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İSTANBUL 29 MAYIS ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
SİYASET BİLİMİ VE ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER
ANABİLİM DALI

WOMEN REJECTING MOTHERHOOD IN INDONESIA

YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ

Dinie HANIFA

Danışman:

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Merve KÜTÜK KURİŞ

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TEZ ONAY SAYFASI

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Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Anabilim Dalı'nda 200822YL04 numaralı Dinie HANİFA'nın hazırladığı '*Women Rejecting Motherhood in Indonesia*' konulu yüksek lisans tezi ile ilgili tez savunma sınavı, 02/07/2025 Çarşamba günü (10:00 – 11:00) saatleri arasında yapılmış, sorulan sorulara alınan cevaplar sonunda adayın tezinin başarılı olduğuna oy birliği ile karar verilmiştir.

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BEYAN

Bu tezin yazılmasında bilimsel ahlak kurallarına uyulduğunu, başkalarının eserlerinden yararlanılması durumunda bilimsel normlara uygun olarak atıfta bulunulduğunu, kullanılan verilerde herhangi bir tahrifat yapılmadığını, tezin herhangi bir kısmının bu üniversite veya başka bir üniversitedeki başka bir tez çalışması olarak sunulmadığını beyan ederim.

Dinie HANIFA

02.07.2025

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the phenomenon of women rejecting motherhood in Indonesia, situating this personal choice within broader feminist theories, historical narratives, socio-economic conditions, and cultural-religious contexts. Drawing on radical, Marxist, and third-wave feminist perspectives alongside interpretations of Islamic discourse, the study critically examines how motherhood has been historically constructed as a normative expectation that defines womanhood and restricts autonomy. The analysis begins by theorizing motherhood as a socially and ideologically embedded institution and then contextualizes its evolution in Indonesia across four major periods: the Colonial Era, Old Order, New Order, and Reform Era. Each era shaped gender roles through differing national, religious, and political ideologies. The research identifies a growing movement of women in contemporary Indonesia choosing to be childfree, influenced by factors such as economic instability, career aspirations, individual autonomy, mental health awareness, and disillusionment with state policies. It highlights how these decisions represent a form of resistance to entrenched societal norms that equate womanhood with motherhood. Moreover, the thesis explores the intense social, cultural, and religious backlash faced by childfree women, including stigmatization, familial pressure, and accusations of immorality or selfishness. Despite these challenges, many childfree individuals are reclaiming their narratives and advocating for diverse expressions of fulfillment beyond traditional family structures. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of the lived experiences of childfree women in Indonesia, this research examines how their decisions reflect broader changes in societal values, gender expectations, and personal priorities. By situating individual choices within historical, cultural, and structural frameworks, it highlights the complex interplay between personal piety and collective norms. The passage underscores the importance of culturally acknowledging various life paths and definitions of fulfillment that go beyond traditional roles and expectations. This acknowledgment contributes to a developing understanding of identity, adulthood, and social contribution within contemporary Indonesian society.

Keywords:

Motherhood, Childfreedom, Gender roles, Women's autonomy, Islam and Modernity

ÖZ

Bu tez, Endonezya'da kadınların anneliği reddetme fenomenini incelemekte ve bu kişisel tercihi feminist teoriler, tarihsel anlatılar, sosyo-ekonomik koşullar ve kültürel-dini bağlamlar içine yerleştirmektedir. Radikal, Marksist ve üçüncü dalga feminist perspektiflerden ve İslami söylem yorumlarından yararlanan çalışma, anneliğin tarihsel olarak nasıl normatif bir beklenti olarak inşa edildiğini, kadınlığı tanımladığını ve özerkliği kısıtladığını eleştirel bir şekilde ele almaktadır. Analiz, öncelikle anneliği sosyal ve ideolojik olarak içselleştirilmiş bir kurum olarak teorize ederek başlamakta, ardından bu kavramın Endonezya'daki evrimini dört ana dönemde (Sömürge Dönemi, Eski Düzen, Yeni Düzen ve Reform Dönemi) bağlamsallaştırmaktadır. Her dönem, farklı ulusal, dini ve politik ideolojiler aracılığıyla toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini şekillendirmiştir. Araştırma, günümüz Endonezya'sında ekonomik istikrarsızlık, kariyer hedefleri, bireysel özerklik, mental sağlık farkındalığı ve devlet politikalarına karşı hayal kırıklığı gibi faktörlerden etkilenen, çocuksuz kalmayı seçen kadınların artan bir hareketini tespit etmektedir. Bu kararların, kadınlığı annelikle eşitleyen kökleşmiş toplumsal normlara bir direniş biçimi olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Dahası, tez, çocuksuz kadınların maruz kaldığı damgalama, aile baskısı ve ahlaksızlık veya bencillik suçlamaları gibi yoğun sosyal, kültürel ve dini tepkileri incelemektedir. Tüm bu zorluklara rağmen, birçok çocuksuz birey, kendi hikayelerini yeniden sahiplenmekte ve geleneksel aile yapılarının ötesinde farklı tatmin biçimlerini savunmaktadır. Endonezya'daki çocuksuz kadınların deneyimlerine disiplinlerarası bir analizle yaklaşan bu araştırma, onların kararlarının toplumsal değerlerde, cinsiyet beklentilerinde ve kişisel önceliklerdeki daha geniş değişimleri nasıl yansıttığını incelemektedir. Bireysel tercihleri tarihsel, kültürel ve yapısal çerçeveler içine yerleştirerek, kişisel dindarlık ile kolektif normlar arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, geleneksel roller ve beklentilerin ötesine geçen farklı yaşam yollarının ve tatmin tanımlarının kültürel olarak tanınmasının önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bu tanıma, çağdaş Endonezya toplumunda kimlik, yetişkinlik ve sosyal katkıya dair gelişen bir anlayışa katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Annelik, Çocuksuzluk, Toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri, Kadın özerkliği, İslam ve Modernite

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ABBREVIATION

Abbreviation	Definition	Translation
Bansos	Bantuan Sosial	Social Assistance
BPS	Badan Pusat Statistik	Central Bureau of Statistics
Gen Z	Generation Z	
Gerwani	Gerakan Wanita Indonesia	Indonesian Women's Movement
KB	Keluarga Berencana	Family Planning
MUI	Majelis Ulama Indonesia	Indonesian Ulema Council
PBB	Pajak Bumi dan Bangunan	Land and Buildings Tax
PKK	Pemberdayaan Kesejahteraan keluarga	Family Welfare Program
PKS	Partai Keadilan Sejahtera	Prosperous Justice Party
PPH	Pajak Penghasilan	Income Tax or Personal Earnings
PPN	Pajak Pertambahan Nilai	Value-Added Tax
STNK	Surat Tanda Nomor Kendaraan	Vehicle Registration Certificate
Tapera	Tabungan Perumahan Rakyat	Public Housing Saving
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund	
USAID	United States Agency for International Development	
VOC	Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie	

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CHAPTER 1: RESEARCHING CHILDFREE WOMEN IN INDONESIA

1.1 The History of the Phenomenon of Childfree Women or Women Denying Motherhood in Indonesia

The traditional concept of womanhood in Indonesia has long been intertwined with the ideals of marriage, family, and motherhood. Historically, societal norms and cultural expectations have placed immense value on women becoming mothers, not only as a biological role but also as a moral duty contributing to the continuity of family lineage and social harmony. From a young age, Indonesian girls were often socialized to embrace the roles of wife and mother as their ultimate life goals. This perspective was deeply ingrained in various cultural traditions and practices, where motherhood was seen as a source of pride and fulfilment for women (Suryakusuma 1996, 92-119, Blackwood 2005).

The influence of religious teachings further reinforced this notion. In a country where Islam is the predominant religion alongside significant Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist populations, religious doctrines have traditionally elevated the role of motherhood to a sacred status. Women who bore many children were highly respected and often viewed as the cornerstone of their families and communities. Societal institutions such as marriage customs, local rituals, and even legal frameworks supported this ideal by encouraging early marriage and large families. Moreover, the agrarian nature of Indonesian society in the past meant that larger families were not only culturally desirable but also economically beneficial. Children were considered essential contributors to household labor, particularly in farming communities, and were expected to care for their parents in old age. As a result, the idea of voluntarily remaining childfree would have been almost unthinkable in earlier generations (Smith-Hefner 2005, Geertz 1961).

However, in recent decades, a noticeable transformation has taken place as an increasing number of Indonesian women have begun to reject the long-standing expectation of motherhood. This shift significantly departs from traditional norms and mirrors a growing global movement towards voluntary childlessness. Several factors have contributed to this trend, including a rise in the number of women postponing or rejecting

marriage altogether. This delay or avoidance of marriage directly correlates with a decline in fertility rates, as fewer women enter the traditional life stage of becoming mothers. Consequently, this trend can be seen as part of a broader phenomenon of more Indonesian women denying the conventional path of having children or starting families.

This shift was undoubtedly affected first by the economic and social landscape that began to shift dramatically in the late 20th century, it was driven by urbanization, increased access to education, and the growing participation of women in the workforce. These changes opened new avenues for women, allowing them to pursue personal ambitions beyond traditional familial roles. With greater exposure to global ideas and lifestyles, Indonesian women started questioning the assumption that motherhood is an inherent part of their identity. In particular, feminist discourse, both internationally and locally, enhanced women's ability to make choices about their reproductive roles, including abortion or having children. In the recent past, this lifestyle has become popularly known as the "childfree lifestyle" (Robinson 2009, Rinaldo 2013).

Furthermore, the emergence of the childfree movement in Indonesia, particularly in the 21st century, reflects these broader social changes. Interestingly, the spread of social media has also played a pivotal role in amplifying the voices of childfree women, creating a platform where they can express their perspectives and connect with like-minded individuals. This online discourse has also sparked public debates, with critics often accusing childfree women of being selfish or defying cultural norms of the country, while supporters advocate for the right of women to define their lives on their own terms. This phenomenon in Indonesia is seen as mirroring a trend that began earlier in Western countries, where the childfree movement gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century. Thus, in Western societies, feminist movements advocating for gender equality, reproductive rights, and personal autonomy laid the groundwork for women to reject motherhood openly. Influenced by similar feminist ideals and increasingly globalized cultural exchanges, Indonesian women have adopted and adapted this movement to fit their unique societal context. However, unlike in the West, where individualism is often celebrated, most Asian countries, especially Indonesian culture, place a strong emphasis on collectivism and familial obligations; therefore, deciding to remain childfree is a more controversial and complex issue within Indonesian society (Dwyer 2000, Nieuwenhuis 2017, Graham 2020, Medina and Puspita 2023).

When discussing the concept of living a childfree lifestyle, it is important to acknowledge that there are significant differences between Western and Eastern societies. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of individuals and couples choosing not to have children, whether it be due to personal preference or societal pressures. However, the reasons behind this choice and the acceptance of a childfree lifestyle vary greatly between Western and Eastern cultures.

In Eastern societies such as those in Asia and the Middle East, the idea of living a childfree lifestyle is still heavily stigmatized. In these cultures, there is a strong emphasis on family and traditional gender roles, with expectations for individuals to get married and have children. In fact, in many Eastern societies, the idea of not having children is often not even considered a valid option. This stigma is further reinforced by cultural and societal pressures, as well as expectations from family and community members (Kaltsum et al. 2022). Many individuals in Eastern societies also face pressure to have children to continue their family line and fulfil their duty to their ancestors. Regardless of their religion, in Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions having children is seen as a social and religious obligation (Rinaldo 2013, Buss 2000, Doniger 2009).

As a result, those who choose to live a childfree lifestyle in Eastern societies may face discrimination, isolation, ostracization, and judgment from others. This can make it challenging for them to openly express their choice and may even lead to them facing societal and familial backlash. Ultimately, the stigmatization of living a childfree lifestyle in Eastern societies highlights the cultural and societal expectations placed on individuals to conform to traditional roles and ideals, making it difficult for them to break away from societal norms and choose a different path.

Moreover, in some Eastern societies, the childfree lifestyle is seen as a failure to fulfil one's societal role. Women, in particular, may face scrutiny and criticism for choosing to not have children, as they are often expected to prioritize motherhood over personal fulfillment. Furthermore, women who are unable to have children due to infertility may face even more severe social repercussions. In contrast to the Western world, living a childfree lifestyle in Eastern societies is often not a matter of choice, but rather a lack of choice. The limited access to birth control and family planning resources, as well as the cultural and societal expectations, make it more challenging for individuals to decide to not have children.

On the other hand, in Western societies, the idea of living a childfree lifestyle is becoming more widely accepted and supported. This can be attributed to the increasing focus on individualism and personal freedom in these societies. Despite the fact that this growing trend is predicted to weaken the traditional emphasis on family and marriage, their people are still encouraged to pursue their own goals and dreams. This has led to a greater acceptance of the decision not to have children, with individuals choosing to focus on their careers, travel, or personal fulfillment instead. Moreover, the concept of a childfree lifestyle in the West is often seen as a choice, rather than a consequence. While this may not always be the case, the choice not to have children is more commonly associated with a person's desires and plans, rather than factors such as infertility or economic constraints. This suggests that there is a level of privilege associated with living a childfree life in Western societies (Harrington 2019).

In short, while the childfree lifestyle is becoming more prevalent in both Western and Eastern societies, there are significant differences in the way it is perceived and accepted. In the West, it is largely seen as a personal choice and a symbol of individual freedom, while in the East it is still heavily stigmatized and considered a failure to conform to societal norms. These cultural differences highlight the importance of understanding and respecting the diverse perspectives and values within our global society.

Nevertheless, in the late 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century together with globalization, this phenomenon is accepted globally and is slowly gaining more recognition and understanding in Eastern societies, like China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia. With increasing access to education and exposure to different cultures, workplaces and lifestyles, more individuals are challenging traditional norms and choosing to live a childfree lifestyle. This is also influenced by the declining birth rates in many Eastern societies, which are leading to a more accepting attitude towards those who choose not to have children. However, it is still a long process, and the stigma attached to living a childfree lifestyle in Eastern societies continues to persist. Not only for the small society but also for the nation. It obviously will take time and effort to change deep-rooted cultural and societal beliefs, but the increasing acceptance and understanding of this choice is perceived as a positive step towards breaking down the stigma and

allowing individuals the freedom to make their own decisions about their lives and families (Jones 2009).

This shift is particularly relevant in Indonesia, a country with one of the largest populations in the world but now grappling with declining fertility rates. Despite the nation's cultural emphasis on family and procreation, urbanization, increased educational attainment, and greater career opportunities, particularly for women, have contributed to a noticeable decline in birth rates. According to the Macrotrends population development Indicators from 1950 - 2025, the birth rate in Indonesia has been steadily declining. The current birth rate for Indonesia in 2025 is 16.40 births per 1000 people, it shows a 1.26% decline from 2024.

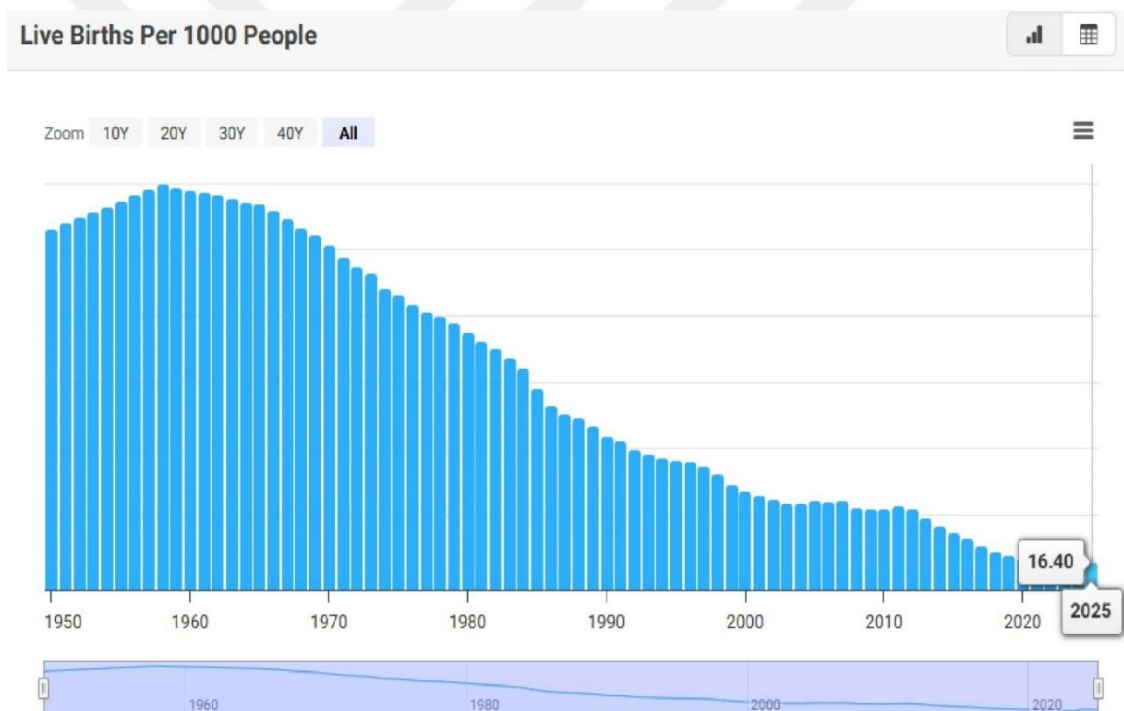


Figure 1. Indonesia Birth Rate (1950-2025) – Macrotrends 2025

This trend is further amplified by economic pressures, such as the rising cost of living and housing, and education which make raising children increasingly difficult. Interestingly, here, this thought has become increasingly prevalent among **Generation Z**

in particular.¹ Therefore, this trend is likely to continue as more women prioritize their career ambitions and personal goals over marriage and family. This shift is likely to have a long-term impact on fertility rates and the structure of the family (Nabila et al, 2024).

1.2 The Significance and the Purpose of the Study

As mentioned earlier, it is interesting that Indonesia, with a predominantly Muslim population, put a strong emphasis on traditional gender roles and the expectation for women to bear children and fulfil their duties as mothers and caregivers regardless of their religion, ethnicity, culture or region. However, with the spread of globalization in the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century as well as the rise of feminist movements and the evolution of societal attitudes such as increased access to education and participation of women in the workforce, more and more women are choosing to reject or delay motherhood, challenging the traditional notions of womanhood in Indonesia.

Furthermore, in recent years, there has been a noticeable and rising trend in Indonesia where more women are embracing feminist ideas and challenging traditional gender roles, despite the country's status as the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world. Among these ideas is the advocacy for the concept of "**My body is My choice**," a famous feminist motto emphasizing a woman's right to make decisions about her own body, including whether or not to become a mother. This perspective marks a significant cultural shift in a society where traditional norms often place motherhood as a central role and obligation for women. However, adopting such a stance is not an easy choice for many Indonesian women, as it often involves confronting deeply ingrained societal expectations, religious interpretations, and familial pressures. By choosing to reject the notion of motherhood as a compulsory duty, these women are not only asserting their autonomy but also challenging long-standing traditions and provoking critical conversations about gender roles and reproductive rights. This phenomenon is significant as it highlights the evolving attitudes toward women's rights in Indonesia and underscores the importance of studying the interplay between feminism and cultural-religious contexts

¹ Generation Z, term used to describe Americans born during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Some sources give the specific year range of 1997–2012, although the years spanned are sometimes contested or debated because generations and their [zeitgeists](#) are difficult to [delineate](#) (Britannica 2025).

in shaping these transformative changes (Shania, Nadhira, and Sobandi 2023, Habiba 2020).

This study also holds great significance in understanding the complexities and challenges faced by women in a highly patriarchal and traditional society. Therefore, my purpose in this study is to explore and analyze how Indonesian women navigate through feminist and Islamic discourses on motherhood in their decision to reject or delay their motherhood obligation. Furthermore, this study sheds light on to the experiences of these women and the factors that influence their decision to deny being a mother while serving a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of these women's choices and the societal pressures they face.

One of the main highlights of this study is its focus on understanding women's choices rather than passing judgment or imposing Western ideologies on them. It recognizes and respects the diversity of experiences and perspectives of women living in a diverse and complex society like Indonesia. By prioritizing the understanding of women's choices and experiences the study aims to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the current issue, rather than reducing it to a mere matter of personal preference.

Additionally, the study holds significance in challenging the traditional and narrow definition of womanhood and motherhood in Indonesian society. By examining how these women navigate through feminist and Islamic discourses, the study aims to challenge the rigid gender roles and expectations imposed on women and promote a more inclusive and diverse understanding of womanhood. Furthermore, the thesis holds significance in providing a platform for these women's voices to be heard and their experiences to be understood. In a society where women's voices are often silenced and marginalized, this study aims to give agency to these women and their experiences, contributing to promoting the empowerment of women in Indonesia.

1.3 Background and Overview of Women's Roles in Indonesia

The historical roots of women's roles within Indonesia's history are marked by a mosaic of cultures and civilizations, including influences from Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms and Islamic sultanates in pre-colonial period, European colonial power, and the struggle for

independence. Each era brought distinct ideals and norms regarding womanhood, deeply influencing societal expectations and the roles women played in various domains of life.

1.3.1 Pre-Colonial Era

Historically, family life in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, had a unique dynamic that differed from many other parts of the world. Women enjoyed a significant degree of status and autonomy, which was uncharacteristic of other regions at the time. The point is not that men and women were equal in the modern sense, but rather that their roles were distinct yet complementary. Women played vital roles in agricultural labor, particularly in transplanting and harvesting rice, as well as in weaving and marketing, which were essential to both household survival and the broader economy (Reid, 1988). Additionally, their reproductive role granted them a certain degree of ritual power, reinforcing their societal importance and leading to the cultural perception that daughters were highly valuable (Galvao, 1544: 89; cf. Legazpi, 1569: 61).

Marriage customs further reflected this balance of gender roles. Culturally, monogamy was the dominant form of marriage, and either spouse could initiate a divorce, an uncommon practice in many other societies of the time. Upon divorce, children were divided between the parents in a structured manner; the first child typically went with the mother, the second with the father, and so on. This system, widespread across the island region, aimed to maintain fairness and ensure that both parents remained actively involved in their children's upbringing. The emphasis on shared parenting roles reflected the broader cultural values of reciprocity and balance (Reid, 1988).

Additionally, economic independence had a dual impact on both ordinary and highborn status women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, providing both empowerment and vulnerability. On one hand, women played a crucial role in local economies, dominating trade networks, managing markets, and actively participating in commerce. Their economic contributions granted them a significant degree of social and financial autonomy, which extended into their personal lives. Many women had considerable control within their marriages, possessing legal rights such as the ability to initiate divorce as mentioned earlier, an uncommon privilege in many other societies in the world of the time. However, on the other hand, this economic agency was not without its challenges.

Systems such as temporary marriages and concubinage, while sometimes providing financial security and social mobility, also left women, especially those from lower social classes or enslaved backgrounds, susceptible to exploitation. These arrangements could limit their long-term stability and reinforce gender inequalities, particularly for women with fewer resources or familial support (Reid 1988).

Despite these complexities, the position of women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, remained notably progressive compared to many other parts of the world. They maintained a higher degree of autonomy, influence, and legal protection than their counterparts in many patriarchal societies, reflecting the unique and often flexible gender norms of the region.

This degree of female autonomy and influence was not limited to family life; it extended to leadership at the highest levels of society. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, during the commercial peak of many Southeast Asian states, female rulers played a significant role in governance. Austronesian societies, including those in Polynesia, Madagascar, Indonesia, and the Philippines, were more inclined than most other major population groups to place high-born women on the throne. This tradition of female leadership was evident in numerous kingdoms, including Pasai, Pegu, Japara, Sukadana, Jambi, and Solor, while regions like Aceh and Patani witnessed entire successions of queens. This trend further exemplifies how pre-colonial Southeast Asia maintained a unique cultural framework in which women held substantial power, both in domestic and political spheres (Reid 1988).

The case of Pasai, the first major Muslim port in Southeast Asia, exemplifies this trend of female leadership. Located in northern Sumatra, Indonesia, Pasai had two successive queens between 1405 and 1434, just before the port's prominence declined with the rise of Melaka as the dominant trade hub in the Melaka Straits (Cowan, 1938: 209-10). Similarly, Japara, situated on Java's north coast, emerged as a formidable naval and commercial power under its renowned queen, Kali-nyamat, in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Other notable examples include the diamond-exporting center of Sukadana in Southwest Borneo (c. 1608-1622), the pepper-rich kingdom of Jambi in East Sumatra (1630-c. 1655), and the sandalwood hub of Solor, east of Flores (c. 1650-1670). Each of these states flourished as key trading centers during the reigns of their female

rulers, suggesting a correlation between women's leadership and economic prosperity (Scott, 1606: 130; Djajadiningrat, 1913: 153-4).

This pattern is particularly evident in commercially significant states such as Japara and Aceh, where female rulers played crucial roles in facilitating trade and diplomacy. Their leadership was not only accepted but also encouraged in contexts where economic stability and political pragmatism were paramount. Even outside formal queenship, women exercised significant influence in commerce and governance. One such example is Nyai Gede Wanagiri, a powerful figure in Banten, who, despite not holding a royal title, played a dominant role in trade and local affairs. Her prominence underscores that female leadership in pre-colonial Southeast Asia was not limited to hereditary queenship but extended to influential women in business and administration. (Reid 1988, 63- 65) Moreover The presence of female rulers during the Hindu Buddhist kingdoms in Indonesia shows that women also have the right to be rulers and occupy seats in government. A great example can be found during the reign of Tribhuwanatunggadewi in Majapahit. Tribhuwanatunggadewi was a female ruler in Majapahit with the title Abhisekha Tribhuwanatunggadewi Jaya Wisnuwardhani. After her success in leading, she married Cakradhara or Cakreswara, who at that time was king in Singasari and had the title Kertawarddhana, which means A Pride and Glory (Poesponegoro and Notosusanto 1992).

The preference for female rulers in this period of time was often viewed as very strategic. Merchants and elites favored queens because they were perceived as pragmatic leaders who prioritized economic interests over military conquest or personal aggrandizement. Unlike some male rulers, who were often drawn into costly displays of power, territorial disputes, or conflicts driven by notions of honor, female sovereigns were seen as more business-oriented, diplomatic, and protective of property rights. Their leadership helped create a stable, business-friendly environment that benefited both local and foreign traders (Reid 1988).

However, the decline of female rule coincided with shifting commercial landscapes and a reduced pool of suitable female successors. As trade routes evolved and European colonial powers began to exert greater influence in the region, governance structures changed, often favoring male-dominated political models. The increasing presence of European trading companies, which operated within patriarchal frameworks,

further diminished the space for female rulers. Consequently, while women in pre-colonial Indonesia had once wielded substantial political and economic power, their influence gradually waned as external forces reshaped the region's commercial and political dynamics.

