed to the understanding of intergenerational influence by highlighting how participants perceived women within their matrilineal family lineages as shaping family legacies, fostering resilience, and intentionally responding to inherited family patterns across generations.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used within this study:

- 1) *Generational Choices*: Decisions or actions made by individuals that are perceived as influencing the experiences, behaviors, values, relationships, or opportunities of subsequent generations. Within this study, generational choices are distinguished from inherited conditions, circumstances, values, or behavioral patterns by the presence of an identifiable individual or collective act of decision-making (Hou et al., 2023).
- 2) *Matrilineal Lineage*: Relating to, based on, or tracing descent through the maternal line (Davies & Fitchett, 2015; USAFacts, 2023).
- 3) *Patterns of Behavior*: Recurring sequences of actions or responses exhibited by individuals or groups in specific situations, often formed and reinforced over

time (Guillemot, 2018; Howland & Glynn, 2024; Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2021).

4) *Generational Trauma Awareness*: The recognition that traumatic experiences can be transmitted across generations and influence present-day emotions, behaviors, relationships, and well-being (Sanders, 2025).

5) *Generational Transformation*: Shifts in values, behaviors, and family dynamics across generations that result in the disruption of inherited patterns and the creation of new outcomes (SThree, 2025).

Contribution to the Field

1) Introduces generational choices as a qualitative framework for understanding how women interpret and influence intergenerational patterns within matrilineal family systems.

2) Extends existing research on intergenerational trauma and resilience by examining how inherited experiences are consciously preserved, reinterpreted, or transformed across generations.

3) Provides empirical evidence from three- and four-generation family groups, offering insight into the transmission of faith, caregiving, leadership, aspirations, relational hardship, and intentional change.

4) Highlights the role of women as key agents in shaping family legacies, resilience, and intentional intergenerational change.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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