1.3.2 Colonial Era

During Colonial power, first under the Portuguese and later dominated by the Dutch, deeply disrupted and reshaped the lives and roles of Indonesian women, imposing foreign ideals that often clashed with indigenous traditions. The European colonial administrations viewed local women as central to their "civilizing" missions, targeting them to install Western notions of domesticity, morality, and subservience. This effort was not merely cultural but deeply political, aimed at consolidating colonial power by altering the fabric of indigenous society. Women, who had historically played active roles in trade, agriculture, and even local governance, were systematically pushed into narrowly defined domestic spheres, their autonomy curtailed under the guise of "modernization" (Elise 2017, 39-41).

The Dutch, in particular, used education as a tool to enforce these new norms, establishing schools for native girls that emphasized housekeeping, sewing, and childcare skills deemed suitable for their roles as wives and mothers under the colonial order. This form of education did not seek to empower women but to mold them into obedient, domesticated figures who could support the colonial system by raising a "civilized" generation compliant with Dutch authority. These imposed roles stripped many women of their traditional community roles and economic contributions, leaving them socially and economically disempowered.

Yet, colonialism was not just about imposing ideals; it was also about control and exploitation. Many women, especially in rural areas, were subjected to harsh labour conditions on plantations and in households. The colonial economy exploited their bodies and labour, relegating them to positions of servitude with little regard for their well-being. Sexual exploitation and abuse were rampant, as the colonial administration often turned a blind eye to the predatory behavior of European men who viewed local women as inferior and dispensable. Since then, Indonesian women have only been seen as satisfying

lust with the term *kanca wingking* in Javanese. Their main role is to provide services and pleasure for men, including cooking (*masak*), dressing up (*macak*), and having children (*manak*) There is even an expression that women have no place in the public because their affairs are only in the private sphere (Carey 2016; Muhmad Pirus & Nurahmawati, 2020, 56-57).

1.3.3 Independence Movement

Despite these oppressive conditions, colonial rule also unintentionally sparked resistance and empowerment. Figures like *Raden Adjeng Kartini* emerged as beacons of hope, using the limited access to education provided by colonial policies to challenge the very system that sought to subjugate her. Kartini's writings for instance, which critiqued the restrictions placed on women and called for broader access to education, became a rallying cry for women's emancipation, inspiring generations to come. Her legacy underscores the dual reality of colonialism for Indonesian women: while it sought to repress and control, it also inadvertently created spaces for defiance and the seeds of future Indonesian women movements (Elsbeth 2000,29-33).

Furthermore, the colonial era left an indelible mark on Indonesian womanhood, a legacy of both deep scars and fierce resilience. For many women, it was a time of profound intimidation, where their agency was systematically stripped away and their value reduced to their ability to serve colonial interests. Yet, this period also sowed the seeds of resistance, proving that even under the harshest conditions, the spirit of defiance and the yearning for freedom could not be extinguished.

Starting in the 20th century, Indonesian women began to rise from oppression. Those who were previously trapped in the darkness of colonialism began to look for solutions for independence. One by one women's organizations emerged, such as Sakolah Istri (1904), Putri Mardika Budhi Utomo (1912), Aisyiah Muhammadiyah (1917) and Pawiyatan Wanito in Magelang (1918). Then from these organizations emerged influential female figures such as Dewi Sartika, Siti Walidah Ahmad Dahlan, and Maria Walanda Maramis. This women's movement reached its peak with the formation of the Indonesian National Political Association Consensus (PPPKI) in 1927 and the holding of the First Indonesian Women's Congress on 22 – 26 December 1928 (“International

Childfree Day,” n.d.). The largest women's organisation during independence struggles, namely the Indonesian Women's Movement (Gerwani), this organisation stood at the forefront of the women's movement. They are very active in fighting for women's rights, particularly opposing polygamy and supporting the eradication of illiteracy.

After Indonesia's independence in 1945, the role of men and women in society underwent significant transformations influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors. The nation's path toward gender equality was shaped by successive political regimes, each imposing different ideologies and policies that had a profound impact on gender relations and women's status in society. To understand how the role of men and women evolved, it's important to categorize the historical trajectory of Indonesia, particularly in terms of its political and economic changes and their implications for gender roles.

1.3.4 Post-Independence (1945–1950s): Struggle for Identity and Equality

Following Indonesia's independence, there was a push to establish national identity and unity. Women, many of whom had been active in the independence struggle, were crucial to the nation-building process. During this period, the 1945 Constitution enshrined the ideals of equality between men and women, including a commitment to women's rights. Women participated in both political and economic spheres, contributing to the early stages of nation-building. Despite gaining formal recognition, the social expectations surrounding women's roles remain deeply rooted in traditional norms (Sunindyo 1998, 4; Sriwahyuni 2023,4).

1.3.4.1 Sukarno's Guided Democracy (1950s–1965): Women in Nation-Building

Under President Sukarno's leadership, Indonesia pursued a policy of "Guided Democracy," which promoted state-sponsored nationalism and the inclusion of women in social and political movements. During this period, the government framed women's rights as integral to national unity and progress. The government established organizations for women, such as the PKK (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, or Family Welfare Movement), which aimed to integrate women into the development process. However, Sukarno's regime did not fully break away from the patriarchal

structures that existed in Indonesian society, and women's political and economic roles were still largely confined to the domestic sphere.(Gerke 1992, 46).

1.3.4.2 Suharto's New Order (1966–1998): State-Controlled Gender Norms

Suharto's New Order, which came into power in 1966, marked a significant shift in gender policies. Suharto's regime propagated a vision of women as ideal "housewives", with their primary role being caretakers of the family unit. The state adopted an approach that reinforced traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's domestic responsibilities while simultaneously promoting their involvement in national economic development, mainly in rural areas through programs like the PKK.²

The New Order regime encouraged women to join the workforce, but the majority of women were still relegated to low-paying, gender-segregated jobs in sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and services. Despite these limited opportunities, economic changes during this period, such as industrialization and urbanization, provided women with more chances to enter the workforce. However, women's participation in decision-making processes and political life remained highly restricted, with their public roles often limited to being supportive figures in their husbands' political and economic activities (Gerke 1992,47-49).

1.3.4.3 Reformasi and Beyond (1998–Present): Advancing Women's Rights and Gender Equality

Following the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesia entered the *Reformasi* period³, which brought greater emphasis on democratic reforms and civil liberties. During this era, there was a significant shift toward gender equality, especially in terms of legal and political empowerment. The introduction of gender-sensitive policies, such as affirmative action

² PKK stands for Family Welfare Empowerment. This term has been widely known which is usually associated with a group of mothers who have positive activities. PKK is a community organization to empower women and participate in the development of Indonesian welfare (Wikipedia 2025).

³ The post-Suharto era (Indonesian: Era pasca-Suharto) is the contemporary history in Indonesia, which began with the resignation of authoritarian president Suharto on 21 May 1998. Since his resignation, the country has been in a period of transition, colloquially known as the Reform era (Indonesian: Era *Reformasi*). This period has been characterised by a more open political-social environment and grassroots economic improvement (Wikipedia 2025).

and greater representation for women in political offices, signaled a move toward more inclusive governance

Socio-Economically, Indonesia saw the rise of women in entrepreneurial and leadership roles. The growth of the service sector, increased access to education, and the expansion of microfinance programs allowed women to engage in business and other economic activities more freely. International organizations further supported these changes by encouraging gender equality policies within Indonesia's development frameworks.

The current period continues to show promise for advancing women's rights, but challenges remain, including issues related to gender-based violence, the underrepresentation of women in political leadership positions, and the ongoing persistence of traditional gender norms. Still, the economic changes brought about by globalization, along with growing awareness of gender equality, have created an environment that empowers women to seek more equality and freedom in both their private and public spheres.

Interplay of these diverse historical forces continues to shape the notion of womanhood and motherhood in Indonesia today. Importantly, the predominantly Islamic character of contemporary Indonesian society reflects a synthesis of these historical influences. The ideal Indonesian woman is often envisioned as a pious, modest, and family-oriented individual more specifically could be a good mother and wife, a perception rooted in Islamic teachings but also influenced by Hindu-Buddhist ideas of familial duty and colonial-era notions of domesticity.

Therefore, it could be said that the ideal role of women started from post-independence Indonesia became synonymous with someone who could balance traditional values with the demands of modern society. From this the notion of an ideal woman began to evolve, emphasizing qualities such as education, career, and familial responsibilities. However, these expectations varied across different regions in Indonesia. In urban areas, women were expected to be educated, independent, and career-oriented. On the other hand, in more traditional and rural areas, the ideal woman was seen as a nurturer, a good wife and a mother who devoted herself to her family and household duties. Nonetheless, regardless of regional differences, the central role of a woman in Indonesian society remained constant: to be a good wife and mother. This perception was

deeply ingrained in the cultural and religious values of the country, and women were expected to prioritize their duties as caregivers and homemakers above all else. While there have been strides towards gender equality and the recognition of women's rights in post-independence Indonesia, as a spiritual country, the ideal of a good wife and mother still carries significant weight in shaping perceptions of ideal womanhood and motherhood. It is going to be further discussed about this in the third chapter, which will have to do with discourses of motherhood in Indonesia (Sarwono 2017).

1.4 Explanation of the Intersection of Feminist and Islamic Discourses on Women's Body: Reproduction and Motherhood

The intersection of feminist and Islamic discourses on women's bodies is a complicated and nuanced field that must be carefully navigated. Within this complex terrain, one of the primary topics of my discussion here is reproduction and motherhood. These topics sit at the heart of key debates within both feminist and Islamic ideologies, which frequently align on certain principles while diverging on others, such as bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and the societal roles of women. While radical feminists in the 1970s championed critiques of motherhood and reproductive roles as tools of patriarchal control, this thesis prioritizes the perspectives of postmodern and poststructuralist feminists from third-wave feminism. The reason for this shift is their ability to account for cultural and contextual differences. Postmodern feminism offers significant strengths in analyzing the intersection of feminist and Islamic discourses on women's bodies, particularly concerning reproduction and motherhood. One key strength lies in its emphasis on cultural specificity. By rejecting universalizing narratives, postmodern feminism recognizes that gender roles, including those related to motherhood and reproduction, are shaped by cultural, religious, and historical contexts. (Jeremiah 2006; Takševa 2018).

This approach aligns well with the complexity of Islamic discourses, which often interpret women's bodies within specific cultural frameworks. For instance, Islamic views on motherhood as a sacred and divinely ordained role can be analyzed without imposing Western feminist critiques of patriarchy as the sole interpretive lens. Another reason is postmodern feminism's incorporation of intersectionality, which is essential for

understanding women's experiences in Islamic contexts. Intersectionality allows for a nuanced examination of how religion, culture, race, and class intersect to shape ideas about reproduction and motherhood. For example, it sheds light on how Muslim women navigate religious teachings on childbearing while also addressing modern feminist critiques of these teachings. Unlike radical feminism, which often critiques motherhood as an inherent site of oppression, third-wave feminism embraces diversity, intersectionality, and agency, making it particularly well-suited for this discussion. To begin with, it is important to note that motherhood is one of the most intimate and essential human connections and therefore of concern to all, and female biological reproductive capacity and social assignment for childbearing and the maintenance of domestic life have been centrally connected with women's subordinate status across many cultures and historical eras (Sarwono 2017).

Moreover, reproduction and motherhood have long been divisive issues within feminist movements, often seen as reinforcing patriarchal norms that limit women's autonomy. Andrea O'Reilly's concept of matricentric feminism, for instance, seeks to resolve this tension by reframing motherhood as an empowering, feminist practice rather than a restrictive role. Rooted in maternal theory, matricentric feminism emphasizes maternal subjectivity, agency, and the value of care work, challenging patriarchal motherhood while advocating for social justice and gender equality. By integrating diverse maternal experiences into feminist discourse, this approach bridges the divide, positioning motherhood as compatible with empowerment and central to feminist goals of equity and liberation (O'Reilly 2019).

Similar to this, postmodern and poststructuralist feminists reject the idea of a universal category of women and see motherhood as just one aspect of a woman's identity, offering potential for agency and diversity. This perspective has been embraced by newer maternal feminist thinking, which sees motherhood as a source of power and emphasizes the diversity of motherhoods, including those made available through assisted reproductive technologies (ART)" (Neyer and Bernardi 2011). This means that women have the right to make choices and decisions about their own bodies, including their sexual and reproductive health. Certainly, advocating reproductive rights and freedoms aligned with the fight for access to all forms of birth control: abortion, sterilization, and contraceptives (Holvick 2014). These accesses allowed women to choose whether or not

they desired children at all and strongly countered the pro-family social mores that had previously existed.

Feminists argue that patriarchal societies have long controlled and regulated women's bodies and reproduction, often for the benefit of men only, and that this has resulted in the oppression and subjugation of women. In this sense, the reproductive rights and freedoms that were mentioned above, even the childfree lifestyle is seen as essential for women's liberation and equality. It can be highlighted that new feminist discourses attempt to remove restrictive conventions that limit women to narrowly defined roles based on their reproductive ability by fighting for a larger and more inclusive concept of motherhood.

On the other hand, religious teachings, cultural traditions, and evolving interpretations over time deeply root Islamic perspectives on reproduction and motherhood. Islam places significant value on the family unit and regards motherhood as an esteemed and noble role for women. Both the Qur'an and Hadith emphasize the importance of motherhood, recognizing the sacrifices and responsibilities involved in raising children. For instance, the Qur'an, in Surah Luqman (31:14-15) and Surah Al-Ahqaf (46:15), highlights the honour bestowed upon mothers in Islam.

Regarding the role of motherhood, Islamic teachings hold that a mother is entrusted with the duties of childbirth, breastfeeding, nurturing, and educating her child to become a righteous *khalifah* (steward) in this world. However, as a comprehensive and accommodating religion, Islam provides alternatives in cases where fulfilling these duties may not be feasible. For example, Islam encourages mothers to breastfeed their children for up to two years, but it does not impose this as an absolute requirement. If a mother is unable or unwilling to breastfeed for the full duration, she is permitted to make alternative arrangements through mutual consultation with her spouse. Additionally, if a mother is physically unable to breastfeed, the responsibility may be transferred to another caregiver, such as a nanny or wet nurse, provided that the family can afford such arrangements.

﴿وَالْوَالِدَتُ يُرْضِعْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ حَوْلَيْنِ كَامِلَيْنِ لِمَنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يُنَمِّ الرِّضَاعَةَ وَعَلَى الْمَوْلُودِ لَهُ رِزْقُهُنَّ وَكِسْوَتُهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ لَا تُكَلَّفُ نَفْسٌ إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا لَا تُضَارَّ وَالِدَةٌ وَبَوْلُهَا وَلَا مَوْلُودٌ لَهُ بِوَلَدِهِ وَعَلَى الْوَارِثِ مِثْلُ ذَلِكَ فَإِنْ أَرَادَا فِصَالًا عَنْ تَرَاضٍ مِنْهُمَا وَتَشَاوُرٍ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِمَا وَإِنْ أَرَدْتُمْ أَنْ تَسْتَرْضِعُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذَا سَلَّمْتُمْ مَا اتَّيْتُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ﴾ (٢٣٣)

The Qur'an explicitly mentions this flexibility, reflecting Islam's pragmatic approach to maternal responsibilities.

These nuances illustrate that conceptions of motherhood in Islam have evolved and, to some extent, reflect contemporary constructions and interpretation of it in Muslim societies. Islamic thought deeply respects and honors mothers for their contributions to the family and community, as previously noted. They are often regarded as role models for their children, and Islamic teachings encourage mothers to actively participate in the religious and moral upbringing of their families, reinforcing their central role within the household. Simultaneously, Islam acknowledges the importance of women's health and well-being, advocating for medical care and support during pregnancy and childbirth. However, interpretations of family planning within Islamic discourse vary. For example, a traditional Indonesian proverb states, "*Many children, many fortunes*," reflecting an older Islamic perspective and a cultural trait in Indonesian society that values large families. In this sense, women historically had limited agency in determining the number of children they could bear and raise. In contrast, modern Islamic thought increasingly supports the principle of mutual consultation ("shura") between spouses regarding family planning, an idea that was less emphasized in classical Islamic texts. As the modern contraceptive methods did not exist, the notion of family planning has largely emerged through neo-traditionalist and modernist interpretations of Islam (Karomi 2023; Hakim, n.d.; Ismail 2018).

From these points of view, it portrays that the relationship between feminist and Islamic discourses on women's bodies, particularly concerning reproduction and motherhood, is complex and often contentious. Feminist perspectives emphasize bodily autonomy and advocate for women's right to make independent reproductive choices, including access to contraception, abortion, and the ability to prioritize or de-prioritize motherhood. These perspectives challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations that define motherhood as a woman's primary purpose.

In contrast, Islamic teachings encourage believers to seek children as a blessing from Allah, emphasizing the legitimacy of offspring born within marriage and the importance of lineage. Qur'anic verses such as Surah An-Nisa' (4:1), Surah Ar-Ra'd (13:38), and Surah An-Nahl (16:72) underscore the value of children and the continuation of human life. Furthermore, Hadith literature reinforces the significance of large families,

with the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) encouraging marriage to loving and fertile partners to expand the Muslim *ummah*. These teachings have been interpreted in diverse ways across traditional, neo-traditional, and modernist Islamic discourses, each offering distinct perspectives on the role of motherhood in women's lives.

Hereby, it can be noted that there has been a growing movement within both feminist and Islamic communities to find a more nuanced understanding of women's rights and their relationship to reproduction and motherhood. This includes highlighting the importance of consent and choice in reproductive decisions, as well as challenging traditional patriarchal interpretations of Islam that may limit women's agency.

1.5 Methodology

This thesis relies on qualitative methods. Qualitative approaches are used to understand people's attitudes, interactions, behaviours, and beliefs" (Kalra, Pathak, and Jena 2013). "There are three broad categories of qualitative research: observational studies, interview studies, and documentary or textual analysis of various written sources" (Mays 2000). This thesis benefits from these different data collection methods all at once.

To gather information on how Indonesian women navigate feminist and Islamic discourses on motherhood in their decisions to reject or delay it, this research primarily relied on interviews and online ethnography.

Firstly, this thesis utilized qualitative interviews to gain insight into individuals' perspectives regarding motherhood and the idea of having children. These interviews were semi-structured and followed a consistent approach: I began by confirming their marital status, followed by in-depth discussions regarding their thoughts on motherhood and childbearing. However, due to the sensitive nature of the topic in Indonesian society, as well as logistical constraints, the number of interviews conducted was limited to three participants it obtained from different ages, professional, educational, and religious backgrounds. At the time of this research, I was living in Türkiye, which restricted my ability to conduct more face-to-face interviews. I conducted two direct interviews: one with Intan Pertiwi during her brief visit to Türkiye and another with an Indonesian diaspora in Türkiye, along with an online interview via personal message. However, the combination of physical distance and the social stigma surrounding the childfree choice

made it challenging to recruit more participants willing to speak openly about their decision.

My first informant is Intan Pertiwi (name withheld), a 38-year-old single Muslim woman with a bachelor's degree in design. She works professionally as a designer. I accessed Intan through her social media account, particularly from WhatsApp Messenger and Instagram. I approached her directly via message, briefly explaining the research purpose and inviting her to participate. I interviewed with her on November 10, 2024, while she was on a business trip in Istanbul. At the beginning of our conversation, I first asked whether she was married. After confirming her single status, I proceeded to explore her views and feelings about the prospect of having children.

The second informant is Dita Anjani (name withheld), a 28-year-old married Muslim woman with a master's degree who lives in Istanbul. She is a wife who prefers to withhold her real name for privacy reasons. I was introduced to her through a mutual academic contact who recommended her as someone willing to speak on the topic. The interview took place on October 3rd, 2024. As with the first informant, I began the interview by confirming her marital status. Once she affirmed that she was married, I asked her to share her thoughts on the idea of having children, including any personal considerations or societal expectations she faces.

The third informant is Anya Safira Cahyati (name withheld), a 35-year-old single Hindu woman who holds a master's degree. Anya is known for her active online presence and was contacted through her Instagram account. Due to geographical distance and scheduling constraints, we conducted the interview online over ten days, from October 5th to October 15th, 2024. Like the others, I started our conversation by asking if she was married or not, followed by open-ended questions about her perspectives on having children. Anya's insights were particularly valuable in understanding how cultural and religious views shape personal decisions on motherhood among single women in her demographic. Through these interviews, I was able to gather a rich diversity of opinions that reflect how age, class, and religion intersect with personal choices and societal norms surrounding marriage and childbearing.

This study anonymized all informants using pseudonyms. Although some participants initially agreed to be identified by their real names or public social media handles, the final decision was made to apply pseudonyms to everyone. This approach

ensures consistent confidentiality, protects participant privacy, and upholds ethical standards, especially given the sensitivity of the subject matter.

In addition to interviews, this study also employed online ethnography as a complementary method to explore how ideas about marriage and childbearing are publicly expressed and negotiated in digital spaces. This method involved analyzing the publicly available content of six female figures active on social media platforms, primarily Instagram and YouTube. These individuals were selected based on their visible engagement with themes of womanhood, family, autonomy, and societal expectations, often in the form of posts, videos, and public commentaries. For example, Yosefine Christi (@yosefinechristi), a 41-year-old single Christian woman with a master's degree, works as an education consultant and content creator. Her posts frequently reflect on personal choice, independence, and relationship advice. Similarly, Evangelina Tessia Pricilla (@evtessia), estimated to be between 30 and 35 years old, is a single author and content creator who openly discusses lifestyle and individuality, personal choice, independence, and relationship advice.

Lilia (@liel_lilia), a Christian woman who appears online with her spouse, presents her content through a mix of social media and online broadcasts, offering insight into Christian family life from a married perspective. Gita Savitri Dewi (@gitasav), a 30-year-old married Muslim woman with a master's degree, engages her audience as an author, content creator, and cosmetic chemist. Her YouTube videos and social media posts often address individuality, personal choice, and independence. Wanda Roxanne Ratu Pricillia (@wandaxanne), a single Muslim woman and psychology graduate in her early 30s, shares reflections on selfhood and societal norms. Finally, Nana (@nana_palmreader), a 32-year-old single Christian content creator, blends spirituality and life commentary in her content, occasionally touching on topics related to women and femininity.

This method does not anonymize all interlocutors because it relies on content that the individuals themselves have already made public. Many are known public figures whose identities are central to the messages they convey. However, this approach maintains ethical consideration by using only publicly available materials and analyzing them within their social and cultural context. Where informants preferred not to be named or where privacy concerns were higher, pseudonyms or partial identifiers were used. This

selective anonymization reflects the complex nature of online ethnography, where the boundary between private and public identities is often blurred.

Besides the interviews and online ethnography through social media analysis, I also gathered data from a variety of digital platforms, including podcasts, YouTube videos, and the comment sections of these platforms. These online sources provided valuable insight into public discourse surrounding marriage, motherhood, childfree choices, personal piety, and the role of women in contemporary society. Many creators and speakers used these platforms to express personal experiences, challenge societal expectations, or offer commentary on cultural norms, content that was highly relevant to the thematic concerns of this research.

Particularly on YouTube, I analyzed not only the videos published by content creators but also the public responses found in the comment sections. These comments often served as a form of social feedback, reflecting audience reactions, agreements, disagreements, and shared experiences. They offered a broader sense of how these ideas are received, negotiated, or contested within online communities. In this way, YouTube functioned as a rich, layered source of both authored and audience-generated content.

To maintain clarity for the reader while preserving the authenticity of the data, I chose to refer to YouTube commenters by their publicly displayed usernames or simplified nicknames derived from those usernames. This approach serves two purposes: first, it respects the semi-public nature of these online interactions; second, it makes the discussion more readable and coherent for the audience of this thesis. Where usernames were too complex, I abbreviated or modified them slightly to enhance readability without altering the essence of the original contribution.

Overall, integrating these digital platforms into the research allowed me to observe how personal narratives, community discourse, and cultural values converge in the digital space, especially concerning gender roles, reproductive choices, and marital expectations. This multi-platform approach enriched the study by capturing a diverse range of voices that might not be accessible through formal interviews alone. To complement the primary data sources, secondary data was also collected from existing academic research, scholarly literature, and international news. After the data collection process, the thesis provides details on the specific scope of its findings.

Furthermore, my positionality as a single, young Indonesian woman pursuing a master's degree who currently lives abroad has significantly influenced both the research process and the interpretation of findings. On one hand, my physical and emotional distance from the daily pressures of Indonesian society allowed me to approach the topic with greater critical reflection. Some respondents and peers acknowledged that my position offered a timely and relevant lens on a growing trend among Indonesian women who are prioritizing education and career over traditional roles of wife and mother. On the other hand, I have also encountered resistance and scepticism regarding my research interests. I have been told, for example, that I should stop pursuing higher education and instead get married to fulfill the religious ideal of completing one's faith. Others have questioned whether my prolonged stay in Türkiye has made me more secular or influenced me to adopt Western feminist views. These personal experiences not only highlight the social tensions surrounding the rejection of motherhood in Indonesia but also shaped my sensitivity, empathy, and reflexivity as a researcher navigating between insider and outsider perspectives.

1.6 Plan of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into six chapters, each building on the previous to explore the complexities surrounding the childfree movement among women in Indonesia, particularly through the intersection of feminism, religion, and socio-cultural expectations.

Chapter One, "Researching Childfree Women in Indonesia", lays the foundation for the study by introducing the historical and cultural context of women who choose to remain childfree. It outlines the significance and purpose of the research, offers an overview of the evolution of women's roles in Indonesia from the pre-colonial period through to the independence movement, and discusses the intersecting discourses of feminism and Islam concerning reproduction and motherhood. The chapter concludes with a description of the methodology and data collection process, including interviews and online ethnography.

Chapter Two, "Theorizing motherhood: secular and Islamic perspectives", examines the major theoretical frameworks that inform the study. It begins with an

overview of feminist discourses on motherhood, including radical, Marxist, and third-wave feminist perspectives. The chapter then transitions to explore Islamic perspectives, comparing traditional, reformist, and neo-traditional views on motherhood and women's roles. The aim is to provide a critical lens through which the childfree phenomenon can be analyzed.

Chapter Three, "Historicizing the discourses of motherhood in Indonesia", contextualizes the ideological and policy-driven constructions of motherhood across different political eras. It traces how colonial rule, the Old Order, the New Order, and the Reform era shaped gender roles and family expectations. This chapter reveals how state and religious institutions have historically regulated women's reproductive choices, helping to understand current social attitudes toward childfree women.

Chapter Four, "Childfree experiences in Indonesia," presents the core findings of the research. It explores why some Indonesian women choose a childfree lifestyle, analyzing a range of motivations including economic, political, individual, and feminist factors, as well as the influence of globalization and digital media. Drawing from interview data and online ethnography, this chapter highlights the voices and lived experiences of women who have made this choice.

Chapter Five, "The stigma and challenges faced by the childfree movement and how they navigate the stereotypes," delves into the societal responses to the childfree movement. It examines both social-political and moral-religious stigmas, and how these are rooted in cultural norms and gender expectations. The chapter also details the strategies used by childfree women to challenge stereotypes, resist pressures, and reframe narratives of personal fulfilment and contribution. Topics such as familial expectations, financial independence, career focus, and alternative life choices, like pet companionship, are discussed to illustrate how these women redefine womanhood outside traditional maternal roles.

Chapter Six is conclusion, to conclude the rejection of motherhood among Indonesian women emerges as a multifaceted form of resistance against deep-rooted cultural, religious, and political gender norms. Shortly this thesis has shown that motherhood in Indonesia is historically framed as a moral and social imperative for women, reinforcing their roles as caregivers and moral anchors. The key findings reveal: (1) childfree women face significant stigma and emotional burden due to entrenched

gender expectations; (2) while men are not expected to center their identities around fatherhood, those who reject traditional roles or express non-normative masculinities also face marginalization; (3) educated and professional women are leading a shift in rejecting motherhood as a liberating act; (4) economic uncertainty, mental health awareness, and feminist discourse support this movement; (5) religious and cultural expectations remain strong obstacles; and (6) online communities help foster solidarity and reshape public discourse. Ultimately, choosing a childfree life in Indonesia is a politically and personally meaningful act that challenges narrow definitions of womanhood and opens space for more inclusive gender narratives.



CHAPTER 2: THEORISING MOTHERHOOD: SECULAR AND ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Feminist Discourses on Motherhood

Motherhood is a universally recognized concept deeply ingrained in society's understanding of gender roles and expectations. Throughout the history of the feminist movement, exploring the idea of the definition of motherhood has been one of the concerns that have polarized feminist activists as well as philosophers. This fact is why the study of motherhood has had an uneasy and ambivalent relationship with feminism and feminist theory. Ranging from a radical feminist rejection of motherhood on the perceived basis of its inherent oppression or double burden on women, and the view that "motherhood has everything to do with a history in which women remain powerless by reproducing the world of men" (Takševa, n.d. 177), on the other hand, since most women become mothers, many feminists have regarded motherhood as a uniting element among women and have based their claims on the rights of women to work on it (Neyer and Bernardi 2011, 164).

This chapter will explore the nuances of the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of feminist discourses on motherhood, building on recent developments in feminist thought that seek to challenge and expand our understanding of what it means to be a mother. It will delve into the diverse perspectives and voices that have emerged in the past and ongoing conversation about motherhood and its intersections with gender, power, and identity. By critically analyzing and interrogating societal norms and expectations, this chapter aims to highlight the transformative potential of feminist discourses from three different groups of feminism: Radical, Marxist, and colonial feminist perspectives in shaping our understanding of motherhood and its impact on both individuals and society as a whole, especially the impact on Indonesian society.

2.1.1 Radical Feminist Perspective

Motherhood is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been defined and redefined by various cultures, societies, and movements throughout history. One such movement,

radical feminism, has challenged traditional notions of motherhood and presented a different perspective that deviates from the norm.

Radical feminism developed mainly during the "second wave" of feminism from the 1960s onwards in Western countries, mainly in France, England, Canada and especially the United States, under the influence of various left-wing social movements such as the civil rights movement, the student movement or the hippy movement (Cottais and Feldner 2021).⁴ This group emerged in response to the limitations and oppressions that women faced in patriarchal societies. In the mid-60s, mainstream feminist discourse challenged traditional notions of motherhood and viewed it as a tool used by men to control and subjugate women. This perspective was influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's idea that motherhood reinforces women's inferior status by trying to immanence and deny them the ability to transcend their roles. They argued that women were socialized to prioritize motherhood above all else and there was no opportunity for individual development especially for women which contributed to their lack of agency and power in society (Neyer and Bernardi 2011, 166). Thus, they stated that women were seen as unable to achieve the same level of success and freedom as men and were confined merely to follow the traditional roles.

Understanding the idea of motherhood through a radical feminist lens, this idea generally stresses that motherhood is not solely about giving birth, raising children, and nurturing them. Instead, they view it as a socially constructed and imposed role for women, aimed at maintaining the patriarchal order. Radical feminists argue that motherhood is not a natural or biological fact but rather a cultural and historical construct. They reject the notion that motherhood is an essential part of being a woman, contending that it is a social expectation rather than a personal choice. Furthermore, they believe that motherhood perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces traditional gender roles,

⁴ Second Wave Feminism refers to a period of feminist activity that began in the early 1960s and continued into the 1980s, primarily in the United States and other Western countries. Unlike the First Wave, which focused on legal issues such as women's suffrage, the Second Wave expanded its scope to a broader range of issues, including reproductive rights, workplace discrimination and equal pay, domestic violence and marital rape, representation in media and culture, and critiques of traditional gender roles and patriarchy (Friedan 1963, Openpress digital, n.d)

restricting women's opportunities for education, career advancement, and economic independence. This, in turn, keeps them dependent on men. More specifically, radical feminists contend that motherhood functions as a tool to control women's bodies and sexuality. They argue that societal norms dictate that heterosexual intercourse and pregnancy are prerequisites for motherhood, further solidifying male dominance. Motherhood, in this view, is not merely a private or personal experience but a political institution that ensures women's subordination within a patriarchal society. Radical feminists seek to challenge and deconstruct these societal norms, advocating for reproductive autonomy and the right to self-determination (Maroney, n.d., 45-51).

One of the most striking perspectives on motherhood within radical feminism comes from Jeffner Allen, in her work "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women" from *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* published in 1983, boldly claims that "motherhood is dangerous to women" and calls for its rejection through a "philosophy of evacuation." This concept of "evacuation" refers to the deliberate rejection of traditional motherhood and the patriarchal structures that enforce it. Allen's argument aligns with the broader second-wave feminist critique of female oppression stemming from rigid gender roles, marriage, and the nuclear family. She asserts that motherhood is often idealized as a "natural" and "fulfilling" role for women when, in reality, it serves as a mechanism of oppression and exploitation that curtails women's autonomy and freedom (Takseva 2017, 181).

Similarly, other radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Sheila Jeffreys have maintained strong critiques of motherhood. Firestone, for example, in her work *The Dialectic of Sex*, argues that biological reproduction inherently subjugates women and advocates for technological advancements to liberate women from the constraints of childbirth (Snitow 1992, 36-38). Millett critiques the family unit as a central institution that enforces male dominance, suggesting that motherhood is a primary means through which patriarchy sustains itself (Thornham 2004, 31). Jeffreys expands on this critique by scrutinizing the ways patriarchal control exploits women's bodies, particularly through enforced reproductive roles (Jeffreys 2009, 42-44). These feminists continue to see motherhood as an institution that enforces gender hierarchy rather than an empowering experience for women.

A crucial factor influencing radical feminist critiques of motherhood was the issue of birth control and reproductive rights. During the time when these ideas were gaining traction, access to contraception and abortion was highly restricted, particularly for unmarried women. The lack of reproductive autonomy meant that many women were forced into motherhood against their will, reinforcing the notion that it was a role imposed upon them rather than a freely made choice. The radical feminist movement, therefore, placed a strong emphasis on advocating for reproductive rights, aiming to dismantle the coercive structures that limited women's control over their bodies and lives.

However, over time, this radical feminist notion of motherhood has faced criticism and rejection. Some feminists argue that rather than being a source of oppression, motherhood can be a source of strength and empowerment for women. They hold the belief that women have the power to redefine motherhood according to their own terms, utilizing it as a tool to question conventional gender roles and assert their agency. One way in which motherhood can be empowered is through the subversion of traditional expectations. For example, some feminists argue that by redefining motherhood as a shared responsibility between both parents, women can break free from the idea that childcare is exclusively their duty. Additionally, mothers who participate in activism and advocacy for parental rights and workplace reforms demonstrate that motherhood does not have to equate to subservience but can instead be a platform for social change.

Among those who have adopted a more nuanced view of motherhood are feminists like Ann Snitow, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, and Sara Ruddick. Snitow critically examines societal norms and expectations surrounding motherhood, highlighting the challenges feminists face when critiquing conventional views. She draws attention to the pervasive pronatalist ideology that exists both in broader society and within feminism itself, which makes it difficult to critique motherhood without facing backlash or judgment. Snitow explores the experiences of both mothers and non-mothers, advocating for the need to dismantle the taboos surrounding both groups.

One of Snitow's key arguments is that within traditional gender roles, motherhood is often framed as the ultimate fulfillment for women, and any deviation from this norm is met with scrutiny and condemnation. She also notes that, even within the feminist movement, there are conflicting views on motherhood, with some feminists placing pressure on women to conform to an "authentic" version of it. This so-called "authentic"

motherhood is an ambiguous and contested concept, referring to a prescribed ideal of what a "good mother" should be, one that aligns with societal expectations and norms (Snitow, 1992).

Moreover, Snitow critiques this notion, arguing that it excludes and devalues the diverse experiences of mothers. Authentic motherhood, in this context, suggests that women must embody certain traits, emotions, and behaviors to be considered "good" mothers. This, she argues, creates unrealistic standards and further marginalizes mothers who do not fit into this mold. Additionally, she stresses that the concept of authenticity in motherhood is problematic because it assumes a singular, universal experience rather than recognizing the fluid and multifaceted nature of it (Snitow 1992).

By contrast, Adrienne Rich, reclaims motherhood as a potential site of empowerment, emphasizing its complexity and the agency women can exercise within it. Alice Walker and Sara Ruddick further contribute by acknowledging that motherhood can be both an oppressive institution and a source of strength, depending on how individual women navigate it. Their perspectives underscore the evolving feminist discourse that recognizes diverse maternal experiences rather than imposing a singular framework (De La Paz 2022, 319-323).

Ultimately, the radical feminist critique of motherhood, while instrumental in exposing the oppressive structures surrounding it, has sparked an ongoing debate within feminism. The movement has evolved to embrace a more nuanced perspective, one that acknowledges the challenges and constraints of motherhood while also recognizing the potential for empowerment and self-determination. The evolution of radical feminist thought in motherhood reflects the dynamic nature of feminist discourse, highlighting the importance of intersectionality, inclusivity, and the recognition of women's agency in shaping their own identities and destinies.

2.1.2 Marxist Feminist Perspective on Motherhood

Even though Motherhood is often romanticized as a joyous and fulfilling experience, radical and Marxist feminists differ significantly in their interpretations of motherhood and its implications for women's lives. As I mentioned in the previous section, radical feminists view motherhood as a primary source of women's oppression, arguing that

societal expectations and traditional gender roles confine women to domestic and caregiving responsibilities, thus limiting their freedom and potential for personal growth. They advocate for dismantling the traditional family structure to liberate women from these restrictive roles. In contrast, Marxist feminists see the oppressive aspects of motherhood as rooted in the capitalist system. They contend that capitalism exploits women's reproductive labor and uses the family structure to maintain economic and social hierarchies. Instead of dismantling the family, Marxist feminists seek to transform the economic system to free women from exploitation and oppression (Gimenez 2019).

Women are continually at odds with their societal responsibilities as caregivers and their desire for personal and financial independence. In other words, motherhood is more than a biological event: it is a social institution. It encompasses a set of practices performed by women, a set of beliefs, and carries significant material consequences. The concept of motherhood is both an abstract ideal and a complex set of concrete activities. It is central to the definition of women's role and identity, and Marxist feminists interpret the meaning of motherhood as central to women's oppression. Therefore, in this subsection, I propose to explore the meaning of motherhood through a Marxist-Feminist lens and analyze how mothers navigate the capitalist divide in their quest for self-determination and social change. This section addresses the frequently overlooked experiences of marginalized women as they contend with the intersecting pressures of motherhood and labor within a capitalist framework. By adopting a Marxist feminist perspective, one that critiques traditional, idealized notions of motherhood, it underscores how capitalist structures exacerbate the contradictions women encounter between reproductive and productive labor. This discussion remains particularly relevant today, as women's experiences continue to be marginalized in a capitalist society that requires them to face the unpaid responsibilities of caregiving with the exploitative demands of paid work.

For the vast majority of women, their biological potential to have children is translated into a social expectation that they will and must have children, and social pressure to do so. From this statement, when women are forced to have children and cannot decide their own choices, an understanding of the theory and practice of motherhood is used to justify women's oppression and to establish and maintain relations of domination and subordination between the sexes. Especially, in a world driven by

capitalist ideologies that prioritize profit over people, women, particularly mothers, are trapped in a complex web of oppression that perpetuates gender inequality and the capitalist system (Bellioti 1988).

Throughout history, capitalism's monopoly on violence and the ability to control discourse indirectly through manipulation of media and institutions has made the oppressed party accept their role and false consciousness. It is undeniable that this has happened to women. What I mean by false consciousness here is it refers to a Marxist concept where the oppressed class (obviously in this case, women) are misled to believe and accept ideologies and conditions that are against their own best interests. This occurs due to the manipulation of media and institutions by those in power (which is the ruling class or patriarchy) to maintain the status quo. The ideology of the patriarch here says that man is the breadwinner, and his benefit comes only to the family. This issue has created the need for cheap labour, which is women, in the industry. Women are treated as a reserve army of labour because when there's inflation or when men's wages aren't sufficient enough, the industry will lay off the women. This fact contradicts the need for more money in the family because women's wages are seen as supplementary to men's, and it's always the man who takes care of the family. This situation is by no means suitable for women with families, and the industry knows it, but the ideology is being kept, and manipulation will ensure that things don't go back to the way they were. Step by step, capitalism has changed many aspects for women, whether it's class or status. Ultimately, it's always for the sake of capital accumulation, and women are also a part of it. False consciousness, therefore, is the mechanism by which women are led to accept and perpetuate their exploitation, often viewing their economic contributions as secondary and their roles as natural extensions of their domestic responsibilities. This ideological manipulation prevents them from challenging the system and striving for genuine equality and empowerment (Glass 1994).

Furthermore, Marxist feminism sees the private-public dichotomy leading to the oppression of women. The capitalistic means of production have turned the family, a private institution that operates as a unit of consumption and personal satisfaction (people living together out of love and/or relation), into a unit of production where the head of the family is responsible for what it's turning out. This idea has created an oppressive connotation for women because of the generic identification of women with their

childbearing function. Physiologically, women can't be alienated from "their product", and the childbearing process that takes a long period to produce a child will always be seen as a "mature product." All of these actions have turned the role of motherhood into one of the most important capitalistic kinds of labour, and tragically, it's unpaid.

When it comes to the Marxist Feminist Critique of Motherhood, generally they also agree that the institution of motherhood is closely linked to patriarchy and the oppression of women as mentioned earlier. However, core to the Marxist feminist view is that motherhood, as a social construction, has been used as an ideological weapon by the ruling class to promote the interests of capitalism by ensuring the maintenance of a productive workforce, the reproduction of cheap labor for future generations of workers, or free labor that does household duties and takes care of babies without any payment at all. This response is achieved by defining women's 'natural' role as that of child bearers and rearing and then using this definition to restrict women's access and contribution to social, economic, and political life. This view of women's role perpetuates gender inequality by denying women the same opportunities as men. It also marginalizes women's voices and prevents them from having a say in decisions that impact their lives.

In other words, the notion that all women should be and desire to be mothers has always been used to keep women in subordinate positions while also paying lip service to the social importance of their role (Gimenez 2019). Particularly, in the capitalist system, they argue that capitalism reinforces gender inequality by prioritizing profit and productivity over the well-being and needs of mothers. For instance, this system undervalues and devalues the unpaid labour of caregiving, which is predominantly performed by women. Most importantly the capitalist structure often lacks support systems such as affordable childcare, paid parental leave, and flexible work arrangements, making it difficult for women workers and at the same time forced to have children to balance their caregiving responsibilities with their economic autonomy. In this case, mothers will be disproportionately affected by economic insecurity, limited career opportunities, and a lack of social recognition for their invaluable contributions to society. This inequality is further compounded by the fact that women are often paid less than men for the same job, making it difficult for them to support their families' expenses. As a result, women are often expected to take on the majority of domestic duties as wives

and mothers, which leaves them with less time to pursue their career ambitions than men (Andrade 1990, Bryson 2004).

Referring to this case, Marxist feminists tried to explain that the oppression of motherhood is not solely based on biological differences or personal choices, but rather on the capitalist system that devalues and exploits their labor (Mackinnon 2013). They view motherhood as a form of unpaid labour that sustains the capitalist economy by producing and reproducing the next generation of workers. This perspective highlights how the capitalist system relies on the exploitation of women's unpaid caregiving work within the confines of the family unit. Furthermore, according to Marxist feminists, the separation of home and workplace under capitalism creates the illusion that women work solely for men in their public or private spheres. However, in reality, women are also working for capital and sustaining the capitalist system through their unpaid labour or being paid less than men. From this view, women's caregiving work becomes instrumental in reproducing and maintaining the capitalist mode of production. This unpaid labour is seen as essential to the continuation of capitalism, and women are seen as the primary victims of this system. This is why feminist activists perceived that the only way to change this system was through a socialist revolution. This revolution would involve the overthrow of capitalism and destroying the patriarchal system through the establishment of a new system based on gender equality and women's liberation.

Subsequently, the meaning of motherhood from a feminist perspective state that it is not limited to giving birth and raising children. It is instead centered around the notion of reproductive freedom and the right for women to make choices about their bodies and sexuality. Feminists believe that motherhood should not be imposed on women and that they should have control over their reproductive choices. This includes the ability to decide when and whether or not to have children, as well as access to safe and legal abortion and contraception. Without these options, women are limited in their ability to make informed decisions about their bodies and their lives.

Even though there is an array of issues that are potentially problematic for Marxist feminists in theorizing motherhood, the idea of motherhood as a social relation of production offers a unique lens to understand the material and ideological conditions under which women's labour and the products of it, most of all children - are shaped and reshaped.

As we know the rise of capitalism saw the privatization and defamiliarization of reproductive work, and from these Marxist feminists' perspectives have been able to assess the relegation of women to the private sphere (and thus removal from the public sphere), the devaluing of women's labor, and the development of the ideology of separate gender spheres. This has implications for understanding the situation of women in the developed and underdeveloped world today, as those who are situated in the latter are still subsistence producers whilst also holding down wage labor, as well as for the changes in the structure of the working-class family and continuing moves towards further privatization and defamiliarization of aspects of reproductive work.

In short, the Marxist feminist perspective on motherhood delves deeply into the socio-economic forces that shape the experiences of mothers within capitalist societies, shedding light on how gender, class, and capitalism intersect to perpetuate inequality and exploitation. It highlights how motherhood is shaped by economic and class relations, perpetuating gender inequality within capitalist societies. Through this lens, motherhood is seen not merely as a natural or personal phenomenon, but as a social and economic construct that serves the interests of capital and reinforces patriarchal power structures. Thus, early Marxist feminist scholars rejected the notion that motherhood is solely a result of biological factors and instead emphasized the influence of the capitalist system on the value and experiences of motherhood.

2.1.3 Third-wave Feminist Perspective on Motherhood through the Lens of Black Feminism

Following the discourse on motherhood within feminist theory, it is important to note that the comparison between second-wave and third-wave feminism reveals significant shifts in perspectives and approaches. In second wave of Feminism, they argued that motherhood was a barrier to women's autonomy, limiting their capacity to participate fully in the public sphere and restricting their potential for personal freedom. While third-wave feminism, influenced by the postmodernist movement, sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that transmit ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity (Brunell, n.d.). The third wave of feminism was more encompassing as it welcomed and included women and girls from various racial

backgrounds. They present a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of motherhood. Third-wave feminists embrace the idea that motherhood is not a singular, monolithic experience. Rather, it can be diverse, shaped by race, culture, class, and personal choice. This wave also rejected traditional notions of womanhood that portrayed women as either submissive and pure or aggressive and promiscuous, and instead redefined femininity as strong, self-confident, and in control of one's sexuality. In particular, I would like to discuss how they reconceived motherhood from a black feminist perspective based on how they perceived and renewed it during this period.

Black feminist perspective is unique in its challenge to the mainstream white-centric notions of motherhood. It has importance in its emphasis on how Black women navigate intersecting systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism. Black feminism brings forward a more complex and multifaceted understanding of motherhood, one that incorporates racial, gender, and class identities as integral parts of the mothering experience. For instance, Black feminist scholars have argued that mothering can be empowering when it allows women to carve out their identities and agency within a broader social context. For example, some Black mothers may see their role as a form of resistance, asserting their autonomy and challenging dominant racial narratives by nurturing future generations within an often-hostile society. Other ways in which motherhood can empower include fostering a sense of community, solidarity, and resilience, as women find ways to balance their familial and societal roles despite systemic inequities (Beyer, n.d.).

Furthermore, influenced by feminist scholars like Andrea O'Reilly, the third wave also advocates for the integration of maternal subjectivity into feminist discourse. O'Reilly, among others, encourages a focus on the lived experiences of mothers and their agency within feminist frameworks, challenging the traditional portrayal of motherhood as an institution solely defined by biological reproduction. By highlighting maternal experiences, third-wave feminists promote the idea that mothering can serve as a form of empowerment, as women assert control over their bodies, relationships, and family structures. Maternal empowerment also extends to challenging stereotypes and broadening the scope of what it means to be a mother in contemporary society, acknowledging the diverse ways mothers contribute to the social fabric. To fully understand the discourse surrounding motherhood from a third-wave feminist

perspective, it is essential to elaborate it through the Black Feminist lens because a key element of third-wave feminism is its rejection of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to motherhood. This is particularly relevant to Black feminism, as the experiences of motherhood for Black women are vastly different from those of white women. Historically, Black women have been oppressed not only as women but also as Black people. This has resulted in unique challenges in the realm of motherhood, from navigating systemic racism and discrimination to balancing multiple roles and responsibilities within their communities. Additionally, black women are often expected to care for their families and be the primary breadwinners, while also facing racism and discrimination in the workplace (Andrade 1990). They are also more likely to experience poverty and unemployment, which can further complicate their parenting experiences. Moreover, Black women also experience higher rates of maternal mortality and are more likely to have children with special needs. Despite this, Black women are resilient and dedicated to their families, often finding creative solutions to their challenges.

Further, Tatjana Takseva in her article on Motherhood studies and Feminist Theory, discusses the relationship between feminism and motherhood, highlighting the complexities and nuances involved in understanding motherhood within the context of feminist theory. She critiques the dominant feminist theory for its failure to engage adequately with the redefinition of "mother" as a subject position in various historical and cultural contexts. Later the author advocates for the inclusion of motherhood studies within women and gender studies programs and agendas, emphasizing the importance of understanding motherhood beyond its essentialized and biological definitions.

Therefore, by differentiating between motherhood as an institution and mothering as an experience, many scholars like Andrea O'Reilly have paved the way for a more comprehensive examination of maternal subjectivity and empowerment. This distinction has allowed for the recognition of the diverse forms of mothering that exist across cultures and societies, challenging the universalization of motherhood and acknowledging the intersectional differences that influence the experiences of mothers. Furthermore, the emergence of matricentric feminism, as advocated by scholars like Andrea O'Reilly, presents an alternative vision of mothering that aligns with progressive forms of feminism. Matricentric feminism celebrates maternal subjectivity and empowerment across various dimensions, including experience, identity, policy, and agency. This

feminist viewpoint not only recognizes the importance of mothering in shaping individuals' lives and society but also advocates for the incorporation of maternal theory into feminist studies to highlight the compatibility of mothering with paid work, women's empowerment, and the deconstruction of the public-private binary. In a broader context, the recognition of the centrality of motherhood in the lives of women globally, coupled with advancements in reproductive technologies and evolving parental configurations, underscores the necessity for women and gender studies programs to incorporate diverse experiences of mothering (Beyer, n.d.).

More consequently, third-wave feminist discourse on motherhood critiques the traditional view of motherhood that has been a widely accepted social construct for centuries, as well as defining the role of women as primarily being mothers and caretakers. However, in recent years, there have been numerous arguments and critiques presented against this view. These arguments shed light on the oppressive and limiting nature of traditional motherhood, as well as its failure to recognize the diverse and complex experiences of mothering.

One major argument against the traditional view of motherhood is the concept of essentialism and oppression. Many critics argue that this view reduces women to their reproductive roles, defining them solely based on their ability to bear and raise children. Another prominent critique is centered around the notion of compulsory parenthood. This concept highlights how the traditional view of motherhood perpetuates the idea that all women must fulfil the role of motherhood, regardless of their desires or circumstances. This can be oppressive and restrict women's freedom from male dominance. It also challenges the idea that motherhood is a universal and essential aspect of female identity, recognizing that not all women wish to become mothers (Jeremiah, n.d.). Moreover, the traditional view of motherhood is criticized for its lack of subjectivity. By defining women solely through their roles as mothers, this view denies women the creation of subjectivity and limits their agency and autonomy. It hinders their ability to develop individual identities beyond motherhood and reinforces the idea that women are defined by their relationships with others rather than by their own aspirations and choices. Some argue that this critique is rooted in black feminist thought, which challenges the exclusion of women of color from mainstream feminist narratives. Black feminists highlight how traditional feminist critiques of motherhood often center on white, middle-class

experiences, failing to account for the historical resilience and community-based forms of mothering that black women have practiced. Additionally, the influence of neoliberal individualism on critiques of traditional motherhood is significant. Neoliberalism emphasizes personal autonomy and self-determination, often overlooking the emotional and relational interdependence inherent in mothering. Feminists critique this framework for perpetuating hierarchical and masculinist biases, which devalue caregiving and collective agency while privileging individualism and economic self-sufficiency. This critique is particularly relevant within socialist feminist discourse, which highlights the economic and systemic forces that shape motherhood experiences and argues for recognizing caregiving as a valuable social contribution rather than an individual burden (Nader 2025).

In addition, the traditional view of motherhood often ignores intersectional differences related to race, class, and sexual orientation. This creates an intersectional blindness, where the experiences of diverse and marginalized groups of mothers are not recognized or understood. Black feminism and intersectional feminism perspectives emphasize the need to acknowledge the varied and nuanced experiences of mothering. Intersectional feminists argue that a monolithic view of motherhood overlooks how race and class shape maternal experiences, particularly for women who face systemic barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to reproductive healthcare. Therefore, by acknowledging and studying the varied maternal experiences across gender, class, race, and location, academia can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of motherhood within feminist discourse.

To conclude, the third-wave feminist perspective on motherhood underscores the importance of redefining motherhood within feminist theory, moving away from essentialism toward a more intersectional, culturally sensitive, and empowering perspective that recognizes the complexities and diversities inherent in the experience of mothering. By incorporating insights from black feminism, intersectional feminism, and socialist feminism, contemporary feminist thought challenges restrictive narratives of motherhood and highlights how mothering can be both an oppressive structure and a source of resistance, fulfillment, and empowerment.

2.2 Islamic Discourse on Motherhood

There are widespread discussions and contested interpretations about the place of women in Islam and how to put these interpretations into practice as well. In some countries, the differences in the Qur'an and the interpretations of religious sources impact state policy, and different points of view are evaluated in various ways.

In the Islamic tradition, the centrality and great importance of motherhood is the view of almost all Muslims, be they conservative, moderate or reformist. The difference lies in how each group views a woman's mother's role, function, and responsibilities, and how a mother can manifest her functions and roles in the private or public spheres. The different responses to these issues then raise similar differences in the related issues of a woman-mother's education, empowerment, rights, and limitations. The term "limitations" in this context refers to the restrictions placed on women regarding their roles and responsibilities within society, particularly concerning their participation in the workforce, education, and leadership. In more conservative interpretations, limitations often manifest as social and religious expectations that confine women primarily to the domestic sphere, where their primary duty is to care for the family. In contrast, reformist perspectives advocate for fewer restrictions, emphasizing a woman's autonomy and ability to balance both domestic and public roles.

On one hand, a traditional or conservative Islamic perspective adheres strictly to traditionalist interpretations of Islamic law regarding women's roles. This view asserts that a woman's primary duty is within the private sphere like caring for the home, raising children, and fulfilling her responsibilities as a wife. According to this belief, the private sphere is considered a woman's most important *jihad* (struggle or duty) in Islam, meaning that her devotion to family and household management is seen as a form of religious dedication. This is related to qur'anic concept of *qawwam*. On the other hand, there is a Reformist Islam, often associated with Islamic feminism, challenges traditional gender roles by advocating for greater gender equality. Within this framework, household duties are not seen as compulsory for women but rather as a shared responsibility between husband and wife. One fine example of a reformist view is seen in the perspective of Islamic feminism in *qawwam*, while conservative Islamic perspectives emphasize a husband's role as the *qawwam* (leader or protector) of the household. Islamic feminism,

on the other hand, promotes the idea that leadership within the family can be mutual. Women are encouraged to work outside the home, pursue financial independence, and contribute equally to the family's economic stability (Fauzi and Farhan 2014, 510 - 511). In Indonesia, there is a moderate form known as Neo-Traditional Islam. While it still upholds the importance of motherhood and domestic responsibilities, it allows women to contribute to society and participate in public life, but only after they have fulfilled their primary duties as mothers and wives. This means that while women are encouraged to pursue education and professional careers, their domestic obligations are still considered paramount (Fauzi and Farhan 2014, 511).

Thus, the key distinction between moderate Islam and Islamic feminism lies in their approach to women's roles. Moderate Islam still prioritizes a woman's duty within the family but allows for public engagement, whereas Islamic feminism deconstructs traditional gender hierarchies, advocating for full equality between spouses in both household duties and financial responsibilities. In this section, I would like to discuss a deeper understanding of the three main perspectives on motherhood within the Islamic world that significantly shape the role and expectations of mothers for the country; Traditional Islamic, Neo-Traditional, and Reformist Islamic perspectives. Additionally, the main interest of this study is to see the unique features in the perspective of motherhood found in each Islamic interpretation and also the related being of an ideal woman. It was also the aim of this study to link those perspectives on unique roles in motherhood to the characteristics of being an ideal woman for Muslim society.

2.2.1 Traditional Islamic Perspective

Traditional Islamic perspectives on motherhood are undoubtedly deeply rooted in religious teachings, primarily derived from the Quran and Hadiths (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad). In these perspectives, motherhood is revered as one of the most honorable roles a woman can fulfil. As the Quran emphasizes the importance of respecting and honoring parents, with specific emphasis on the mother's elevated status. In particular, the role of mothers as primary caregivers for children receives special attention in the Koran, showing how significant a mother's responsibilities and services are. For instance, in Surah Luqman (31:14), the following is stated:

“And we commanded men to be good *to* their parents. His mother carried him, facing weakness after weakness, and his weaning is in two years: "Be grateful to Me and to your parents. To me, it is the ultimate return.”

This verse mentioned the importance of being devoted to parents yet emphasized to mothers who have made sacrifices from pregnancy to breastfeeding (Mianoki 2012).

Further, from a Hadith perspective, Rasulullah SAW paid great attention to the position and respect of mothers in Islam. One hadith that describes it is from Bukhari (No. 5971 Fathul Bari), (syariah, n.d.) which means,

"From Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased with him, he said ', 'O Rasulullah, who is the person to whom I have the most right to serve?' He answered, 'Your mother.' He asked again, 'Then who?' He answered, 'Your mother.' He asked again, 'Then who else?' He answered, 'Then your father' (Hadith Narrated by Bukhari).

Moreover, Traditional Islamic societies often place a strong emphasis on women's roles within the family, particularly as mothers and caretakers of children. Women are expected to prioritize their roles as mothers above other pursuits, such as career ambitions or personal aspirations. This perspective aligns with traditional gender roles, where men are typically seen as providers while women are primarily responsible for the domestic sphere, including childcare and nurturing. This traditional view is often reflected in Islamic literature and teachings, which emphasize the family unit and the importance of women's roles in it.

The command regarding the Greatest Responsibility for Women in Their Household is found in the hadith of Bukhari Muslim, where the Messenger of Allah, Sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam, said,

كلكم راع، وكلكم مسئول عن رعيته، فالأمير راع، وهو مسئول عن رعيته، والرجل راع على أهل بيته، وهو مسئول عنهم، والمرأة راعية على بيت بعلها وولده، وهي مسئولة عنهم، والعبد راع على مال سيده، وهو مسئول عنه، فكلكم راع مسئول عن رعيته

"Each of you is a leader, and each of you will be asked about those he leads. The country's leader holds a leadership role and will face questions about those under his guidance. A man is a leader for his family, and he will be asked about those he leads. A woman is a leader for her husband's family members and their children, and she will face

questions about them. A slave is a leader over his master's property, and he will be asked about that property. Each of you is a leader, and each of you will be asked about those he leads." (Hadith Narrated by Bukhari 893 and Muslim 1829).

The term "عقيل" refers to someone who is tasked with protecting something and is expected to do so fairly. Sheikh Muhammad bin Shalih Al 'Uthaymeen rahimahullah further explained: A wife is a leader who guards her husband's house and will be asked about her guarding. Therefore, it is essential for her to take good care of the house, including cooking, preparing drinks like coffee and tea, and arranging the bed. She should not cook more than she should. She should not make more tea than she needs. She should be a woman who is moderate, not lacking and not excessive, because moderation is half of life. She should not go beyond the limits of what is inappropriate. The wife also bears the responsibility of tending to her children's needs, including dressing them, removing their dirty clothes, tidying up the bed, and paying attention to their body coverings during the winter months. Every woman will be asked about all of that. She will be asked about cooking, and she will be asked about everything in her house" (Mianoki 2012).

This hadith underscores that a woman's primary responsibility is to manage and care for her household. She is entrusted with maintaining the home, ensuring the well-being of her husband and children, and fulfilling domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and organizing. Her role is one of guardianship, where she is accountable for the proper functioning of the household, emphasizing that staying at home and tending to family affairs is a significant duty she will be questioned about in the afterlife.

Additionally, many Islamic societies place a strong emphasis on the importance of female modesty, which can limit women's access to certain educational and employment opportunities. Although women of the time were able to receive education, that education was limited to learning how to be a good daughter, mother, and wife (Fauzi and Farhan 2014, 512).

Talking about the role of the mother from a traditional Islamic perspective, parents, especially for mothers, had to guide children to learn from the Quran and Hadith. This is because the Traditional Islamic cosmogony and society view mothers as the primary responsible party for religious education. Prophet Muhammad stated that "the heart of the young of any living creature is likened to uncultivated ground. Whatever is planted in the uncultivated ground would take firm roots". While both parents play a role,

traditional Islamic understanding believes that Islam places greater emphasis on the mother as the first and most important teacher. as This hadith highlights the importance of a mother nurturing Islamic values from an early age. The Quran also shows this through the story of Maryam's (AS) mother, who prayed for her unborn child's righteousness (Surah Aal-e-Imran 3:35). Similarly, the hadith stating, "Every child is born upon the fitrah, but his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magician" (Sahih Muslim 2658) reinforces that a child's faith is shaped by their upbringing, with the mother playing the most direct role (Abdal-Ati and Abdal - Ati 1974, 46).

It is important to note that the traditional Islamic main idea about motherhood is to see the role of the mother as a homemaking and childbearing position. Based on Quranic ideas and Prophet Muhammad's teachings, especially in the Hadith, nurturing and educating sons and daughters are the primary responsibilities of mothers. The actions of a mother are crucial in guiding the development of Islamic belief and nurturing valuable Islamic character in their children. In the early days, due to the strict gender roles and emphasis on traditional values, mothers were primarily responsible for instilling religious teachings and morals in their children through daily practices and teachings at home. They were expected to prioritize their children's spiritual and moral upbringing above all else, ensuring they grew up to be devout and righteous individuals.

Nonetheless, the requirement of *niqmah*, which is having a husband or another male relative in charge, to escort between what is forbidden and what is permissible outside their homes illustrates traditional Islamic authority greatly values household affairs over community affairs. (Abdal-Ati and Abdal-Ati 1974,52). However, some parents from traditional Islamic sociocultural backgrounds also emphasized nurturing an open capable mind and independent responsible personality of their daughters during the nurturing and education processes. In addition, they encouraged their daughters to pursue higher education and engage in career paths that would contribute to the well-being and progress of society. This emphasis on nurturing intellectual curiosity and fostering independent thinking in daughters reflects a progressive approach to traditional Islamic societies. By doing so, parents sought to empower their daughters to become active members of their communities, making positive contributions and challenging societal norms that restrict women's agency and opportunities.

This shift in attitude reflects the changing dynamics of Islamic societies, which are now more open to progressive ideas and values. Additionally, this shift in attitude has also had a positive effect on the lives of many Muslim women, who are now able to pursue careers in fields previously closed to them. Based on this approach, this movement brings us to the Reformist Islam period.

2.2.2 Reformist Islamic Perspective

Reformist Islam, often associated with Islamic feminism, challenges the traditional hierarchical relationship between men and women by advocating for gender equality. Reformist scholars argue that men and women are fundamentally equal in dignity and rights, rejecting the classical interpretation that positions men as superior or dominant within the family structure. Whereas conservative and traditional perspectives emphasize a husband's role as *qawwam* (leader or protector) and assign household duties primarily to women, this reformist movement contends that family responsibilities should be shared equally between spouses. This perspective extends to the concept of motherhood, which, while still valued and respected, is not seen as a woman's sole or defining role. Reformist scholars argue that restricting mothers solely to domestic duties is a product of patriarchal interpretations rather than genuine Islamic teachings. They emphasize that Islam commands kindness and respect toward mothers but does not prohibit them from seeking education, employment, or public engagement. Thus, reformists, including figures like Qasim Amin and Tahir al-Haddad, advocate for the reinterpretation of Islamic texts to ensure that motherhood coexists with women's rights to economic and social participation (Kian-Thiébaud 2007, 61).

It should be noted that they further seek to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures and norms that they believed historically oppressed women. A scholar like Sariya Cheruvallil takes a feminist-pragmatist epistemological stance to examine young Muslim women's experiences and understandings of motherhood in contemporary Britain. She draws on both an analysis of Islamic religious doctrine on motherhood from foundational texts like the Quran and Sunnah, as well as an anthropological study of the lived experiences of young Muslim women in Britain. Her article presents a comparative analysis of traditional and reformist Islamic perspectives on motherhood. She argues that

while foundational Islamic texts like the Quran and Sunnah present an emancipatory narrative of motherhood that does not privilege it as a woman's sole purpose in life, patriarchal interpretations have come to dominate in many Muslim communities. These patriarchal readings over-signify motherhood as a woman's only path to success and contrast it with "Western" constructs of womanhood (Cheruvallil 2016, 16-19).

The traditional perspective, often promoted in popular literature, conflates women with mothers and makes motherhood a woman's only goal. It emphasizes qualities like love, sacrifice, and dedication for mothers, and suggests that a woman's most important achievement is raising virtuous children. This view seen by reformists limits a woman's potential and can make her feel inadequate if she is unable to have children. In contrast, the reformist interpretation as she tries to draw from foundational texts presents motherhood as one of many important roles a woman can play in her life. It does not privilege motherhood above all else and suggests that a woman can be successful without being a mother. This emancipatory narrative empowers women with knowledge of their faith and gives them the authority to challenge patriarchal constructs of motherhood. Nevertheless, this highlights how the young Muslim women in the study were aware of the respect assigned to mothers in Islamic texts, but they also sought to balance their roles as mothers with their other identities and aspirations. They recognized motherhood as a significant role, but not the only one. It proved that many young Muslim women in this period chose to prioritize their education or career over motherhood even though they were married women (Hewett, 2006).

From this point of view, it is possible to conclude this reformist perspective aligns with feminist understandings that seek to challenge essentialist notions of motherhood and allow women to have multifaceted identities beyond mothering. Overall, the reformist Islamic perspective argues for a more nuanced engagement with the complexities of Muslim mothering experiences, which are shaped by both traditional patriarchal interpretations and reformist understandings drawn from foundational texts. It calls for empowering women with knowledge of their faith to challenge limiting constructs of motherhood and embrace the diversity of roles they can play in their lives.

2.2.3 Neo - Traditional Islamic Perspective

As motherhood holds a central place in Islamic thought, but interpretations of its role and significance vary across different intellectual traditions. On the one hand, Conservative or Traditionalist Islamic perspectives emphasize a rigid, scripturally grounded understanding of motherhood, often linking it to traditional gender roles. A mother's primary duty within this view is strictly to nurture children and maintain the household, while the father assumes the role of provider and protector. This perspective is deeply rooted in classical jurisprudence, where motherhood is revered as a sacred duty but largely confined to the domestic sphere.

On the other hand, Neo-Traditionalist Islam, while also valuing motherhood as a divine and essential role for women, presents a more flexible and contextualized approach. Unlike strict conservative interpretations, Neo-Traditionalists seek to reconcile traditional values with contemporary realities. They emphasize the spiritual and moral dimensions of motherhood, seeing it not merely as a set of duties but as an elevated form of worship and personal development. While still upholding traditional family structures such as the belief that a father or a man is the head of the family, neo-traditionalists acknowledge the diverse experiences of modern Muslim women, including allowing them to pursue education and social engagement. While both perspectives honor motherhood, the conservative Islamic view tends to be prescriptive and rigid, whereas the Neo-Traditionalist approach allows for adaptability and a more nuanced understanding of a mother's role in today's world (Shafieka Moos 2021, 1-8).

It should be noted contrary to traditionalists and reformists, moderates believe that despite the domestic role being the primary role of women, public roles can also be fulfilled during this time as long as they do not interfere with their domestic responsibilities. Yusuf Qardhawi, Hasan Al-Banna, Muhammad Abdul Ro'uf, and Qurasih Shihab were those who expressed this viewpoint (Fauzi and Farhan 2014, 510).

Historically, the concept of motherhood holds a revered and significant position in the Islamic tradition, reflecting the religion's emphasis on family values, compassion, and the nurturing of future generations. Particularly, within the Neo-traditional Islamic perspective, motherhood is regarded not only as a biological role but also as a profound spiritual and moral responsibility. This perspective upholds the balance between traditional values and contemporary realities, emphasizing the importance of motherhood while recognizing the evolving roles of women in modern society.

However, this perspective aligns with the broader Islamic view that education and knowledge are paramount. Mothers, therefore, are tasked with the dual responsibility of caring for their children's physical well-being and guiding their spiritual and intellectual growth. This dual role is critical in shaping balanced and ethical individuals who contribute positively to society. Interestingly, the mother in this modern society does not even feel burdened with this double burden. Instead, they embrace it and see it as a natural part of their role. More importantly, they perceive it as an opportunity to shape their children's future and to create a better future for society as a whole. They are determined to use her dual role to help her children learn important life lessons and to help them become successful members of society. Additionally, they are committed to being a role model of how to be a good mother and wife so that future generations can decide how they wish to be or how they wish to find a good woman (Ginting-Carlström 2024).

Moderate Islam acknowledges the evolving societal roles and the increasing participation of women in various professional fields. Therefore, this perspective advocates for a balance, where women can pursue careers and personal ambitions while also fulfilling their roles as mothers. It recognizes that the empowerment of women through education and professional opportunities does not diminish the importance of motherhood but rather enriches it. A mother who is well-educated and engaged in the world is seen as better equipped to provide a holistic upbringing for her children (Sarwono 2017).

In contemporary contexts, the idea of Islamic Reformists on motherhood that mentioned above is the primary factor for a woman's success and fulfillment should not solely be focused on motherhood because they believe that women have an important role in society and should not be limited to just the role of a mother. However, from The moderate Islamic perspective which also emphasizes the importance of shared responsibilities within the family and society, yet the role of motherhood or being a good mother is a high measurement of women's success. First, they have to prioritize their role as mothers and then they can balance their careers or education, as they see their success reflected in the success of their children. The same idea was also discussed by Siti Musdah Mulia and Husein Muhammad. They stressed that, while the mother's role is highly valued, the father's involvement in child-rearing is equally encouraged. This collaborative approach ensures that the burden of parenting does not fall solely on

mothers, promoting a healthy family dynamic and allowing both parents to contribute meaningfully to their children's development (Fauzi and Farhan 2014,511). This idea helps to build a strong family bond and create a sense of shared responsibility. For instance, fathers can also serve as role models for their children, providing guidance and support as they navigate life. Additionally, it could reduce the burden on mothers and allow them to pursue their passions and interests as they wish.

In addressing the challenges within society, Moderate Islam does not shy away from addressing the challenges faced by mothers in modern societies. These include balancing work and family life, societal pressures, and the psychological and emotional stresses of parenting. The community's role is crucial in providing support systems, such as extended family networks and community resources, to assist mothers in effectively fulfilling their roles. Islamic teachings advocate for a compassionate and understanding approach, encouraging the community to support mothers through various stages of motherhood.

In short, the moderate Islamic perspective on motherhood is one of profound respect and acknowledgement of its critical role in both the family and society. It honors the traditional values that elevate the status of mothers while embracing the changes and challenges of modernity. By advocating for education, shared responsibilities, and community support, this perspective ensures that motherhood remains a cherished and respected institution, integral to society's spiritual and moral fabric. Through this balanced approach, moderate Islam upholds the dignity of motherhood and supports the multifaceted roles of women in contemporary life.

2.3 Conclusion

The discourse surrounding motherhood within feminist theory has evolved significantly across various feminist waves, each offering distinct perspectives shaped by socio-political contexts. The radical feminist perspective, emerging during the second wave of feminism, critiques traditional notions of motherhood as a construct that perpetuates women's oppression within patriarchal societies. Radical feminists argue that motherhood is not a natural role but a socially imposed expectation that limits women's autonomy and reinforces gender inequality. Influential figures such as Jeffner Allen and Shulamith

Firestone have posited that motherhood can be a mechanism of control over women's bodies and sexuality, advocating for reproductive autonomy and the rejection of traditional motherhood as a means of liberation.

Conversely, Marxist feminists contextualize motherhood within the capitalist framework, asserting that the institution of motherhood is exploited to maintain economic hierarchies and gender inequality. They argue that women's reproductive labor is undervalued, and that capitalism perpetuates women's subordination by relegating them to domestic roles while simultaneously exploiting their labor in the workforce. This perspective emphasizes the need for systemic change to dismantle the capitalist structures that devalue women's contributions, advocating for a socialist revolution to achieve gender equality.

The third-wave feminist perspective, influenced by postmodernism, seeks to reclaim and redefine motherhood, particularly through the lens of Black feminism. This wave challenges the essentialist views of motherhood prevalent in earlier feminist discourse, recognizing the diverse experiences of mothers shaped by race, class, and culture. Third-wave feminists advocate for an intersectional approach that acknowledges the unique struggles faced by marginalized women, emphasizing the potential for empowerment within motherhood. Scholars like Andrea O'Reilly have highlighted the importance of maternal subjectivity, arguing for the inclusion of diverse maternal experiences in feminist discourse.

Overall, having discussed various approaches to motherhood, this chapter allows us to underline the significance of motherhood within both secular and Islamic perspectives. Through the examination of feminist discourses, particularly radical feminism and Marxist feminism, motherhood is revealed not as a purely natural or biological role but as a social and political construct shaped by patriarchal norms. They argue that motherhood has historically been used to reinforce gender inequality by limiting women's autonomy and confining them to domestic roles. These critiques challenge the traditional glorification of motherhood and highlight how it can function as a tool of control in male-dominated societies.

In contrast, Islamic perspectives offer a more varied understanding of motherhood. While traditional and conservative interpretations place a strong emphasis on the mother's role within the home as a nurturer and moral guide, reformist and neo-

traditional approaches present more nuanced and flexible views. Reformist Muslim thinkers and many modern Muslim women view motherhood as one important aspect of a woman's identity, but not her sole purpose. These perspectives affirm a woman's right to education, professional life, and personal development, emphasizing that fulfilling multiple roles is compatible with Islamic teachings.

Neo-traditional perspectives provide a balanced view by upholding the spiritual and moral importance of motherhood while also acknowledging the realities and aspirations of modern Muslim women. This interpretation sees motherhood not just as a duty but as a form of worship and a contribution to the moral and intellectual development of future generations. Thus, by comparing these secular and Islamic viewpoints, the chapter highlights how motherhood is a dynamic and contested concept. It is shaped by culture, religion, and ideology, and understanding these variations is crucial for analyzing the broader social roles of women.

CHAPTER 3: HISTORICIZING THE DISCOURSES OF MOTHERHOOD IN INDONESIA

Motherhood in Indonesia is an essential aspect of womanhood and is a complex and multifaceted issue profoundly connected to the country's rich tapestry of cultural, religious, and social norms. Discussions about motherhood reflect a synthesis of traditional beliefs, modern influences, and political forces. In Indonesian society, motherhood is frequently respected, representing not just the biological duty of carrying and rearing children, but also larger obligations such as preserving familial harmony, supporting moral ideals, and transferring cultural inheritance. These expectations are influenced by a variety of factors, including religious beliefs, specifically Islam, which has a huge impact on gender roles and family structures in this country. Furthermore, various ethnic groups and differing historical periods contribute to divergent views and behaviours regarding motherhood in Indonesia. In this chapter, I will elaborate on four different periods in the history of discourses on motherhood in Indonesia. The first is The Colonial era, the second is the Old Order Period. Following Indonesia's independence, this period is also called the post-independence period. The third period is the New Order era, which lasted from 1966 to 1998, and the last is The Reform Era (*Era Reformasi*) which began in 1998 after the fall of Suharto, Indonesia's second and longest-serving president, that lasted to 32-year authoritarian rule under the New Order (*Orde Baru*).

The reason why I begin with the colonial era without explaining the pre-colonial period is that there is no detailed research focusing on the pre-colonial period on motherhood studies in Indonesia. However, some studies argue that the condition of Indonesian women before the colonial period and during colonial times was different. In pre-colonial Indonesian society, as mentioned earlier in the first chapter, women held significant autonomy and influence in family, economic, and political life. Unlike many other societies of the time, gender roles were distinct yet complementary. Women played crucial roles in agriculture, trade, and weaving, granting them economic independence. Marriage was also monogamous, and either spouse could initiate divorce, with children divided equally between parents. Economically, women dominated trade and commerce, providing them with social and financial power. Additionally, female leadership was a notable feature of pre-colonial governance. Women ruled in several key trading states,

including Pasai, Japara, Aceh, Jambi, and Solor. Their leadership was often preferred due to their diplomatic and business-focused approach, which helped maintain economic stability. For example, Notable figures like Nyai Gede Wanagiri, an influential trader, and Tribhuwanatunggadewi of Majapahit, who successfully led her kingdom. Thus, it is crucial to remember that Indonesia was divided into kingdoms before the arrival of colonialism. Interestingly some of those kingdoms were led by women. Other examples from Queen Tribhuwanatunggadewi are; Queen Shima of Kalinga Kingdom, Queen Pramodhawardhani of Ancient Mataram Kingdom, and Queen Suhita of Majapahit Kingdom (Yulian, 2023). This portrays those Indonesian customs before colonialism identified women with public and political roles, economic functions and positions in society, and had equal rights with men. However, the glory of female rulers and the stable condition of Indonesian women during the time declined and erased with the arrival of European colonial powers, who introduced patriarchal governance structures. Later the shifting trade landscape and European dominance gradually eroded the influence of women in political and economic spheres. Despite this, the historical role of women in pre-colonial Indonesia remains a testament to the region's unique gender dynamics.

3.1 Colonial Era

To understand the current construction of Indonesian motherhood, it is crucial to explore its historical foundations and evolution. Motherhood in Indonesia, as it is recognized today, was part a product of Dutch colonialism. Before the colonial era, the Indonesian social structure was built on the idea of 'womanhood', where women were valued for their contributions to the family and society, rather than a defined only a set of domestic tasks. However, the arrival of the Dutch in the 19th century brought about several changes in the Indonesian political, social, and economic structure and would greatly impact the role of Indonesian women and mesh the idea of 'womanhood' into 'motherhood'. The shift from a multifaceted social role to a domesticated maternal figure played a crucial role in altering women's status in Indonesian society.

Indonesian culture has long emphasized the importance of motherhood, often defining it as a woman's ultimate purpose. A well-known Indonesian proverb states, "*Seorang wanita belum sempurna hidupnya sebelum dia beranak,*" which translates to

“A woman has not yet completed her life until she gives birth to a child.” This cultural expectation pressures women into motherhood, often shaping their identity around being a mother above all else. While this belief predates Dutch colonization, colonial influence further reinforced the idea that a woman’s primary duty was to her household. Under colonial rule, the ideal mother was redefined as a devoted housewife who served her husband and raised the next generation. This solidified women’s domestic role and, in turn, contributed to the legitimization of colonial rule by discouraging native women from engaging in politics or public life.

The Dutch colonization of Indonesia from 1602 to 1945 had a profound impact on shaping motherhood in Indonesia. As one of the longest and most oppressive colonial occupations in history, it left lasting effects on the social, political, and economic structures of Indonesian society. The Dutch generally showed little respect for Indonesian culture, despite the fact that women in Indonesian society, particularly in Java, often held a higher status compared to their European counterparts at the time. In Javanese society for instance, honor was traditionally based on noble lineage, refined manners, and intellectual wisdom rather than material wealth. Respect was granted to those who were considered "civilized," meaning they exhibited cultural refinement, ethical behavior, and adherence to social etiquette. This form of social hierarchy was not strictly tied to economic class; wealth alone did not guarantee respect, nor did poverty necessarily equate to a lack of dignity or status. The Dutch, however, sought to impose European hierarchical structures that prioritized wealth and rigid class distinctions, thereby challenging and altering these indigenous values. Although they never achieved complete control over Indonesian society, their cultural and social influence often surpassed their direct political dominance, reshaping gender roles and social expectations in ways that continue to have an impact today (Fogg 2019; Knaap 2014).

The imposition of European family structures by the Dutch not only disrupted traditional gender roles but also redefined the concept of motherhood in Indonesia. Under indigenous social systems, particularly in matrilineal and matriarchal societies such as those of the Minangkabau, women played a central role in property inheritance, decision-making, and community leadership. Their status as economic providers and social leaders meant that motherhood was not solely defined by domestic responsibilities but was deeply intertwined with broader societal functions. However, Dutch colonial policies gradually

eroded these structures by promoting the nuclear family model, in which women were expected to be primarily responsible for child-rearing and confined to domestic spaces. European notions of morality and propriety further reinforced the idea that a “respectable” mother was one who devoted herself to household duties, rather than engaging in trade, agriculture, or public affairs as many Indonesian women had traditionally done. These changes were made official by education policies that pushed girls to learn how to do housework, missionary efforts to align Indonesian women with Christian ideals in Europe, and laws that favored male inheritance and authority. As a result, Indonesian motherhood came to be redefined under colonial rule not merely as a biological or nurturing role but as a political construct that aligned with Dutch efforts to reshape Indonesian society according to Western norms (Blackburn, 2004, 84-99).

3.1.1 European Impositions on Gender Roles

The Dutch presence in Indonesia began with the establishment of the Dutch East Indies by the Dutch United East India Company (VOC) in 1602. This marked the initiation of Dutch economic and political control, while the Dutch sought to dominate Indonesian trade, extracting as much wealth for the Netherlands as possible. The Dutch colonized Indonesia until the late 1940s, which was an expansive amount of time that brought about significant changes to Indonesia as a whole. In particular, the introduction of Dutch culture, language, legal and educational systems that are still evident today, show the extent to which Dutch colonial presence has shaped modern Indonesia. This idea is especially true in the context of gender roles, and as a result of Dutch colonization, the perception and role of Indonesian women had changed permanently. Throughout Indonesian history, the Indonesian understanding of gender was flexible. This allowed women to own businesses and inherit property, and it allowed women to hold political positions. The Javanese concept of 'raja wanita' or 'queen and/or king of women' illustrates the respect given to women. The wide range of gender and sexual diversity that was recorded by early European travelers is a testament to the flexibility of gender roles in traditional Indonesia. However, the arrival of Europeans with their rigid ideas of male/female gender roles and the supposed inferiority of women, disrupted these diverse gender systems. colonizers forced Indonesian women into submissive roles, imposing

their patriarchal values and drastically altering the social and cultural dynamics of Indonesia (Blackburn, 2004, 84-110).

Additionally, the European imposition of gender roles reinforced the idea that men should be the breadwinners and in control of their households, while women were expected to be homemakers and caregivers. This deeply ingrained gender hierarchy caused a shift in the social and economic power dynamics, leading to the suppression of women's rights and opportunities. It also perpetuated the belief that women were inferior to men, causing long-lasting damage to the perception of Indonesian women and their position in society.

The legacy of Dutch colonization on Indonesian gender roles serves as a reminder of the detrimental effects of imperialist attitudes and actions on the social and cultural fabric of a nation. The European imposition of gender roles also had far-reaching effects on education and employment opportunities for Indonesian women. Under Dutch colonial rule, educational opportunities for women were limited, with a focus on domestic skills and religious education rather than academic or professional development. This resulted in a significant gap in literacy and educational attainment between men and women, perpetuating the idea that women's primary role was within the domestic sphere or only as a mother (Dwi Hapsari et al., 2020).

It is essential to note that, before the colonial era, education in Indonesia was influenced by the religious and cultural practices of the time, which also impacted the roles of women in society. While educational opportunities were largely reserved for the elite and the religious elite, noble women were granted access to higher education to prepare them for their significant roles within the kingdom. Education for noble women in the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Majapahit or Sriwijaya, and later in the Islamic Sultanates, typically involved training in religion, literature, and the arts. These women were not only taught to read and write but were also expected to participate in religious and cultural life, reinforcing their status and responsibilities within the kingdom. Noble women played a crucial role in preserving the kingdom's traditions and cultural practices, making such education essential.

However, access to education for the majority of the population, especially for women, was limited. For common people, education was largely informal, focusing on life skills such as farming, trading, and craftsmanship, knowledge passed down through

generations in families and communities. It was not the formal, structured education that noble families had access to, and it rarely extended to academic or religious studies. Thus, education was strongly divided along class lines, with the elite, including women, receiving the privilege of formal education while the lower classes were left to learn practical skills for survival.

Despite the more equitable nature of education in pre-colonial Indonesia compared to the colonial period, there was still a clear divide between the educational experiences of men and women. The men of the nobility, in particular, were more likely to receive the kind of education that would prepare them for governance, administration, and warfare. Women, on the other hand, were primarily educated in roles that supported the kingdom's religious and cultural continuity. Studies, such as those by Sutherland (1986) and Ricklefs (2001), highlight that the education of noble women in pre-colonial Indonesia was essential for maintaining the socio-political order, but it was still restricted to specific, often ceremonial functions.

The Dutch colonial period marked a sharp reversal in the progressive educational roles that noble woman once held. The arrival of European colonial powers established a more rigid gender divide, relegating women to limited roles. The Dutch colonial policies, particularly their emphasis on domesticity, further restricted women's access to education, especially in the lower social strata. Women were largely excluded from formal education systems and relegated to teaching domestic skills, which perpetuated gender inequalities. Moreover, economic policies under Dutch rule further limited women's opportunities, denying them ownership of property and access to formal employment, which reinforced the patriarchal notion that women should rely on their male relatives for financial support. These limitations on women's education and economic opportunities during the colonial period laid the groundwork for long-term social and economic marginalization, which continues to affect women in Indonesia today (Dwi Hapsari et al., 2020).

3.2 The Old Order Government

The Old Order refers to the period from Indonesia's independence in 1945 to Soekarno's (Indonesia's first President) fall from power in 1967. This era was characterized by significant political and social upheaval as Indonesia transitioned from Dutch colonial

rule to an independent nation. Soekarno's leadership focused on anti-colonialism, nationalism, and efforts to build a unified Indonesian identity. His presidency was marked by a blend of socialist and nationalist ideologies, which sought to balance the diverse ethnic and cultural fabric of the country. During the Old Order, Soekarno implemented policies that aimed at consolidating his power and promoting national unity. He introduced the concept of Guided Democracy in 1957, which shifted Indonesia away from a parliamentary system to a more centralized form of governance, with a strong executive role for the president. This move was justified as a means to overcome political instability and fragmentation (Indonesia Investment, 2024).

During Soekarno's era, the regulation and societal expectations surrounding women were shaped by a complex mix of traditional values and the burgeoning influence of nationalism and socialist ideas from the West. While women were encouraged to participate in the workforce and public life, traditional gender roles continued to exert considerable influence. Women's primary responsibilities were still viewed as those of homemakers and mothers, charged with nurturing the family and upholding moral values within the community. However, Soekarno also emphasized the importance of women in the nation-building process. The government established organizations like the Indonesian Women's Congress (Kongres Wanita Indonesia, Kowani) to mobilize women for national development and state building.

Therefore, the aim of this initiative was not to primarily foster women's advancement or freedom as autonomous individuals. The focus was less on achieving gender equality or liberating women in the sense of personal autonomy and more on enabling them to contribute to the common good. The nation encouraged women to participate in education and economic activities, not solely for their personal growth, but for the nation's development. Because they were seen as essential contributors to the broader collective good through their roles in educating the future generation, supporting the workforce, and embodying the moral backbone of society.

In this sense, while the national call for women's participation in social and economic spheres was progressive, it did not fundamentally challenge the traditional confines of gender. Thus, people viewed women's empowerment as a tool to fortify the nation, not as a route to personal liberation or the dismantling of patriarchal structures. This dual expectation promoting women's participation in national development while

still emphasizing traditional roles created a complex landscape for women. They had to navigate a tension between embracing modern societal roles and maintaining their traditional duties at home, all while being tasked with the responsibility of contributing to the broader vision of state-building.

This is why, in the nationalist discourse, mothers were seen as child-rearers, selfless caretakers, and bearers of tradition, whose sons would sacrifice themselves for their honour. Especially, during the first congress of nationalist-oriented women's organizations in 1928, there was unanimous agreement that motherhood was the highest calling for Indonesian women. This was echoed by various speakers, regardless of their religious or non-religious backgrounds. They emphasized the responsibilities and ideals of motherhood as crucial to the education of children and the nation. They saw the nation as a mother figure, often referred to as 'Ibu Indonesia', and the motherland as 'Ibu Pertiwi'. This symbolism was also used by nationalists to portray their struggle against colonial oppression as a mission to rescue and protect the 'suffering mother'. For women in the nationalist movement, this representation of motherhood elevated their role in society and gave them a position of national reverence (Blackburn 2004, 145).

These ideas were later incorporated into the national celebrations of Indonesia, with the first Women's Congress on 22nd December 1928 being commemorated as a National Day of Celebration known as *Hari Ibu* or Mothers' Day. However, some critics have argued that this focus on motherhood as the primary role for women has overshadowed other roles and responsibilities that women may have. Despite this criticism, the symbolism of motherhood remains an important and revered concept in the nationalist discourse of Indonesian women's organizations and society (Kirandita, 2022).

Indonesian women's organizations as one of the nationalist movements in the early Republic were viewed as unwaveringly loyal to their country during the Japanese occupation and the subsequent Revolution (1945-1949). These women played a crucial role in supporting soldiers and others through tumultuous times of scarcity and difficulty, with the needs of mothers especially prominent. During this period, women and children made up the majority of refugees, underscoring the pressing need to uphold the concept of motherhood and provide care for the wider community (Kirandita, 2022).

Following the Declaration of Independence in 1945, organized women were expected to continue embodying this ideal of motherhood, as stated by Vice-President Mohamad Hatta in 1958.

The task at present is raising new people with good character and a sense of responsibility. Next to schoolteachers, it is the mother in the home who must lay the basis for the character formation of children. For this reason, the education and training of children, especially girls who will mostly become mothers in future, must be the subject of great efforts by the women's movement, as well as the health and education of society. The issue now is not to make demands but to participate in carrying out measures, in taking initiatives. Social problems in the development of the state and society are remarkably intense, more intense probably than political issues. The women's movement must concentrate its efforts on that, adding its initiatives to those of the government. (Buku Peringatan, 1958).

Shortly after Indonesia gained independence, women played a crucial role in social work and welfare initiatives. They initially focused on supporting families and providing aid during the reconstruction period after the Revolutionary War. However, the state did not prioritize women's health needs, leading to high maternal mortality rates. While women were encouraged to participate in national development, this was primarily framed within traditional maternal and domestic roles rather than as a recognition of their rights or individual autonomy.

Not all women's organizations were content with the limited tropes assigned to them. One such organization, *Gerwani*,⁵ (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, or the Indonesian Women's Movement), emerged as a radical force advocating for women's rights. Unlike other mainstream women's groups that aligned closely with the state's vision of women as nurturers and moral guardians, Gerwani had feminist-leaning aspirations, arguing for broader political and social rights. They demanded better healthcare services, including maternal health programs, childcare for working mothers, and policies that would support women's economic independence. Additionally, some women activists sought to expand

⁵ Gerwani was a women's organization founded as Gerwis in Semarang, Central Java, on 4 June 1950. In 1954, Gerwis as an activist-based movement, changed its name to Gerwani to signify its move towards a mass organization to appeal to communist supporters. Known also the mass-based left-wing women's organization in Indonesia that was completely destroyed after the coup of 1965 (Wikipedia 2025).

access to contraception, recognizing the urgent need for reproductive autonomy. However, these efforts faced strong resistance from religious and political leaders, who viewed birth control as contrary to national and moral values (Robinson 2009, Martyn 2005).

Despite these challenges, Gerwani and other progressive women's groups persisted in their activism. Yet, they ultimately did not succeed in shifting state policies in their favor. President Soekarno, while a proponent of women's participation in nation-building, did not endorse birth control efforts and instead promoted the idea that women should embrace sacrifice for the greater good of the nation. His vision of women's empowerment remained constrained within the framework of their service to the state and family, rather than the pursuit of gender equality or individual freedom. As a result, women's roles in politics and public administration were still limited and they faced persistent structural barriers in their fight for greater rights. While women contributed immensely to post-independence reconstruction and social welfare, their aspirations for deeper systemic change remained largely unfulfilled (Blackburn, 2004, 150).

3.3 The New Order Government

In the authoritarian regime of the New Order in Indonesia, which was led by the second president of Indonesia, Suharto (1966-1998), mothers were highly regarded and valued for their role in maintaining stability and harmony within the family unit. It is not surprising that this regime was characterized by strict gender norms, as it was led by military men, and that it differentiated clearly between men's and women's roles. While men are expected to fulfil the duties of breadwinners, women are primarily responsible for domestic duties and children's care. In other words, the New Order regime identified the status of women through their roles as housewives, known as "The Ideology of Ibuism." In other words, it means women are designed to have dual roles or double burdens aimed at serving the state's interests. The government creates discourse on exemplary others as measured by the success of supporting the husband's career and children's education (Dwi Hapsari et al., 2020, 486). Therefore, Women's organizations

such as *Dharma Wanita*⁶ and the *PKK*⁷ (*Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* or The Family Welfare Movement) were created and promoted by the New Order regime, with a focus on traditional wifely and motherly duties. Any deviation from this prescribed role, such as the feminist group Gerwani, was seen as a threat and was purged from the women's movement.

The New Order regime placed great importance on limiting fertility rates, recognizing the strain that a rapidly growing population could have on the country's development and resources. This marked a significant shift from the previous regime led by President Sukarno, who had dismissed birth control as unnecessary and was strongly opposed to limiting the rapid growth in Indonesia's population. It is important to know that the move towards promoting contraception was also influenced by Western countries, which saw population control as a key issue globally, particularly in large countries like Indonesia. Therefore, Suharto's government converted to spreading the message of contraception for three main reasons. Firstly, limiting the birth rate formed part of the government's far-reaching commitment to development, which was the basis of the New Order's legitimacy. Suharto was aware that a rapidly growing population made it so much more difficult to raise people's standard of living and put immense strain on government resources. Secondly, measures in the late 1960s by the Governor of Jakarta, Ali Sadikin, showed that Muslims could be persuaded to support state-sponsored family planning. Thirdly, family planning was urged upon the Indonesian Government by its main aid donors, as Western countries like the USA (Blackburn, 2004, 142).

As a result, the government received and depended on significant foreign aid for their family planning program. The state made fertility reduction a top priority and established a National Family Planning Coordination Board to oversee the program.

Nevertheless, this was met with opposition from religious groups, such as Islam and Christianity, but the government was able to gain their support by avoiding

⁶ Dharma Wanita is an organization for the wives of Indonesian civil servants. Created during the *Orba period*. Dharma Wanita was conceived ultimately as a tool to control the wives of the civil servants. Ultimately it also controls the career of the husbands. According to Dharma Wanita, the main dharma (duty) of an Indonesian woman is to "support the official duties of the husband by creating a harmonious atmosphere, avoiding anti-Pancasila behavior, in order to create a state official who is authoritative and clean"(Redditt 2003).

⁷ *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* is a nationwide women's organization in Indonesia with strong government backing, which works for family welfare, community development, and a decent standard of living. It encourages community self-help and is heavily involved in health care (Lenart 1988).

controversial methods such as abortion and sterilization and only targeting married couples. The slogan "Two children are enough" was used to promote the idea of small ideal families. The government also implemented various tactics to gain popular support, such as providing income-generating activities and loans to those who accepted contraception. This approach proved successful and even gained the support of Muslim organizations, with the help of Aisyiyah⁸, the women's wing of Muhammadiyah⁹. Although they agreed to join the Family Planning Coordination Board to promote contraception, Aisyiyah disagreed with the Board's notion that a family would be ideal if it consisted of two children. (Blackburn, 1999). This statement aligns with Sabrur Rohim's argument regarding the family planning program (KB) in Islam. He asserts that support for the KB program should not be regarded merely as an act of civic duty but, on a broader scale, as a religious obligation to contribute to public welfare within the national and state framework. By evaluating the KB program, particularly during the New Order era, as a means of promoting national development and economic growth, Rohim's perspective resonates with Najm al-Din al-Thufi's principle. Whereas Al-Thufi argued that since the primary objective of Sharia is human welfare, whenever a conflict arises between religious texts and the well-being of society, human welfare should take precedence. Thus, in any cases where religious texts appear to contradict the greater good, prioritizing human welfare becomes more imperative (*wa-in khalafaha wajaba taqdimu ri'ayah al-mashlahah 'alayha*) (Rohim 2016). The result of the family planning program during the New Order era was hailed as a major success, with President Suharto receiving two United Nations Population Awards for its achievements. Although the program was praised, there were also criticisms that arose among society. According to some groups in rural areas, this program wasn't the only factor contributing to the decline in fertility rates. Aside from that, there were reports of women being pressured or coerced into using contraceptives, and limited options being provided without sufficient consideration for side effects. In the often-contested territory of East Timor, for instance, the program was viewed as a tool of oppression by the Indonesian government. The family planning

⁸ Aisyiyah is an Islamic non-governmental organization in Indonesia dedicated to female empowerment and charitable work. It was formed on 19 May 1917 by Nyai Ahmad Dahlan to facilitate women's access to education, health care and social services (Wikipedia 2019).

⁹ Muhammadiyah, socioreligious organization in Indonesia, established in 1912 at Yogyakarta, aimed at adapting Islam to modern Indonesian life (Britannica 2007).

program was also an example of how the state controlled the women's movement and used women's organizations to promote their development agenda. The PKK, for instance, with its extensive access to women, played a significant role in recruiting them as "acceptors" of contraception. However, the decision-making and implementation of this program remained largely in the hands of men, particularly Haryono Suyono, the leader of the Family Planning Coordination Board (Hull, 1987).

The government of the New Order era had to deal with an unstable global economy when the world crisis hit Indonesia in the 1980s. This has resulted in an imbalanced state of the country's growth and an increasingly severe economic crisis. By the 1990s, shifts in economic and societal circumstances resulted in reduced fertility rates becoming easier to achieve for both the government and women's organizations. Even though the Suharto regime started to lose trust in society as a result of this crisis, other factors such as later marriage, higher education levels, and the increasing cost of raising children all contributed to the decline in birth rates. Women also had more agency in making decisions about childbearing, and the campaigns against early marriage and for girls' education led by women's organizations played a role in this shift. Ultimately, the New Order regime's family planning program was a reflection of its authoritarian control and desire for modernization and economic development. While it achieved some level of success in reducing fertility rates, it also raised concerns about women's rights and the use of coercion and pressure. It also highlighted gender dynamics and power imbalances within the regime and society as a whole (Dwi Hapsari et al., 2020).

In short, the New Order regime's discourse on womanhood remained deeply rooted in the state's vision of women as primarily mothers and caregivers, aligning with its broader socio-political agenda. While the government promoted family planning to control population growth, this did not fundamentally alter the dominant ideology that positioned women within the domestic sphere. As mentioned earlier, the state-sponsored women's organization, *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (PKK), continued to emphasize women's roles as nurturers, responsible for household management and child-rearing (Suryakusuma, 1996).

However, there were subtle shifts in the discourse as economic and educational advancements provided women with greater opportunities outside the home. The rise in women's participation in higher education and the workforce in the 1980s and 1990s

signaled a gradual expansion of women's roles beyond motherhood. Government programs encouraged women to contribute to national development, but this was often framed within the context of their duties as "supporters" of their husbands rather than as independent individuals (Blackburn, 2004). The contradiction between state-driven modernization efforts and the persistence of patriarchal norms created tensions within the gender ideology of the era.

Moreover, while women's organizations advocated for greater autonomy in reproductive decision-making and education, they often operated within the constraints of the New Order's rigid gender policies. The regime's emphasis on *Kodrat Wanita* (women's natural destiny) continued to reinforce traditional expectations, even as modernization efforts required adjustments to women's roles. Thus, while the fertility program brought measurable demographic changes, the core narrative of women as mothers and caregivers persisted, even though with slight modifications to accommodate economic and social shifts (Robinson, 2009).

3.4 The Reform Era - Present

The Reform Era (Era *reformasi*) in Indonesia is marked by the transition from the authoritarian New Order regime (*Orde Baru*) to a more democratic system that began in 1998 after the fall of President Suharto. This period, driven by an economic crisis and widespread protests, introduced major political, economic, social and cultural transformation. Democratization efforts led to constitutional amendments, limiting presidential terms, strengthening human rights, and reducing military influence in politics. A significant transformation during this time was the growing role of women in politics, society, and advocacy. The Reform Era opened more opportunities for women's participation in government, with an increase in female representation in parliament and leadership positions. Through these eras, the state has continually reshaped the meanings of womanhood, motherhood, and fertility through its relationship with women's bodies and identities, the influence of religious ideologies, and the emergence of new individualistic values.

As mentioned in the previous section, under the authoritarian *Orde Baru* regime of President Suharto, the state actively shaped a specific model of womanhood and

motherhood, primarily through the lens of State Ibuism. Women were positioned as loyal wives, nurturing mothers, and moral keepers of the nation. The state's construction of ideal femininity served political goals: ensuring social stability, economic development, and political order. One of the crucial policies was the aggressive promotion of a national family planning program (*Keluarga Berencana*, or *KB*), encapsulated by the slogan "*Dua Anak Cukup*" ("Two Children Are Enough"). Beginning in the early 1970s, the government partnered with international agencies (like USAID and the UNFPA) to launch a massive campaign to control fertility rates. Women, especially rural women, were the primary targets. Importantly, the KB program was framed not merely as a health initiative but as a national duty to have only two children was a patriotic act contributing to the country's economic development. Fertility was therefore highly politicized, and motherhood was tightly regulated within a development-oriented, secular-nationalist framework.

However, the *Reformasi* era, which began in 1998, brought a dramatic shift. The collapse of central authority allowed for greater political decentralization and a resurgence of religious and cultural identities. In this environment, the once dominant "two children" narrative began to lose its hold.

The re-Islamization of society was not merely a cultural phenomenon; it had a major bearing on how femininity, fertility, and motherhood were conceived and practiced across the archipelago. Islamic organizations such as *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)*, along with more conservative movements like *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)* and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), began to assert stronger positions on gender roles and family life. These groups emphasized traditional interpretations of Sharia, advocating for women's primary role within the domestic sphere and framing reproductive choices as moral and religious obligations. As a result, notions of ideal womanhood shifted away from the state's developmentalist narrative toward a conception that was more spiritual and duty-based, grounded in Islamic teachings (Robinson 2009).

This ideological shift was also evident in how public discourses around contraception and reproductive rights changed. In regions like West Java, Aceh, and parts of Sumatra and Sulawesi, local governments, influenced by sharia-inspired bylaws (*Perda Syariah*), began to promote family values in line with Islamic teachings (Buehler 2016). Some even limited access to contraceptives for unmarried women, arguing that such

access encouraged premarital sex and moral decline. The state's previous centralized campaign for fertility control was now replaced by a fragmented, decentralized policy environment where local norms, often heavily shaped by religious ideologies, played a decisive role (Robinson 2009).

Moreover, media and religious television programs further disseminated these values. Popular Islamic preachers (ustadz and ustadzah) with large followings, such as Ustadz Arifin Ilham and Ustadzah Oki Setiana Dewi, frequently emphasized the religious merit of having many children and the sanctity of the maternal role. They portrayed motherhood as not just a social responsibility but a sacred trust (*amanah*) from God, thereby reinforcing a spiritualized model of womanhood that contrasted sharply with the modernist, state-defined woman of the New Order (Slama and Jones 2017).

This cultural and religious reconfiguration of gender and reproduction during the *Reformasi* era thus not only challenged the legacy of the *Orde Baru* but also opened new, sometimes conflicting, avenues for women's identity formation. While some women embraced these religious narratives as empowering and spiritually fulfilling, others criticized them for reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting women's autonomy (Blackwood, 2008; Brenner, 2011). The *reformasi*, in this sense, did not present a single, unified vision of womanhood and fertility but rather a contested and dynamic field shaped by intersecting forces of democracy, religion, and local tradition.

Moreover, there was a shift from secular nationalists' ideology to Islamic modernist movements. The political landscape after 1998 also saw the decline of secular nationalist dominance and the rise of Islamic modernist and revivalist movements. During this period organizations like PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera) and mass Islamic groups such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama gained greater political and cultural influence (Direktorat et al., n.d.).

For instance, Islamic modernist movements emphasized the importance of the *ummah*, moral discipline, and a return to Islamic values in public and private life. Within these frameworks, womanhood was rearticulated not just as a matter of supporting husbands and raising children but also as guardians of Islamic morality. In Islamic modernist views, women were often portrayed as the backbone of a pious family and community. Fertility was not just personal but communal; producing and raising righteous children was considered an act of devotion to God and a contribution to the

Islamic society. However, it is important to note that Islamic modernism was not monolithic. While some interpretations emphasized traditional family roles, others promoted education and professional achievement for women, as long as it was within an Islamic moral framework. Therefore, here Islamic feminism began to emerge, arguing for women's rights and equality grounded in Islamic principles (Direktorat et al., n.d.).

Interestingly, alongside these religious and communal discourses, a small but visible childfree movement also began to emerge in urban, middle-class Indonesian society during the *Reformasi* period. The expansion of the internet, exposure to global cultures, and the pressures of urbanization and economic precarity led some young Indonesians, particularly women, to question traditional expectations of marriage and motherhood. Despite this, these childfree individuals frequently encounter significant social stigma, with others accusing them of selfishness or betrayal of cultural and religious values. Due to this childfree movement critiques the expectation that motherhood is a biological or moral destiny for women. Instead, it aligns with broader global discourses on bodily autonomy, environmental concerns (overpopulation), and personal fulfilment beyond traditional family structures. However, their presence shows a major shift away from the focus on women's roles in development during *Orde Baru* and the emphasis on fertility in the *Reformasi* era (Dwi Hapsari et al., 2020).

In short, the transformation from *Orde Baru* to *Reformasi* radically reshaped Indonesian womanhood, motherhood, and fertility ideals. From the secular, state-driven ideal of the disciplined, two-child mother under Suharto, the *Reformasi* era opened a diverse and sometimes contradictory landscape of Islamic revivalist pro-natalism, pluralistic interpretations of womanhood, and the embryonic emergence of individualistic, childfree identities.

In this new era, womanhood is no longer singularly defined by state ideology or nationalist narratives. Instead, it is contested between religious resurgence, global liberal values, and local cultural traditions, with Indonesian women increasingly asserting the right to define their identities and reproductive choices.

3.5 Conclusion

The discourse surrounding motherhood in Indonesia is a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and socio-political factors that have evolved significantly over time. This examination delineates four historical periods that have shaped the understanding and expectations of motherhood in the Indonesian context: the Colonial Era, the Old Order, the New Order, and the Reform Era.

During the Colonial Era, Dutch colonialism profoundly influenced the conception of motherhood, transforming the multifaceted roles of women into a more domesticated ideal. Prior to colonial rule, Indonesian women enjoyed considerable autonomy and participated actively in economic and political spheres. However, the imposition of European patriarchal structures diminished their status, redefining motherhood as primarily a domestic role. This shift was reinforced by colonial policies that emphasized women's responsibilities within the household, thereby legitimizing colonial authority and discouraging women's engagement in public life.

The Old Order period, characterized by Soekarno's leadership from 1945 to 1967, saw a blend of traditional values and emerging nationalist ideologies. While women were encouraged to contribute to nation-building, their roles remained largely confined to motherhood and domesticity. The nationalist discourse valorized motherhood as a critical component of national identity, framing women as moral guardians of the family and the nation. This dual expectation of women as both contributors to national development and caretakers of traditional values created a complex dynamic that limited their autonomy.

In the New Order regime (1966-1998), under Suharto's authoritarian rule, the state further entrenched the ideology of "Ibuism," which positioned women primarily as homemakers and caregivers. The government promoted family planning initiatives to control population growth, framing motherhood within a development-oriented narrative. Despite some advancements in women's education and workforce participation, the overarching discourse continued to emphasize women's roles as mothers, perpetuating traditional gender norms.

The Reform Era, commencing in 1998, marked a significant shift towards democratization and the re-emergence of diverse discourses on womanhood and motherhood. This period witnessed an increase in women's political representation and a

resurgence of Islamic values, which redefined motherhood as a religious virtue. Concurrently, a childfree movement began to emerge among urban, middle-class women, challenging traditional expectations of motherhood and advocating for bodily autonomy and personal fulfillment.

Overall, the historical evolution of motherhood in Indonesia reflects a dynamic interplay of colonial legacies, nationalist ideologies, and contemporary social movements. The ongoing contestation of motherhood's meaning illustrates the complexities of gender roles in Indonesian society, as women navigate between traditional expectations and modern aspirations for autonomy and self-definition.



CHAPTER 4: CHILDFREE EXPERIENCE IN INDONESIA

The term childfree basically still sounds unfamiliar to most Indonesian people especially those who live in rural areas, this term was trending only on social media in 2022 and continues being debated because several influencers openly stated their life choice not to have children. Specifically, childfree does not yet have a word that can be translated into standard Indonesian. Childfree comes from American English which consists of two words, "child" which means "child" and "free" which means "free". This word when combined means "childfree". The term childfree refers to the belief that a person chooses to live freely without a child in their marriage relationship or personal life. This thought comes first from Western societies, such as France, England, America, and the Netherlands which have been characterized by this phenomenon since the 1500s, through the thought of not marrying or even having children.

The idea of women having the choice to not have children can be traced back to the first and second waves of feminism, where women fought for their reproductive rights and autonomy. The concept of being childfree in Indonesia can also be seen as a form of revolutionary feminist thought from Western countries, where women are free to make choices about their own bodies and lives without societal pressures and expectations. From a feminist perspective, the choice to be childless can also be seen as a form of liberation from the traditional expectations and roles imposed on women in terms of motherhood. In many societies, including Indonesia, women are often expected to prioritize their roles as mothers and caretakers above all else. Therefore, the decision to not have children challenges this societal norm and also empowers women to make their own choices about their bodies and lives for those who believe in this ideology.

Furthermore, the childfree phenomenon also sheds light on the unequal burden of childcare and domestic work placed on women. In many cases, it is primarily the responsibility of mothers to care for children, which can limit their opportunities for personal and professional growth. By choosing to be childless, women are challenging this gendered division of labour and advocating for more equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women.

Moreover, childfree women believe that the pressure to have children can also be an obstacle for women in pursuing their careers, financial stability, and educational goals.

From their perspective, being childfree allows women to focus on their personal and professional growth without the added responsibilities and limitations of womanhood or motherhood. This means that it defies the societal expectation that women should compromise their personal aspirations for the sake of having children. In essence, the childfree phenomenon in Indonesia not only challenges cultural and religious values about motherhood but also highlights the intersections with feminist discourse. Several feminist groups in Indonesia, such as Jakarta Feminist, Perempuan Mahardhika, Indonesia Feminis, and Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, actively promote these critical perspectives. While influenced by Western feminist thought, these groups adapt their advocacy to fit the local culture, emphasizing women's rights to autonomy and choice.

In Indonesia, despite having a predominantly Muslim population, in recent years the childfree movement has been gaining recognition as a legitimate lifestyle choice. Particularly, because of several reasons. This movement advocates individuals choosing not to have children and aims to raise awareness about this lifestyle option. Unlike involuntary childlessness, which is often due to medical or circumstantial reasons, the childfree lifestyle is a deliberate decision not to have children at all. In many Western countries, this choice has become more common, influenced by shifts in gender roles, economic pressures, urbanisation and industrialisation, and the desire for personal freedom. However, the global context reveals varying degrees of acceptance and stigmatization, with some societies embracing the concept more readily than others.

Understanding the childfree phenomenon in a global context helps to highlight its complexities and varying motivations. In Indonesia, the phenomenon is not a new concept, but it has been given more visibility and importance in recent years. It is commonly known as a decision that is often met with judgments and stigmas from society, as having children is seen as a natural and necessary part of life in many cultures and religions, especially in Indonesia. However, more individuals are choosing to be childfree, citing reasons such as concerns about the future their children would face, the desire to contribute to reducing overpopulation, lack of time for parenting responsibilities, concerns about physical changes due to pregnancy and childbirth that particularly affect women, financial constraints, unresolved childhood traumas, or a wish to focus on personal development and independence.

Rather than viewing this decision as a personal failing or a radical act, it is important to recognize the broader societal structures that influence this choice. Women, in particular, often make this decision in response to systemic challenges that do not adequately support their rights, health, or aspirations. It is not merely a personal problem but a reflection of larger systemic issues within society itself. Without sufficient social policies, healthcare systems, and protections that prioritize women's well-being and autonomy, some may feel compelled to forget parenthood.

Thus, in this chapter, I explore the main elements guiding Indonesian women to choose a childfree way of life. Then, in the next chapter, I will examine how society reacts to childless women and the potential stigma attached to them as well as rare cases where These women may receive support.

4.1 Why Choose a Childfree Lifestyle?

The emergence of the childfree trend in Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, marks a significant cultural shift. This development contrasts with the traditionally held values of the predominantly conservative Muslim population, for whom bearing children has long been regarded as both a divine blessing and a moral obligation. This is why the pressure to have children is particularly strong for married couples, as culturally they place importance on the concept of *filial piety*, which Ancestors also taught that children bring happiness, respect, and economic security to the family, fulfilling religious obligations and ensuring care for parents in their old age. Where traditionally, large families with five or more children were the norm, and elder siblings were often expected to help raise their younger brothers and sisters. These values reinforced the belief that producing offspring was both a social and spiritual necessity. More specifically this reinforces and pushes the idea that having children is necessary to provide for parents' benefits and continue the family lineage.

However, today, a new generation of Indonesians, particularly women, is increasingly finding their voice in questioning these long-standing expectations. They navigate the tension between deep-seated traditions and the realities of a rapidly changing world. Globalization has exposed Indonesian society to diverse worldviews that challenge conventional norms, but these global influences alone are not driving the shift.

The exhausting social and economic pressures of modern life, for example, also play a major role. Many women balance demanding careers, financial insecurities, and societal expectations, leading them to reconsider the assumption that motherhood is inevitable. Higher levels of education have broadened their horizons as well as empowering women to aspire beyond the traditional roles assigned to them. Education also provides women with more choices and strengthens their autonomy to prioritize personal goals, such as career advancement, travel, or creative pursuits, over traditional family-building.

Moreover, mental health awareness has brought attention to the emotional demands of parenting and the unresolved traumas many individuals carry from their childhoods, especially recently trending among Gen Z and beyond. For some, choosing a childfree life is an act of self-preservation and healing. Rising individualism, the belief in personal fulfillment over collective expectations, is also a key factor behind this choice. Urbanization and the increasing cost of living make the prospect of raising children financially daunting for many young couples.

Particularly, in today's era of rapid social change, the decision to remain childfree in Indonesia speaks to something much deeper than simple rebellion against tradition. It reflects a complex mix of factors as mentioned above, the intense pressures of modern life, evolving expectations among educated women, concerns for mental and emotional well-being, economic and political uncertainties, and above all, a growing desire for personal freedom. To better understand this movement, I gathered data through ethnographic content from social media platforms like Instagram, blogs, and YouTube, which are spaces where real, everyday conversations are happening.

One especially powerful example comes from A popular YouTube video titled *"Kick Andy-Childfree"* uploaded by @Metro TV, one of Indonesia's major television networks, on April 21, 2022. In the video, the host invites a psychologist and two childfree couples to share their stories. Paul and Gita Savitri, an influencer and successful Indonesian diaspora living in Germany, have been married for six years and remain childfree. Similarly, Muhammad Arif Maulana and his wife, Citra Hayu, married for eleven years, have also embraced a childfree life. Through their honest conversations, the video reveals that many people are choosing this path to protect their personal freedom, achieve financial security, and prioritize their emotional well-being.

This is why understanding these motivations is crucial for grasping the broader cultural shift taking place in Indonesia today. More and more Indonesians, especially women, are boldly asserting their right to live on their own terms, even when it means challenging and redefining traditional ideas of what a "family" should look like.

4.1.1 Economic Factors

The decision to be childfree in Indonesia is multifaceted, and influenced by cultural, personal, and economic factors. Economic factors are often regarded by childfree Indonesian women to have a significant impact on their decision not to have kids. As Indonesia experiences rapid economic development and social changes, young Indonesians are increasingly weighing the financial implications of raising children against their career aspirations and financial stability. This has resulted in a decrease in fertility rates and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future (See the table in Chapter 1).

The cost of living in Indonesia has been rising steadily over the past decade, making it increasingly difficult for families to sustain a comfortable lifestyle, either in an urban area or in a rural area. With inflation and the high costs of education, healthcare, and basic necessities, many couples are struggling to make ends meet (RRI 2024, Gramedia n.d.). This has led to a growing concern among couples about their ability to afford the expenses that come with raising a child. Firstly, the economic burden of bringing up a child is a critical factor that married couples in Indonesia must consider when deciding to have children. Secondly, the job market in Indonesia is highly competitive, and securing stable employment with a decent salary is becoming more and more challenging (Gramedia n.d., International Labour Organization 2016). This makes it difficult for couples to save enough money to support a child, which can lead to additional financial strain and impact on their overall well-being. Many couples in Indonesia have to work multiple jobs or have both spouses working to maintain a stable income. The time and effort put into working leaves little room for taking care of a child. This has also influenced many couples to choose not to have children, as it would mean significant financial strain and limited time for both parents to raise them.

Furthermore, the lack of support systems for working parents in Indonesia is another economic factor that has influenced the decision of couples to be childfree. Unlike in some of our neighborhood countries like Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia, where there are policies in place to support working parents, such as paid parental leave, affordable childcare services, flexible working hours, and free healthcare services, in Indonesia, such support systems are extremely constrained. For instance, according to Indonesia's Labor Law No. 13 of 2003, women are entitled to only three months (90 days) of paid maternity leave, typically divided into 1.5 months before and 1.5 months after childbirth. If mothers require additional time off beyond this period, they must negotiate unpaid leave directly with their employers, as there is no formal regulation that guarantees extended unpaid maternity leave (Hukum Online 2025). In contrast to countries like Singapore, as of the updated policy effective April 2025, eligible working mothers are entitled to 16 weeks of Government-Paid Maternity Leave (GPML). In addition to this, a new Shared Parental Leave (SPL) scheme allows for up to 10 weeks of leave to be shared between both parents, initially 6 weeks from April 2025, increasing to 10 weeks from April 2026. If the full SPL entitlement is allocated to the mother, she may receive up to 26 weeks, or 6.5 months, of paid leave in total. In contrast to Singapore, Indonesia does not currently have a formal shared parental leave arrangement. Consequently, when comparing the two countries, it is clear that Singapore offers up to 3.5 months more paid leave than Indonesia. This difference highlights Singapore's more expansive approach to supporting parental involvement and caregiving during the early stages of a child's life (Made for Families 2025). Singapore also offers generous childcare subsidies, whereas childcare services in Indonesia are often costly and predominantly available in urban areas, rendering them inaccessible for many middle- and lower-income families (World Bank 2023). A study conducted by UNICEF Indonesia (2021) indicated that the average monthly cost of a private daycare center in Jakarta can consume up to 30%–40% of a middle-class household's income, creating additional financial strain. This means that parents, especially mothers, have to take on the responsibility of raising a child while still maintaining a full-time job. As a result, many couples have been dissuaded from having children as they fear the financial and emotional burden it may bring. One example of life experiences can be found in the comments on the popular YouTube channel Kick Andy-Childfree. One commentator, such as Bunga, shared her feelings, stating, "*Aww, same!!!*"

I really do not want to go through that vicious cycle again. It's better to enjoy my own money now, feeling happy and free.”!! Here she expresses relief in avoiding the burdens of caretaking of a child and finding happiness in the ability to enjoy financial independence.

In addition to the challenges couples face, the economic situation in Indonesia has also affected the cost of living for children. Wildan Sadi, a finance Manager at GE Healthcare, shared on his LinkedIn “*Why Being Poor is More Expensive?*” He stated that the cost of living in Indonesia has been increasing, affecting families' ability to meet their basic needs (LinkedIn 2025). Factors such as inflation and rising prices for essentials like food, housing, utilities, and healthcare contribute to this strain.

When it comes to education, many couples fear that they will be unable to provide their children with a good education or a comfortable life, leading them to think of not having a kid at all or choosing a childfree lifestyle. Even though the government has established laws to ensure education until middle and high school for the strict job requirements with education degrees, they have failed to support their citizens with free education unlike neighboring countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Korea, and Australia (Palawan State University 2018). Despite being developing nations, they have prioritized education for their citizens, offering free education from elementary school to university degrees. This demonstrates that their government can prioritize the well-being and future of its citizens, regardless of their economic status. This promotes equal opportunities for all and contributes to a more educated and skilled workforce, which can help boost the country's economy (Palawan State University 2018).

In contrast, Indonesia's government does not prioritize or invest in the education of its citizens. This has resulted in a drastic disparity in education opportunities and outcomes among different social classes. The lack of support for free education has hindered the development and potential of many talented and bright students, leaving them behind with limited opportunities for growth and success. Moreover, the existing laws that mandate education until middle high school only operate on paper, as many children in rural and remote areas are still unable to access basic education (WENR 2019). This further exacerbates the educational gap and perpetuates the cycle of poverty for many families. In other words, the Indonesian government's failure to provide free education for its citizens partially not only hinders the personal growth and potential of

individuals but also limits the overall progress and development of the nation. Concerning these issues, Indonesians started to accept and adopt the concept of childfree.

One of the most well-known Indonesian figures who has publicly embraced the childfree lifestyle is Gita Savitri Devi. She is a 30-year-old married Muslim woman with a Master's degree and is a content creator and influencer based in Berlin. In 2021, Gita garnered significant attention across Indonesia after openly discussing her choice to remain childfree with her husband. She provided several reasons for her decision, including the desire for personal freedom, the importance of mental health, and the socioeconomic challenges associated with raising a child. This argument is particularly relevant in countries like Indonesia, where the costs of education, healthcare, and child-rearing are high and largely unsupported by the state.

In her interviews and social media posts, Gita has frequently criticized the lack of systemic support from the Indonesian government, particularly in crucial areas such as education and healthcare. She emphasized that bringing a child into a society where basic rights, like access to quality education, are not assured places an unfair burden on many families. She has also mentioned that one of her motivations for residing in Berlin is the declining economic conditions in Indonesia, which she perceives as constraints on personal development and financial security. She expressed that staying overseas provides her with a sense of security, enhanced professional opportunities, and access to a more substantial social support network elements that she perceives as lacking in her homeland. Her viewpoint resonated with numerous young Indonesians, especially those from lower-middle-class backgrounds who believe the government does not provide adequate opportunities for advancement.

Furthermore, the reason for the rising cost of housing has also played a significant role in the decision of couples not to have children. As the population grows, the demand for housing has increased, leading to skyrocketing prices. Many young couples in Indonesia cannot afford to buy or rent either a small or a larger house to accommodate a growing family, leading them to choose not to have children (Abidoye 2020). Beyond the rising cost of housing, which has already placed substantial strain on the ability of couples to afford larger living spaces suitable for raising children, the Indonesian government's taxation policies further exacerbate the financial burdens on citizens. The country imposes a variety of taxes, including income tax, value-added tax (VAT), property tax,

and other levies that collectively reduce the disposable income of households. Progressive income tax can significantly cut the earnings of working couples, particularly those in middle- and upper-income brackets. As the cost of living rises, the proportion of income that must be allocated to taxes increases, leaving less available for other essential needs such as housing, education, healthcare, and savings. Property taxes, on the other hand, have become increasingly burdensome, especially in urban areas where property values have soared due to high demand (Kompasiana 2025, Tahu Ekspres 2025). The higher the property value, the higher the tax obligation, which adds to the overall cost of homeownership or renting. Moreover, VAT, which is applied to a broad range of goods and services, further inflates the cost of living. This tax affects everyday purchases, making basic necessities more expensive and reducing the amount of money that households can set aside for future investments, or the additional costs associated with child-rearing.

Evangelina Tessia Pricilla, estimated to be between 30–35 years old, is a single author and content creator and Yosefine Christi a 41-year-old, single Christian woman with a Master's degree, works as an education consultant and content creator exemplify a growing trend among Indonesians opting for a childfree lifestyle as a practical and economically responsible choice. Both in their early 30s, they have openly expressed their views on the childfree lifestyle, citing the significant financial burdens faced by young families in Indonesia as a key factor in their decision. They stress that their choice is not driven by selfishness or an anti-family stance but stems from a realistic evaluation of their economic circumstances, which include rising housing costs, limited access to affordable education, and high taxes.

Their views align with recent statistics from BPS Indonesia (Statistics Indonesia), which reported that 8.2% of Indonesian women, approximately 71,000 individuals, have chosen to remain childfree primarily due to economic pressures (BPS 2025). These figures indicate a broader societal shift, particularly in urban areas, where the cost of raising a child is becoming increasingly unaffordable without substantial government support. Evangelista and Yosefine emphasize their preference to invest in their well-being, financial security, and long-term goals rather than bring a child into an environment where access to quality education, healthcare, and housing is both uncertain and expensive.

Besides, dissatisfaction with governmental policies and political leadership often results from this financial strain. When young individuals and couples perceive that political inaction or mismanagement exacerbates their economic hardships, it can intensify their distrust of the system. As a result, many view the decision to remain childfree not only as an economic necessity but also as a political stance, a form of resistance against structures they believe have failed to create a supportive environment for future generations. This growing sentiment highlights how political factors, alongside economic ones, are increasingly shaping the childfree movement.

4.1.2 Political Factors

It should be noted that the decision to remain childfree is often deeply personal, but it can also carry significant political weight. Especially in recent years, political dissatisfaction, economic instability, and distrust in governing institutions have increasingly influenced younger generations in Indonesia to reconsider traditional life paths, including marriage and parenthood. For many, the choice to remain childfree has evolved into a form of silent protest, serving to withhold their contribution to a system they perceive as failing them. In other words, it has become a political act of resistance.

In particular, the voices of women have been central to this movement. Faced with governments that restrict reproductive rights, fail to provide adequate parental support, or enforce economic policies that make family life unsustainable, many women are choosing to opt out of motherhood entirely. Their decision sends a clear message: until systems change to respect and support their autonomy and future, they will withhold their participation in creating the next generation (Jakarta Feminist 2020). The childfree movement among women reflects a deep disillusionment with political leadership, revealing how personal life choices can transform into powerful critiques of societal structures.

Consider the following example on the political aspect of being childfree. Carlos Ramirez, 45 years old academician who does not identify with a religion and has been married for 12 years, shared her reasoning of being childfree on Quora, a platform for exchanging insights and experiences. Responding to the question, *"Why do Millennials*

and Gen Z generally not want to get married, or if they do, why do many choose to be childfree?"

Choosing to be childfree is the most ideal way to punish the government. Do you know what kind of incompetent government is? A government that is unable to produce and manage its sources but relies on tax money for state revenue. The similarity is when we want to lift a bucket but instead, we fall into the bucket. And who is most taxed here? Of course, the middle class. An ordinary worker. Unlike the poor or the wealthy, the middle class is relentlessly taxed, from income taxes (PPh) to value-added taxes (PPn), vehicle registration fees (STNK), property taxes (PBB), and beyond. They toil endlessly, only for the government to collect the fruits of their labour, keeping them from ever truly becoming wealthy. They are, in essence, reduced to mere cash cows or economic slaves. If they have children, their children will replace their position as slaves. But by not having children, they can still save to live in their old age. And when they die there is no successor. Now here is the beauty of revenge. When there is no successor... tax revenue decreases. Who else has to pay? The rich? Are they forced to pay taxes? They will close the factory. He doesn't need to work, he's already rich. The tax revenue from the middle class is decreasing. Poor people? Burned alive, later riots. The government also cannot easily replace the lost workforce because there is no expertise. Finally, the government is forced to produce to get income. This is what happens in countries like Singapore, China, and Japan. Running out of young people. In Saudi Arabia, there is no such thing as personal income tax. The state makes money for the people, not the people making money for the state, don't get it the other way around. That's why people are prosperous. If they are prosperous, they don't have a headache having children. So, it should just let it be that many people are not married and are childfree.

The statement made by Carlos Ramirez suggests that choosing to be childfree is a form of protest or "punishment" for the government, and touches on a broader critique of societal structures and the economic burdens especially placed on the middle class. Ramirez highlights the taxation systems that disproportionately impact on the individuals or family, income taxes, property taxes, and other policies that drain financial resources, ultimately keeping them in a state of economic stagnation. Ramirez's narrative also highlighted how political and economic dissatisfaction fuels the decision of childfree women. While his observations offer an important viewpoint, it is crucial to center the experiences of women, who face not only economic burdens but also political battles over

their bodies, rights, and futures, making their choice to be childfree an even more profound political statement.

Therefore, one of the key ideas here is that by opting out of parenthood, individuals may disrupt a government's future revenue streams. Children, after all, represent the next generation of taxpayers and workers. If fewer children are born, the labour worker pool shrinks, and so does the government's ability to rely on that group for future tax revenues.

Ramirez's argument reflects concerns seen in many developed nations, where declining birth rates in places like Japan, Korea, Singapore, and parts of Europe have caused governments to grapple with shrinking workforces and increasing dependency ratios. When there are fewer young workers to support an aging population, it puts pressure on the state to find alternative methods of economic sustainability. Ramirez perceives this demographic decline as a significant challenge for governments, potentially compelling them to generate income through production rather than relying solely on citizens' tax contributions. Interestingly, he contrasts this with places like Saudi Arabia, where government wealth often comes from natural resources, meaning there's less reliance on personal taxes. In this model, Ramirez suggests, people are more prosperous and less stressed about having children, since the government plays a more active role in supporting its population economically.

Undoubtedly, the notion of being childfree as a form of resistance points to deeper frustrations with how contemporary government systems work. It's a radical critique of government inefficiency, economic inequality, and excessive taxation. This idea also resonates with the growing trend among Millennials and Gen Z to remain unmarried or childfree due to financial concerns, dissatisfaction with societal expectations, and a rejection of traditional life paths.

When considering Indonesia's increasingly burdensome regulations on taxation, we can examine and even magnify Carlos Ramirez's statement that choosing to be childfree is one of the most effective ways to "punish" the government. More unconventionally, Indonesia has recently introduced several policies that further highlight this issue, such as the mandatory Public Housing Savings (Tapera) scheme, private-sector worker pension savings requirements, and increased taxes on independent housing construction (PPN). These regulations are direct examples of how the state continues to

drain the middle class, forcing them to shoulder the majority of the financial burden, while the wealthy often find ways to avoid or minimize their contributions, and the poor are not in a position to contribute much to state revenues.



Figure 2: Tapera will Cut Your Salary by 3%. Posted on news.detik.com on 6 June 2024, Screenshot Accessed 1 September 2024

The Tapera policy, for example, aims to provide affordable housing in the future by mandating private-sector employees and employers to contribute to a housing savings fund. However, for many middle-class workers, this simply represents another mandatory deduction from their already heavily taxed income. While these funds aim to provide housing assistance in the future, they may not yield proportionate benefits to those who are required to contribute. Through this mechanism, the government essentially guarantees itself a steady stream of income, using the middle class as a financial crunch.

By choosing to be childfree, individuals can subvert this system in the long term. If there are fewer children to take up the roles of future taxpayers, the state may eventually find itself in a financial crisis, unable to generate revenue from its traditional tax base. The Tapera system, like many other tax-based policies, becomes increasingly unsustainable without a growing workforce to fund it.



Figure 3. Private Workers' Salaries to be Cut Again for Mandatory Additional Pension Program” Posted on 3 September 2024 at the Okezone Website. Screenshot Accessed 5 September 2024



Figure 4. Taxes are Increasing Again, starting in 2025, Building Your Own Home will be Subject to VAT of 2.4 per cent.” Posted on the Instagram account UNEXPLND on 30 August 2024. Screenshot accessed 5 September 2024

The introduction of mandatory pension savings for private-sector workers adds another layer of economic pressure on individuals who are already struggling to manage their finances. Middle-class workers are required to allocate part of their income to pension funds, yet many fear that they may never fully benefit from these savings. Given the rising cost of living, stagnant wages, and increased taxation, the idea of saving for retirement can feel more like a forced obligation than a long-term investment. How should we save for the future when we are still short of money?

When placed in the context of Ramirez’s argument, this only strengthens the rationale for choosing to be childfree as a form of economic self-preservation. If individuals do not have children, they avoid passing this economic burden to the next generation. In essence, they deny the government a future pool of pension contributors and taxpayers, forcing it to rethink its dependence on the working class to fund these schemes.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of how the Indonesian government is squeezing the middle class is the recent increase in taxes on independent housing

construction (PPN). As housing becomes increasingly unaffordable, the government's decision to increase taxes on those attempting to build their own homes is a clear signal that it values short-term revenue over the long-term prosperity of its citizens. This tax hike particularly affects those who dream of homeownership, forcing them to reconsider their future. Therefore, individuals who may have once aspired to build a home and raise a family are now weighed down by additional taxes and costs, deciding to remain childfree even more appealing.

This growing tax burden focuses on Ramirez's point: instead of supporting people, it sometimes feels like the government is just finding new ways to take from them. By choosing not to have children, people are breaking this cycle, refusing to create the next generation of taxpayers who would inherit these financial pressures. In Indonesia today, Ramirez's idea of "the beauty of revenge," which portrays leaving no successors to shoulder these burdens, seems especially relevant. Another informant, Anya Safira Cahyati, is a 35-year-old single Hindu woman with a Master's degree agreed with Ramirez's point about the growing frustration with societal and governmental expectations. She argues that choosing to remain childfree is not just a personal or lifestyle decision, but also a form of resistance against an economic system that continuously demands more from its citizens while offering less in return. Anya shared that she sees raising children in today's Indonesia as preparing them to enter a life already burdened by inflation, rising housing costs, limited job security, and increasingly competitive education systems. For her, choosing not to have children is both a form of self-preservation and an act of refusal, refusing to pass on these compounded financial and social pressures to another generation. She also perceived the overpopulation crisis as a significant factor contributing to these challenges. The strain on resources and the environment only intensified her resolve, as she felt that bringing a child into such a world would be an unfair burden on both the individual and society at large. This can be understood as, if an increasing number of people choose not to have children, the government will ultimately confront a harsh reality: fewer taxpayers, a diminished workforce to fund pensions, and an ageing population that requires more care and support. This scenario is a future resulting from policies that have overlooked the struggles of the people.

4.1.3 Individual Factors

Childhood Trauma and Personal Experiences

Childhood experiences frequently serve as the foundation on which adults construct their views on life, relationships, and, importantly, parenthood. In Indonesia, where cultural and religious customs firmly establish family structures, childhood trauma can significantly influence the decision to pursue a childfree lifestyle. For certain people, negative childhood experiences create enduring wounds that influence their views on motherhood, frequently resulting in their deliberate decision to reject having children.

Often, people who have suffered childhood trauma, whether it be emotional, physical, or psychological, hold a profound fear of repeating the same damage in the same cycle they previously faced. In Indonesia, where mental health concerns often face stigma or inadequate handling, the long-term consequences of childhood trauma may be particularly evident. Particularly, the stigma associated with psychological disorders has been extensively examined in scholarly studies. Arsyad et al. (2024) in their work "Exploring Mental Health Stigma Among Indonesian Healthcare Students Towards Individuals with Mental Illnesses" emphasize that mental health is a sensitive issue in Indonesia, where pervasive stigma leads to underdiagnosis and inadequate treatment of psychological disorders. In the absence of sufficient support or psychiatric interventions, these individuals may encounter unresolved issues manifesting as worry, anxiety, or overwhelming feelings of inadequacy especially toward parenting.

For instance, someone who grew up in an abusive family may internalize the belief that they are incapable of fostering a secure and positive environment for a child. The experience of watching or personally enduring abuse might generate a deep-seated apprehension that one would unintentionally imitate such actions when becoming a parent. In many regions of Indonesia, the scarcity of readily available mental health services exacerbates this anxiety, therefore impeding individuals' ability to effectively cope with their trauma and cultivate a more positive outlook on parenting (Nallanie and Nathanto 2024; Bunyamin et al 2025).

Furthermore, the cultural expectation to strictly adhere to conventional gender norms might intensify these fears. In Indonesia, there exists a profound societal pressure to marry and procreate, and those who stray from this convention may encounter

substantial social examination. Individuals who have experienced a traumatic childhood may find the prospect of confronting this pressure while also struggling with unresolved trauma to be rather stressful, therefore reinforcing their choice to remain childfree.



Figure 5. YouTube video. Filmore channel. Included the discussion title of Uncensored #01: Childfree is NOT the Nature of Women?!

A compelling example of such transparency can be found in the podcast hosted by Andrea Gunawan, a 35-year-old Christian entrepreneur and married woman, on her YouTube channel Filmore. The episode, titled "Uncensored #01 *Childfree itu BUKAN Kodrat Perempuan?!'*" (Childfree is not a woman's nature?), features Gitasav alongside Radinta Btari, a married Muslim woman who is a dentist and parenting content creator. They discuss the contrasting perspectives of motherhood versus the choice to remain childfree.

In the video, Gitasav candidly shared how her childhood trauma influenced her decision to remain childfree. She explained that her upbringing left emotional scars that made her reflect deeply on the responsibilities and emotional demands of parenting. Gitasav expressed that it is better not to have children at all than to risk becoming a parent who, due to unresolved trauma, might not be able to provide a nurturing and emotionally healthy environment. She emphasized, "Instead of being labeled a bad parent, it may be preferable not to have children".

Her viewpoint was supported by sex educator Gunawan, founder of Catwomanizer, who agreed that choosing not to have children due to past trauma is entirely valid. She remarked, "I think it's very valid if you would rather not have children because you have child trauma, so why should society condemn that? While it's our right to heal ourselves." This highlights an important point within the childfree discourse: that healing from personal trauma and prioritizing one's mental health should be respected, not criticized. For individuals like Gitasav and many others, the decision to remain childfree is not a rejection of motherhood itself, but rather an act of self-awareness, responsibility, and courage in the face of deep personal experiences.

The Burden of Responsibility

Another critical aspect of childhood trauma is the increased sense of duty that individuals feel towards prospective children. Individuals who have encountered neglect, abandonment, or inconsistent caring may acquire an increased consciousness of the significant influence that parents may exert on a child's developmental trajectory. Such consciousness, however beneficial, can also be immobilizing. Fear of inability to offer the necessary emotional, financial, or psychological care for a child might result in a deliberate choice to avoid becoming a parent completely.

The weight of duty might be even more pronounced in Indonesian social life, which is characterized by significant economic inequalities and mostly inadequate social support systems. Especially being the first-born child or the older child in the family with a large number of siblings and growing up in an unstable family income or a poor family could bring nightmares in the whole life. This is because they are not only expected to support their family financially but also to perform household chores and care for their siblings, regardless of their age. This also pertains to the sandwich generation, a group of individuals who find themselves caught between the dual responsibilities of caring for their aging parents and simultaneously supporting and raising their own children, including siblings. This phenomenon has become more prevalent in recent years due to factors such as longer life expectancy, delayed parenthood, and increasing financial strain on younger generations. The term "sandwich generation" underscores the metaphor of transitioning between two caregiving responsibilities, frequently leading to difficulties and stress.

Therefore, bringing a child into the world without the ability to ensure their welfare can be a formidable challenge for those who experienced poverty or significant financial instability in their early years. The burden to provide not just a child's fundamental need but also their education, emotional growth, and future prospects may be daunting, particularly in a culture where upward social mobility is difficult and uncertainty is prevalent.

Other discussions on a popular YouTube video titled *"Kick Andy-Childfree"* by Metro TV, state that many individuals choose a childfree lifestyle because they prioritize their personal freedom, financial stability, and emotional well-being. The video's most popular comment, with over 1.3K likes, discusses a more emotional reason: *having children because of social pressure is more selfish than due to desire*. The next commenter, who has experienced inner child wounds or childhood trauma, describes how neglected or absent parents forced them to care for siblings or manage household duties, leading to an overwhelming sense of exhaustion and a desire to avoid repeating that cycle as an adult. This resonated with many viewers, as responses to the comment echoed similar experiences of forced maturity and caregiving. These personal stories indicate that some individuals decide to avoid having children as a direct reaction to challenging childhood experiences, where the early imposition of caregiving engendered a reluctance to assume parental responsibilities in adulthood. The engagement around this comment highlights how deeply formative experiences can shape attitudes toward parenthood, particularly concerning emotional and psychological well-being.

In the comments section of the YouTube video *"Kick Andy-Childfree"*, Titin, a commentator on YouTube, shared that *"my husband and I are also childless because we've been exhausted since childhood. We took care of our siblings and helped our parents earn money, and now that we have our own money, we just want to enjoy the fruits of our hard work. We are thrilled now."* Another commentator, Zahra, similarly stressed the same experiences about how bad being a sandwich generation is.

Wow, same here, sis. From a young age, I received instructions to care for my siblings, manage household chores, clean everyone's clothes, and perform various tasks that even adults find challenging. Imagine how I felt as an elementary school kid, with minimal help and guidance. I had to perform flawlessly to avoid punishment. Even without mistakes, I always

faced physical and verbal abuse. Since kindergarten, I've had to work and pay for everything myself. Even now, I still do all those things, and I'm exhausted. I feel like I wouldn't be able to do these things again if I got married, even if my husband helps. That's why I want to be childless, on top of the fact that life in this world isn't pleasant. Even if some people had a blissful childhood, there's still suffering, loss, and sadness. It feels wrong to bring a child into such an unpleasant world. It's better to spend my life freely with my partner, without children.

The perspectives shared by Titin and Zahra reveal deep personal reasons for choosing a childfree life, rooted in early childhood experiences of excessive responsibility and emotional strain. Titin recounts having to care for siblings and assist their parents from a young age, which has led them to prioritize enjoying the fruits of their labor and embrace the freedom that a childfree lifestyle offers. For Zahra, however, these responsibilities were compounded by physical and verbal abuse, as well as the expectation to earn and manage their own finances as a child. This difficult upbringing has not only shaped their preference for remaining childfree but has also raised existential concerns about bringing a child into a world filled with hardship. Collectively, these narratives illustrate how early life experiences can heavily influence decisions to reject parenthood, particularly as a means of reclaiming personal freedom and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the similar comments below also come with emphasizing how hard being a Sandwich Generation Child is, somehow it makes them think that I shouldn't have been born into this world.

Sriwijaya (modified username): Same here. My spouse and I also chose to be childless because of these issues. We're too exhausted. As the oldest child, I had the burden of taking care of my siblings and helping my parents. Meanwhile, outsiders casually assert that, among other things, I must be loyal as the eldest. But who asked to be born as the eldest child? Now, I just want to enjoy the fruits of my own labor. You can call me selfish, but those who say that don't understand the sandwich generation.

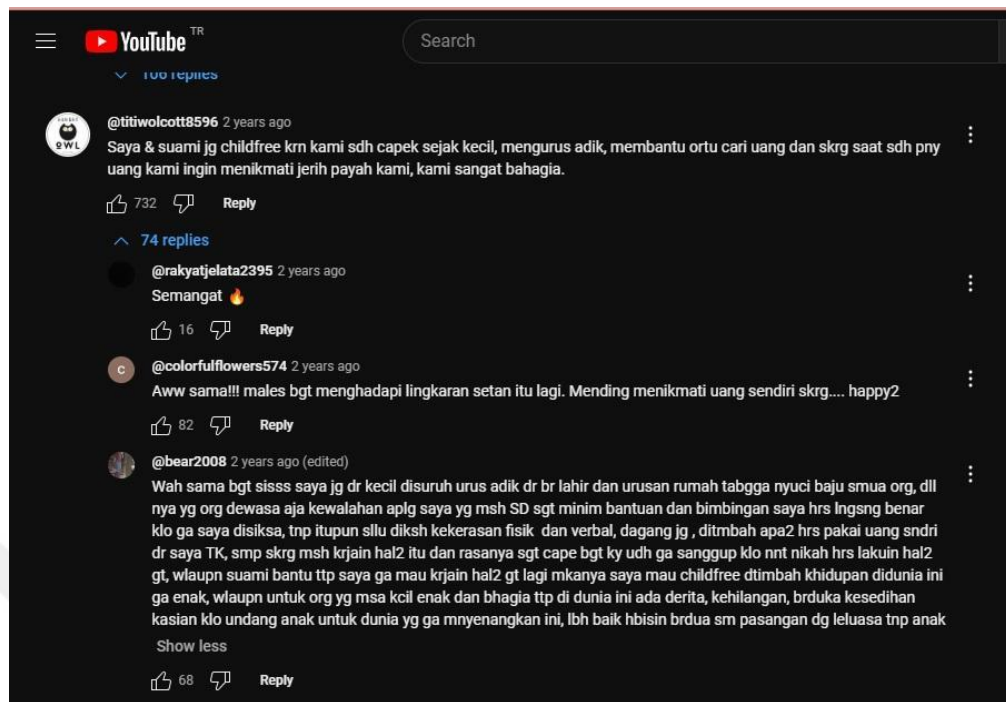


Figure 6. A pro-childfree Commentator Posted a Comment on a YouTube video titled "KickAndy - Childfree." They shared their experience of feeling burdened by family expectations, which influenced their decision to live without children

Dyan Sansa responded to Sriwijaya: I feel you. My husband and I are part of the sandwich generation. Up until now, I've been the breadwinner for my family. I already have one child, but as long as my parents are still alive (since I'm responsible for supporting them until they pass), I don't want to have more children. It's not straightforward; it's never easy to be part of the sandwich generation. This is my life path, and I have no choice but to follow it. Particularly when I evaluate my life in comparison to others, I often find myself dwelling on my own shortcomings. Since childhood, I've experienced psychological trauma because of my father. He had to live with me until his death (since my mother couldn't accept him anymore). I even went to a psychiatrist due to my depression. I often cried on the train after work, feeling exhausted. My salary wasn't for me and my small family; it was to support my parents. I'd come home, sit in the bathroom, and sob uncontrollably until I couldn't breathe. Heavy? Life is never easy. That's why my husband and I work hard to save and buy assets through installments, so we don't burden our child when we're older. We are committed to enabling our child to pursue their dreams unhindered, free from the burden of caring for us in our old age."

The stories told by Sriwijaya and Dian Sansa provide insight into the difficulties of being part of the "sandwich generation".

Sriwijaya reflects on the exhaustion of being the eldest child, tasked with caring for siblings and supporting parents while facing societal expectations that demand loyalty and sacrifice.

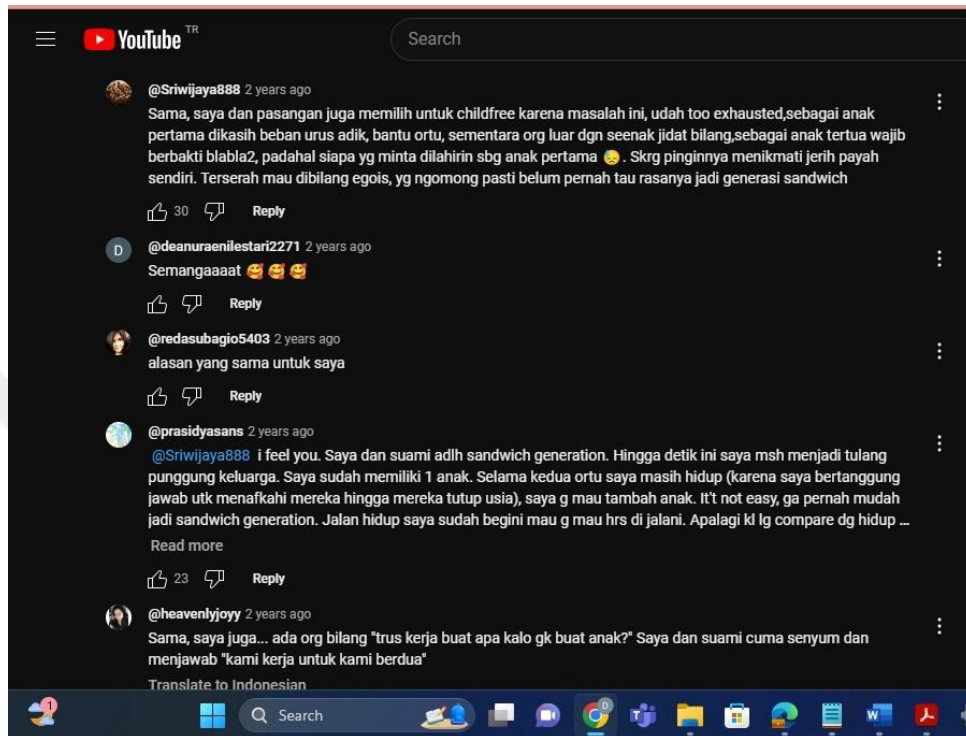


Figure 7. A pro-childfree Commentator Posted a Comment on a YouTube video titled "KickAndy-Childfree." They shared their experience of feeling burdened by family expectations, especially as a sandwich generation, which influenced their decision to live without children

This experience, along with the pressures of being born into such a role, has led to a desire to enjoy the fruits of their labor, even if some perceive this as selfish. Similarly, Dyan Sansa highlights the emotional and financial burdens of being the primary breadwinner in their family, which have left them unwilling to have more children. The strain of supporting parents while managing their own household, compounded by childhood trauma and ongoing depression, underscores the immense pressure faced by those in this generational position. Both individuals emphasize the importance of securing their own future and ensuring their children are free to pursue their dreams without the obligation to care for aging parents, illustrating how these personal struggles influence their choice to be childfree or limit family size.



Figure 8. Gita Savitri and her Husband Participating in an Online Interview with Metro TV about their Decision to Live a Childfree Life

Another comment from the online interview Gita Savitri and her husband with Metro TV that caught my attention came from comments on the personal experiences of the account owners of Cut Faranadia and Billy (username commentators).

Cut Faranadia; "Trauma from my family, my mom died when I was 11 years old, made me decide at age 12 that I wouldn't have kids. Growing up wasn't as joyous as it should have been. The parents neglected what should have been their responsibility. Now I'm 21, and that decision hasn't changed. Thank you for watching this; I'm pleased to see that some people are making a "different" choice than the "normal" one.

What she's really saying is that while people may see her as abnormal for rejecting motherhood, the pain and neglect she endured were not normal either. Society and the state were absent when she needed them most, yet now they expect her to conform. Her choice, then, is not just personal but a response to a world that failed to protect her.

Billy: "For those who come from broken homes or have inner child wounds, the desire to be childfree is strong. It's not about the desire for freedom, but rather the trauma from childhood and a challenging life journey. In reality, many parents in Indonesia weren't mature enough when they had children, and as a result, they raised their children while going through their maturity process."

The comments shared by Cut Faranadia and Billy provide deep personal insights into how early childhood trauma and negative family dynamics can shape a person's life choices. Cut Faranadia reflects on the loss of a parent at a young age and how it influenced her decision not to have children, citing a lack of parental responsibility and a joyless upbringing. This highlights how profound emotional scars from childhood can lead individuals to make life choices that challenge societal norms. Similarly, Billy speaks to the experience of coming from a broken home and the resulting emotional wounds that reinforce the desire to remain childfree. Their comment draws attention to a broader issue, especially in the Indonesian context, where many parents may not have been fully mature when they started raising children, leading to cycles of unresolved trauma passed down through generations.

It is highlighted that even though they are fully aware that such a decision may likely expose them to stigma, judgment, and the label of being "abnormal" in a family-centered society, they still choose to break the cycle, courageously prioritizing emotional healing over conformity. This act of defiance does not reject family but represents a conscious step toward ending inherited pain and creating space for personal peace. Both comments, therefore, underline how trauma can deeply influence personal decisions like choosing to remain childfree. Put differently, these experiences highlight the need for empathy and understanding towards individuals who make different life choices based on their personal history, especially when shaped by challenging life circumstances.

For many people, choosing to remain childless is a deliberate gesture to disrupt the pattern of psychological distress. This choice encompasses more than simply avoiding the difficulties of parenting; it involves assuming command over one's story and rejecting the influence of previous difficulties in shaping the future.

Self-determination Narratives

In Indonesia, where cultural and family standards often perpetuate intergenerational trauma, choosing to be childfree serves as a tool for empowerment and self-determination. Due to increase in the quality of life, many Indonesians explore alternative ways of living, through travelling, dedication to education, and this further exacerbates by the use of the internet – allow them to meet individuals with similar pursuits globally. Increasing numbers of Indonesians are studying or working abroad, where they encounter more diverse views on family life and individual autonomy. These

experiences often influence their perspectives on parenthood and life choices. For instance, Indonesian expatriates who spend significant time in countries where the childfree lifestyle is more common may return with a changed outlook on family and reproduction. Experiencing these options broadens their understanding of their options, as well as reinforcing the legitimacy of their decision. An example of this trend in Indonesia is the lifestyle of Gitasav and her husband, who value self-expression, career success, and personal fulfillment to promote mental health awareness.

It can be understood that increasing awareness of mental health and the need to break harmful habits shape this choice. Although traditional notions of family in Indonesia may emphasize the perpetuation of ancestry and the satisfaction of social responsibilities, an increasing number of young couples are acknowledging the significance of their own welfare and psychological well-being. The choice to forgo parenthood can serve as a means for those who have undergone trauma to give precedence to their own recovery and personal well-being over the pressures imposed by society.

In short, all the shared personal stories emphasize how deeply formative early life experiences, particularly those rooted in trauma and unstable family dynamics, can influence a person's long-term decisions. Therefore, the choice to be childfree is not always about rejecting societal norms for freedom but can be a protective response to unresolved childhood wounds. These reflections offer a critical reminder of the importance of emotional healing and maturity in shaping future generations' well-being, and they challenge the idea that the "normal" choice is the right one for everyone. Personal experiences and traumas shape diverse paths in life; therefore, it could be interpreted that every choice deserves respect, even though some of them might justify with *"This is our fate, it is what it is."*

4.1.4 Feminist Motivations

The emergence of feminist thought has also played a crucial role in reshaping gender roles and expectations worldwide, and Indonesia is no exception. Over the past few decades, feminist movements have made significant strides in advocating for women's rights, including the right to make choices about their bodies and reproductive health. Feminist thought, particularly those linked to bodily autonomy and career aspirations, has

resonated with a growing number of Indonesian women who may view motherhood as one of many life options rather than an obligation. In a society where patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained, the feminist discourse on reproductive rights offers women an alternative narrative to the traditional expectation of motherhood. Many women in Indonesia, especially in urban centers like Jakarta, Tangerang, Depok, Bekasi, and Surabaya, are increasingly focused on building careers and achieving financial independence.

There are feminist groups in Indonesia that embrace childfreeness, including Magdalene.com¹⁰, led by Devi Asmarani, who is the founder and editor-in-chief of Magdalene. She wrote in an article, “Being Childfree in Indonesia: Not all 8 hours of sleep and Botox: I am glad we are discussing childfree openly now, but I think we should stop focusing on the message and let women decide what to do with their bodies”. Further, she added that “we need to stop policing women’s bodies and respect their choice to have or not have a child.” Furthermore, Salsabila Putri Pertiwi author and editor of konde.co¹¹, emphasized that childlessness is a structural issue. We cannot deny that the current economic situation is very difficult. The cost of living is high, wages are stagnant, and jobs are uncertain. This makes many women reconsider their choice to have children. From a feminist perspective, the economic crisis affects women's autonomy in choosing to be childfree. This is because financial conditions make raising children increasingly difficult, both financially and emotionally. Marxist and socialist feminism see the economic crisis as a consequence of the injustice of the capitalist system that prioritizes profit over the welfare of the people. The choice to be childless is also seen as a reaction to the pressure of the capitalist system, which does not provide enough support for women and families. When wages are low and social security is reduced, having children becomes a burden that adds to economic difficulties. This makes many people choose childfreedom as a form of resistance or rejection of social expectations.

For them, the childfree decision is not just about avoiding motherhood; it is also about challenging societal expectations that tie a woman's worth to her role as a mother.

¹⁰ Magdalene is a bilingual online magazine that educates, empowers and pushes for a more equal society through solution-driven journalism (Magdalene n.d.).

¹¹ Konde.co is a media that carries the perspective of women and minorities that is present bilingually (Indonesian and English). Konde.co's scope of work includes publishing articles on the website, video/film production, and public information/knowledge (Konde n.d.).

Additionally, some women view the decision to remain childfree as a feminist stance against the pressures of traditional gender roles, where caregiving and childrearing are considered women's primary responsibilities. They believe that by choosing to remain childfree, these women rejected the notion that motherhood is the pinnacle of womanhood, instead embracing the idea that women can define their lives on their own terms. These ideas are also reflected in the works of *Jakartafeminist*¹², *Jurnalperempuan*¹³, and *Mahardhikakita*¹⁴ - local feminist platforms popular among childfree women in Indonesia.



Figure 9. Examining the Childfree Choice Through an Existentialist Feminist Lens. Posted on Konde.co

This evolving mindset finds resonance with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist framework, originating from her seminal work in 1949, articulated in her groundbreaking book "*The Second Sex*," which critiques the traditional roles imposed on women, particularly through marriage and motherhood. De Beauvoir argued that society

¹² Jakarta Feminist is the initiator of Women's March Jakarta, the organizer of Feminist Fest, and the creator of Cari Layanan, a directory for survivors of gender-based violence (Jakarta feminist n.d.)

¹³ Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan is a non-profit organization engaged in the empowerment and enforcement of women's rights, focusing on education, research, publishing and advocacy activities for gender equality and justice based on research (Jurnal Perempuan n.d.).

¹⁴ Mahardhika kita is a Women's Organization that was founded to fight for women's rights to be free from all forms of discrimination and violence, including gender-based violence, and to achieve prosperity and a decent life. During its 20-year journey, Mahardhika Women has collaborated with women's organizations, labor unions and pro-democracy organizations to achieve the organization's goals (Mahardhika n.d.).

historically positions women as "the Other" and that motherhood has often been treated as a woman's destiny rather than a choice. She rejected the idea that biology should determine a woman's role and insisted that true liberation involves a woman's ability to define herself independently of imposed societal functions. De Beauvoir contended that motherhood, when forced or socially expected, often leads to dissatisfaction and that fulfillment must come from a woman's self-realization through work, autonomy, and recognition as a complete individual. Indonesian feminists echo these arguments, especially as the nation grapples with growing issues like fatherlessness, where many children grow up without the active presence of a father figure, and the increasing prevalence of baby blues and postpartum depression. These social realities highlight the disproportionate emotional, psychological, and economic burdens imposed on women. By voicing support for the childfree choice, Indonesian feminists advocate not only for women's autonomy but also for a more equitable understanding of parenting and gender roles, highlighting that the decision to have children should be rooted in mutual responsibility, emotional readiness, and genuine desire, rather than societal obligation.

4.1.5 Impact of Globalization and Social Media

Globalization has fostered increased interconnectedness, exposing Indonesians to a wide range of cultural norms and practices from across the globe. In many Western countries, particularly in Europe and North America, the choice to remain childfree has become more mainstream, and this trend is gradually influencing attitudes in Indonesia. Globalization brings not only economic integration but also the flow of ideas, including changing views on family structures and reproductive choices. In Indonesian society, there has been a long-standing expectation that marriage and children are natural milestones in adulthood. However, the rise of global individualism, where personal fulfillment and autonomy take precedence over traditional expectations, has begun to challenge this. Global media exposure often exposes Indonesian millennials and members of Generation Z to alternative perspectives on relationships, careers, and personal happiness, challenging the traditional path of marriage and childbearing. For many of these individuals, remaining childfree is a way to prioritize personal freedom, career aspirations, and a different lifestyle from their parents or grandparents.

With globalization, social media has become an influential platform for shaping public opinion and lifestyle choices in Indonesia. Younger generations widely use platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, which have played a crucial role in spreading information about life without a child and trying to normalize the childfree lifestyle. Influencers, both local and international, who advocate for a childfree life or who share their experiences of living without children, are gaining significant followings in Indonesia. Through social media, Indonesians have unprecedented access to global communities that share similar views on being childfree. These online spaces allow individuals to engage in discussions, share experiences, and might also validate their decisions. The exposure to diverse perspectives on child rearing, personal freedom, and career-focused lifestyles creates a sense of empowerment for those who may have otherwise felt isolated in their choices. Social media has also brought the economic realities of parenting into sharper focus, with many influencers openly discussing the financial, emotional, and physical demands of raising children. These discussions often resonate with young Indonesians who are already concerned about economic instability, rising living costs, and housing prices, factors that make the prospect of raising children seem financially burdensome. In a society where the cost of living is rising faster than wages, some view the decision to remain childfree as a pragmatic choice.

For example, below are two influencers that shared having children in Indonesia is often seen as an investment. This means that people believe children will contribute to their family's financial stability and well-being in the future. However, Tessia also implies that despite this perception, children may not always receive the best care or opportunities. This could be due to various factors, such as economic constraints, limited access to education, or societal pressures. On the other hand, Christi stated that the choice of not having children should be made by those who are less informed than by the wealthy.



Figure 10. Welcome to Indonesia, which Sees Children as an ‘Investment’ but Tends to Provide them Very Carelessly, Instagram content shared by Evangelina at her Instagram account at evtessia



Figure 11. Childfree should be Practiced by the Poor or People Who don’t have Enough Knowledge, not the Rich and Smart Ones. Instagram content shared by Christi at her Instagram account at yosefinechristi.

As depicted in her video, numerous impoverished families are unable to adequately care for their children and end up abandoning them on the streets. This leads to the children having to fend for themselves and work for their survival, which ultimately causes them to not receive proper guidance and support from their families. Based on her assertions, she asserts that it is not selfish for individuals to choose not to have children, but rather those who have children but are incapable of taking responsibility for them.

A compelling example of this phenomenon is a recent viral video from West Java shared on Instagram account of Indotoday, featuring an unemployed father with 11 children, whose wife is currently pregnant with their 12th child, as they refuse family planning. None of their children are enrolled in formal school, and the family sustains themselves by selling homemade snacks.

The father insists that children are a blessing and "an investment for the future," convinced they will ultimately support the family. However, the reality is harsh. The

children lack proper education and care, and the mother, despite being pregnant, still has to work tirelessly every day. This story reflects a common belief in Indonesia: that having many children guarantees financial security. In truth, many low-income families end up struggling to raise their kids, with some even abandoned or forced into child labour.

Meanwhile, the idea of going childfree is often criticized and seen as a "luxury" for the wealthy, when in fact, it might be the more responsible choice for those with limited means. This case is a stark reminder that children are not investments, but they are responsibilities.

Therefore, This growing trend reflects a shift in societal values, particularly within modern society, among women who are well-educated and live in urban areas. Deputy Women's Empowerment and Children's Protection Minister Tan also commented on the phenomenon of growing childfree in Indonesia and spread it in social media, noting that the decision to remain childfree is often tied to a conscious and informed lifestyle choice. These women are typically aware of the significant responsibilities and long-term commitments that come with parenthood, and they prioritize financial security, mental health, and quality of life. Minister Tan further explained that many of these women carefully consider whether they are able to provide a stable and nurturing environment for children. If they feel they lack the emotional or financial capacity to raise children properly, they often choose to remain childless. She emphasized that they often make this decision through deliberate planning and awareness of the future.

The 2023 BPS report also indicated that this trend is most prevalent in major cities such as where access to education and employment opportunities for women is higher. Veronica contrasted this with the situation among women with lower educational backgrounds, who are often less informed about the long-term consequences of having many children. As a result, families may form in such cases without adequate preparation, leading to various financial and emotional challenges.

In response to these ongoing issues, recently news that went viral among Indonesia, the newly appointed Governor of West Java, Dedi Mulyadi, has introduced a bold new policy aimed at promoting responsible family planning among lower-income families. Under this policy, participation in male-centered family planning programs, specifically vasectomy, is being made a requirement for recipients of *bansos* (government social assistance) in the region. Mulyadi emphasized that this step is necessary to prevent

the over-concentration of government aid in large, unplanned families, particularly when the financial means to support children are lacking. His message was clear: individuals should not continue having children if they are unable to provide for them adequately. This initiative reflects a growing effort by local governments to address the socioeconomic consequences of unregulated population growth by involving men more actively in reproductive responsibility.



Figure 12. The Instagram Post Included a photo of Dedi Mulyadi, the Governor of West Java Province, who has made the Male Family Planning Program a requirement for receiving social assistance. He stated that individuals should refrain from having children if they are unable to support them

In essence, the rise in childfree lifestyles among Indonesian women reflects broader societal changes regarding gender roles, economic pressures, and personal well-being. The government acknowledges the importance of supporting all women, regardless of their choice, while also continuing to raise awareness about family planning and the responsibilities of parenting.

Despite the growing influence of modernity and globalization, it is essential to acknowledge that Indonesian society remains largely traditional, with strong religious and cultural values. Both Islam, which is the dominant religion, and traditional customs place a high value on family life and procreation. The decision to remain childfree can still be met with resistance or criticism, particularly in more conservative circles. However, the tension between tradition and modernity has created a space for dialogue, and more Indonesians are finding ways to reconcile their personal choices with their cultural and religious beliefs. For some, this means redefining the concept of family in a way that does

not require children, while for others, it may involve navigating the expectations of elderly and religious leaders while asserting their right to make personal life choices.

To conclude, modernity and globalization play a central role in the complex interplay of factors that influence the decision to remain childfree in Indonesia. Exposure to global trends, the influence of feminist ideologies, the rise of social media, and increasing interaction with diverse lifestyles have all contributed to the growing acceptance of the childfree choice, particularly among younger generations and urban dwellers. While tradition and religious values continue to shape the broader societal framework, the ongoing dialogue between modernity and cultural norms is reshaping Indonesian society in profound ways, allowing for greater individual autonomy in reproductive decisions.

4.2 Conclusion

The emergence of a childfree lifestyle in a nation that is characterized by a predominantly traditional and conservative Muslim population reflects a significant cultural shift influenced by various socio-economic and political factors. Historically, the Indonesian cultural framework has placed immense value on procreation, viewing childbearing as a divine obligation and a source of familial happiness and economic security. This cultural norm has perpetuated a strong societal pressure on married couples to have children, reinforcing the belief that offspring are essential for fulfilling religious duties and ensuring care for aging parents.

However, contemporary Indonesian society is witnessing a growing number of individuals, particularly women, who are questioning these entrenched expectations. This shift is not solely attributable to globalization and exposure to diverse worldviews; it is also a response to the increasing social and economic pressures of modern life. Including the escalating cost of living, housing, taxation and education, further complicate the decision to have children, as many couples grapple with financial constraints that make child-rearing increasingly daunting. Also, many women are now balancing demanding careers and financial insecurities, prompting a reevaluation of the assumption that motherhood is an inevitable life path. Additionally, higher education levels have empowered women to pursue personal ambitions beyond traditional familial roles,

leading to a prioritization of career advancement, travel, and self-fulfillment over childbearing.

The political landscape also plays a crucial role in shaping the childfree movement. Disillusionment with governmental policies, particularly those perceived as failing to support family life, has led many to view the decision to remain childfree as a form of silent protest against a system they believe is inadequate. This sentiment is particularly prevalent among women, who often face additional challenges related to reproductive rights and parental support.

Furthermore, personal experiences, particularly childhood trauma, significantly influence individuals' decisions to pursue a childfree lifestyle. Many individuals who have endured adverse childhood experiences may harbor fears of perpetuating cycles of trauma, leading them to consciously choose to forgo parenthood. The societal expectation to conform to traditional family structures can exacerbate these fears, making the prospect of parenting feel overwhelming. As a result for some, opting for a childfree existence is an act of self-preservation and healing, reflecting a broader trend towards individualism and personal autonomy.

In short, the decision to embrace a childfree lifestyle in Indonesia is a multifaceted phenomenon that encapsulates a complex interplay of cultural, economic, political, and individual factors. As more Indonesians assert their right to define their own life paths, this movement challenges and redefines traditional notions of family and parenthood, reflecting a broader cultural transformation within the nation. Understanding these motivations is essential for comprehending the ongoing societal changes in Indonesia, particularly as they pertain to the evolving roles and aspirations of women in contemporary society.

Besides these motivations, one of the most significant challenges faced by the childfree movement in Indonesia is societal reaction. Parents and families, in particular, may view the decision not to have children as selfish or even taboo. Additionally, traditional gender roles and expectations may reinforce the societal pressure for individuals, especially women, to have children. This can lead to social stigma, discrimination, and even familial disapproval. The next chapter will delve deeper into the societal reactions to the childfree movement in Indonesia, exploring the different perspectives and attitudes towards this lifestyle choice.

CHAPTER 5: THE STIGMA AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CHILDFREE MOVEMENT AND HOW THEY NAVIGATE THE STEREOTYPES

The childfree movement has arisen as a notable counter-narrative to conventional expectations of family, reproduction, and maturity in Indonesia. In the past decade, an increasing number of individuals, particularly women, have begun to disclose their choice publicly to adopt a childfree lifestyle through various social media platforms. This increasing visibility, however, does not automatically result in societal acceptability. Conversely, childfree individuals in Indonesia frequently encounter significant scrutiny and societal criticism. The collective Indonesian psyche is still dominated by deeply rooted cultural and religious expectations surrounding having a family, especially the notion that marriage must lead to pregnancy. These expectations are universally applicable, irrespective of an individual's socioeconomic status, faith, or educational attainment. In Indonesian society, the decision to remain childfree is often regarded not just as unconventional but also as a conscious rejection of national and religious values. People frequently reject the idea as a Western import, viewing it as a cultural infiltration that poses a danger to established family and gender norms. A prevalent apprehension exists that the increasing acceptability of a childfree lifestyle may undermine the family unit, considered essential for national stability, and result in a sustained population decrease. The childfree choice is therefore viewed as a challenge to national identity rather than just a personal choice, leading others to view it as a kind of cultural colonialism that jeopardizes Indonesia's moral and demographic destiny.

The stigma is fundamentally rooted in a disputed interpretation of piety. In prevalent Indonesian discourse, particularly among religious communities, piety is tightly connected to the devotion to normative life scripts: marriage, procreation, and nurturing the next generations. Parenthood is frequently perceived as a sacred obligation, whereas voluntary childlessness is associated with selfishness, spiritual inadequacy, or moral aberration. In contrast, certain individuals within the childfree movement perceive piety in more personal or pragmatic terms: they define devotion not as adherence to assigned duties, but by ethical living, minimizing damage, and authenticity. For them, the decision

to forgo parenting is not a rejection of religious principles but a thoughtful, responsible choice motivated by environmental, emotional, or economic factors.

This divergence in the meaning of piety creates a significant moral rift between childfree individuals and the wider society, positioning them as morally questionable in the public eye. They are often accused of prioritizing material comfort over spiritual obligation or national duty. Such accusations reflect broader anxieties about individualism in a culture that emphasizes collectivism, family duty, and religious conformity. Yet rather than conforming to these expectations, childfree individuals navigate these pressures by asserting their autonomy and reframing their decisions as acts of self-awareness, not rebellion. They develop support networks online, rearticulate cultural and religious values on their terms, and challenge dominant narratives that equate womanhood, or adulthood more broadly, with parenthood. In doing so, they assert an alternative form of adulthood rooted in self-determination, intellectual freedom, and critical reflection. This chapter argues that the stigma faced by childfree individuals in Indonesia stems not only from cultural conservatism but from deeper conflicts over the meaning of morality, adulthood, and national identity. By centering the narratives of these individuals, the chapter highlights how childfree Indonesians are not passively resisting cultural norms but actively redefining them. Their stories foreground the importance of individuality in navigating societal expectations and reveal the complex ways personal decisions intersect with collective anxieties.

5.1 Social and political Stigmatization: Cultural Norms and Gender Expectations

One of the primary barriers faced by childfree couples or individuals in Indonesia is the pervasive social stigma surrounding their choices. Traditional Indonesian society views marriage and parenthood as essential milestones of adulthood, often portraying those who choose to remain childfree as selfish, immature, or unfulfilled. The widespread belief that procreation and the continuation of one's familial lineage are not only deeply ingrained cultural values but also a fundamental religious duty is the root of this sentiment. (Usman et al. 2023). Therefore, those who choose to be childfree often encounter criticism for defying societal norms. Those who view choosing to be childfree as deviating from natural order often meet this decision with skepticism, misunderstanding, and sometimes

outright hostility. Not surprisingly, ostracism is likely happening in some rural areas or small cities to those who are married but not having a child yet. Unmarried people without children prefer to isolate themselves.

In this context, the principle of childlessness often leads to social exclusion for both men and women, as gender expectations significantly contribute to the challenges faced by the childfree community in Indonesia, subjecting them to distinct social pressures. For instance, society often equates femininity with motherhood in Indonesian women, perceiving it as a biologically innate role. Peers, families, and even strangers often scrutinize and disbelieve women who choose not to have children, perceiving them as defying these expectations. Moreover, the societal narrative often associates womanhood with nurturing and raising children, establishing a framework that labels childfree women as incomplete or unnatural. People may accuse these women of being "selfish" if they prioritize their careers, personal goals, or lifestyles over motherhood. Additionally, there is a stereotype that many people believe these women will eventually regret their decision, with loneliness haunting them in their old age, reinforcing the idea that they are making a temporary or misguided choice rather than an informed or permanent one (Nurul Kartika Laili 2023).

While men mostly do not face the same biological pressures as women, they are not exempt from societal expectations. Traditional masculinity emphasizes the role of men as providers and protectors, with a family to support. Men often view fatherhood as a significant milestone in life, a way to perpetuate their name and legacy. Therefore, people may perceive those who choose to remain childfree as denying their fate, avoiding responsibility, particularly in child-rearing, lacking ambition, or failing to "settle down." Certain cultures that highly value lineage and family continuity can particularly accentuate this expectation. For men, choosing to be childfree may also challenge the traditional concept of manhood, leading to questions about their maturity, masculinity, or even fertility. In many cases, society assumes that all men desire children, whether for biological or legacy reasons; therefore, deciding to remain childfree seems alien, selfish, or even unfaithful (Encup, 2023).

Building upon this discussion, it is important to note that societal expectations surrounding childlessness are deeply entwined with broader gender norms, which apply not only to women but also to men. As discussed in gender studies, R. W. Connell's

concept of hegemonic masculinity is especially relevant in this context. Connell argues that within any given society, there exists a culturally exalted form of masculinity, one that upholds the dominant gender order. This ideal form of masculinity emphasizes traits such as emotional restraint, physical strength, financial capability, heterosexual virility, and a protective, authoritative role within the family. In this context, fatherhood is not merely viewed as a personal choice; rather, it is perceived as a societal expectation that reaffirms a man's adherence to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Men who reject fatherhood and choose to live childfree are often perceived as deviating from these prescribed norms. Their refusal to assume the traditional role of protector and provider can be interpreted as a failure to embody “real” manhood. They may be labeled as immature, selfish, or even emasculated, falling into what Connell terms subordinate masculinities. These are masculinities that do not conform to the dominant model and are therefore marginalized or devalued. Such men might be viewed as emotionally unstable, weak, or lacking ambition, reinforcing the rigid binaries that define acceptable gender performance (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Thus, while childfree women face scrutiny for not embodying the ideal of nurturing femininity, men, too, are burdened by gendered expectations. They are expected to express their masculinity through family leadership and lineage continuation. Failing to do so places them outside the framework of hegemonic masculinity, exposing them to different but equally powerful forms of social exclusion. This underscores that gender norms are not only prescriptive for women but are deeply entrenched for men as well, shaping how both are perceived when they deviate from reproductive expectations.

Furthermore, prevailing societal norms often subject both men and women who choose to remain childfree to unsolicited advice, prescribing a “correct” or “normal” life trajectory that inherently associates marriage with having children. Family gatherings, social settings, and even workplaces often question their choice, portraying them as rebellious, stubborn, naive, or even infertile. This is why one significant layer of this stigma is the assumption that those who are childfree must be infertile, and that infertility itself is something to be pitied or hidden. In Indonesian society, the notions of a woman's worth deeply tie childbearing to involuntary childlessness, often evoking sorrow, sympathy, or even suspicion. People rarely consider that being childfree can be a

conscious decision; instead, they default to the belief that the individual is "incomplete" or "unfortunate." This conflation between childfreeness and infertility reinforces the idea that all individuals are supposed to become parents, if they do not, it must be due to failure, not choice.

Dita Anjani, 28 years old a childfree Muslim woman who has been married for 8 years, believes that infertility is the worst thing that childfree individuals should rarely accept. In the interview, Dita Anjani stated, "Even though we announced our childfree status to our relatives during our early dating period, before marriage, some family members and neighbours questioned and gossiped about our fertility." Dita continued, "We can show them that we are fine; we're both in good condition, not because one of us is infertile, but because we just do not want to have a child." Dita's statement illustrates how challenging it can be to conform to family norms, particularly when older generations or close relatives perceive the absence of children as a personal failure. Their highly systematized belief system, which envisions the life cycle in a linear and predetermined manner, largely structures their worldview. From this perspective, 35 years old single Hindu interlocutor Anya, who is childfree and frequently questioned about her principles, asserts that society expects an individual's life to follow a rigid sequence of stages: pursuing education from school through college, securing employment, entering into marriage, having children, subsequently becoming grandparents, and eventually passing away, all with the ultimate goal of attaining eternal reward in the afterlife. People view each of these milestones as essential for fulfilling their societal and spiritual obligations, leaving minimal space for alternative life choices or deviating from this prescribed path. In addition, there is a concept of "Gotong Royong" (communal cooperation) in Indonesia, where families and communities work together to support one another, often reinforcing the expectation that everyone contributes to the family's future by having children. Not participating in this cycle may appear self-centered or disconnected from community well-being.

Another recurring narrative is the accusation that childfree individuals are selfish. Choosing not to have children is often interpreted as a refusal to contribute to family lineage, cultural continuity, or even national development. Especially for women, this choice is frequently framed as a rejection of their "duty" to nurture and sacrifice. Individuals who prioritize personal freedom, career, or well-being are often accused of

lacking the moral integrity to put others before themselves, as parenthood is seen as the ultimate expression of selflessness in many Indonesian cultural and religious traditions.

The childfree decision has not only been met with public scrutiny in Indonesia but has also drawn criticism from political leaders and government institutions. Prominent figures in the Indonesian government have framed the childfree lifestyle as a threat to national interests, particularly population sustainability and economic stability. This political response reinforces the broader societal stigmatization of individuals who choose not to have children, showing a convergence between state ideology and societal norms when it comes to gender roles and reproductive expectations.

For instance, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection explicitly stated that it does not support a childfree lifestyle. Assistant Deputy Eni Widiyanti emphasized that, in her view, women and men in “normal conditions” are expected to marry and have children. She framed childfree choices as being in direct opposition to the Ministry’s mission of maintaining the continuity of the nation’s population. By stating that “if the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection supports [childfree], this nation could become extinct,” she underscored a perception of personal reproductive decisions as matters of national concern, rather than individual rights (Tempo 2023).



Figure 13. Government Confirms It Does Not Support 'Childfree'. Screenshot from RRI.co.id

Similarly, Hasto Wardoyo, Head of the National Population and Family Planning Agency warned of the potential consequences of widespread childfree decisions, linking them to demographic imbalance and future economic crises. According to him, a declining birth rate may lead to a demographic crisis, where a growing elderly population is not matched by a sufficiently large and productive younger generation. This viewpoint not only medicalizes and politicizes reproductive choices but also suggests that individual autonomy should be subordinated to the state's developmental goals (Kumparan woman 2024).

By publicly condemning childfree choices and alternative reproductive practices like vasectomy, governments and religious institutions reinforce traditional gender norms and marginalize those who challenge them. This alignment between political rhetoric, religious authority, and societal judgment illustrates how deeply embedded reproductive expectations are in both cultural and institutional frameworks. Rather than supporting diverse life paths, the Indonesian state and its allied institutions continue to promote a singular vision of adulthood and family life, centered around marriage, reproduction, and conformity to state-defined norms.

As a result, the growing visibility of childfree individuals in Indonesia has created a deep tension between personal autonomy and entrenched societal expectations. While some choose this path deliberately and confidently, their decision often clashes with dominant norms that equate adulthood, manhood, especially womanhood, with reproduction. This tension leads to various forms of stigma and social repercussions that go beyond mere disagreement (from certain social circles.)

5.2 Moral Stigma: Religious Norms and Gender Expectations

Despite the growing influence of modernity and globalization, it is essential to acknowledge that Indonesian society remains largely traditional, with strong religious and cultural values. As a country with a diverse religious landscape, where Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism play a central role in shaping societal norms, the pressure to conform to traditional family structures is immense. Religious teachings in Indonesia often emphasize the importance of family and reproduction, viewing these as essential components of spiritual fulfillment and social responsibility. As a result, regardless of

their religion, individuals or couples who choose to remain childfree may face religious scrutiny and societal judgment, making it difficult for them to navigate their lives in a way that aligns with both personal beliefs and the prevailing religious expectations (Dayaning Pertiwi, Silvester Mitchel Vinco, and Dian Pertiwi, n.d.).

Choosing to remain childfree is also frequently portrayed as unnatural or as a denial of one's *fitrah*, a term in Islamic discourse that refers to the natural disposition or instinct granted by God. For women, especially, motherhood is often cast as an essential, biological destiny. When a woman rejects this path, she may be accused of going against her nature, which can lead to moral condemnation. This perspective is reinforced by religious and political leaders who equate parenthood with divine and national duty, making those who choose otherwise to appear deviant or spiritually lacking.

First, Islam, the dominant religion in Indonesia, places a high value on family life and procreation. Even though there is no specific verse or Hadith that prohibits Muslims from being childfree, the Quran and Hadith emphasize the importance of marriage and having children to fulfill God's will. Muslims view children as a gift from Allah, and they view procreation to ensure the continuation of the Muslim *ummah* (community). The Quran encourages marriage and the bearing of children, with verses such as, "And those who say, 'Our Lord, grant us from among our wives and offspring comfort to our eyes and make us an example for the righteous'" (Quran 25:74), highlighting the significance of family in a Muslim's life. (Rahman et al. 2023)

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ بَنِينَ وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُم مِّنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ
وَيَنْعِمَتِ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ هُم يَكْفُرُونَ

"And Allah has created you from yourselves, your mates, and your sons and grandchildren, and has provided you with the good things." "Then, in falsehood, they believe, and in the favor of Allah, they disbelieve."

According to the Tafsir of the Indonesian Ministry of Religion, the blessings of Allah SWT described in Surah An Nahl verse 72 range from the blessings of being in pairs and producing offspring to the blessings of favorable fortune. According to Ibn Kathir's interpretation, Allah SWT created men and women in pairs to form families by His grace. We hope that this family will produce children and grandchildren who can

fulfil their duties as caliphs on this earth, also known as *hafadah*. Meanwhile, other interpretations from Qatadah, Abu Malik, and Al-Hasan Al-Basri say that *hafadah* can also mean helpers, assistants, and servants (Indrawan and Rifa'i 2023). Furthermore, beyond the ancient beliefs that having children is an investment and savings for old age lives, Indonesian Muslim society also deeply believes that children are also an investment for the afterlife. Parents invest in their children, ensuring they continue to perform charitable deeds without interruption, even after their death and burial in the ground. Despite the death of their parents, children who abstain can engage in Jariyah charity or practice, ensuring their reward remains uninterrupted (Usman et al. 2023).

As Prophet Muhammad said:

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ: أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: ((إِذَا مَاتَ الْإِنْسَانُ انْقَطَعَ عَنْهُ عَمَلُهُ إِلَّا مِنْ ثَلَاثَةٍ: صَدَقَةٍ جَارِيَةٍ، أَوْ عِلْمٍ يُنْتَفَعُ بِهِ، أَوْ وَلَدٍ صَالِحٍ يَدْعُو لَهُ)). رواه مسلم

Abu Hurairah (May Allah be pleased with him) reported:

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "When a man dies, his deeds come to an end except for three things: Sadaqah Jariyah (ceaseless charity); a knowledge which is beneficial, or a righteous child t who supplicates for him." [Reported by Muslim].

This religious framework interprets choosing to remain childfree as going against God's design for human beings. Some Islamic scholars argue that one of the key purposes of marriage is to bear and raise children following Islamic principles, ensuring the propagation of the faith. Individuals who wish to remain childfree but remain committed to their religious identity may experience feelings of guilt or shame as a result. Additionally, many traditional ceremonies and cultural practices revolve around family and lineage, reinforcing the societal expectation that all adults will eventually have children. Consequently, people may perceive couples who choose not to have children as failing to fulfill their religious obligations as Muslims. Despite some progressive Islamic thinkers including notable Indonesian scholars such as Prof. Dr. Siti Musdah Mulia and K.H. Husein Muhammad, has acknowledged the importance of respecting personal choices regarding family planning, the traditional viewpoint still holds sway, particularly in rural and conservative communities. Childfree couples or individuals may face

judgment or ostracism due to the perception that their decisions are selfish or in conflict with Islamic values (Rahman et al. 2023).

More recently, religious authorities have also entered into this debate. A notable example is the public backlash faced by politician Dedi Mulyadi after he revealed that he had undergone a vasectomy as a form of family planning. His decision was met with criticism from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), which considers vasectomy a forbidden (haram) practice unless for serious medical reasons. The MUI's response reflects a broader religious stance that discourages permanent methods of birth control, viewing them as contradictory to Islamic teachings on reproduction and family life. This reaction further reinforces the moral and religious framing of reproductive decisions in Indonesia, where both the state and religious bodies actively regulate and judge individuals' choices.



Figure 14. The Instagram post included a photo of Dedi Mulyadi states that Vasectomy a Condition for Receiving Social Assistance, West Java MUI: This Violates Islamic Law.

These official and religious comments demonstrate how the childfree stance and alternative family planning methods are not merely private decisions in Indonesia but political and moral issues. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, many of the women

interviewed framed their choice to remain childfree as a form of critique against rigid state expectations around gender, family, and motherhood. However, the backlash from state institutions and religious authorities reveals the limits of such resistance. Political figures and religious leaders openly criticize and delegitimize the childfree lifestyle, effectively aligning themselves with conservative public sentiment and contributing to the social stigma surrounding it.

An example of this tension in Indonesian society is the well-known case of Gita Savitri and her husband, Paul. Gita Savitri Devi, a public figure, writer, and content creator, has often shared her thoughts and experiences regarding her choice to be childfree. With significant following on social media, Gita uses her platform to openly discuss personal, social, and philosophical issues, including her decision with Paul to remain childfree. As Muslims, Gita and Paul's choice has sparked considerable public discourse and has made them a focal point for debates around marriage, family planning, and Islamic values in Indonesia. Gita has expressed that her decision aligns with personal convictions and a desire to focus on other aspects of life, such as personal growth and her relationship with her husband. However, their decision has not been without consequences. Many within the Indonesian Muslim community have criticized the couple, arguing that they are disregarding a fundamental aspect of Islamic marriage and going against religious expectations. Some have even condemned their choice as selfish or accused them of promoting liberal feminism values that contradict traditional Islamic principles, especially considering the belief that having children contributes to one's afterlife. Their experience highlights the societal pressure that childfree Muslims face, particularly in communities that emphasize the role of children in fulfilling religious duties. Some people view Gita and Paul's decision to remain childfree as a way of rejecting the religious and cultural belief that marriage should automatically lead to having children.

Secondly, Christianity, the second-largest religion in Indonesia, particularly among the Protestant and Catholic communities, also holds strong views on family and childbearing. Many Christians in Indonesia interpret the Bible's commandment in Genesis: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28) as a sacrament that entails having children. Tradition has traditionally understood this verse as a directive

from God to procreate, thereby making childbearing an essential aspect of Christian family life (“Procreation,” n.d.).

Conservative Christian groups in Indonesia often interpret this mandate literally, expecting married couples to have children and raise them in the Christian faith. Childfree individuals or couples may face criticism for choosing a path that seems to contradict this biblical command. They may be told they are missing out on marriage's main goal of creating a God-centered family. In certain Christian communities, being childfree can also lead to the assumption that the couple is avoiding their spiritual responsibilities or even living outside of God's will. This religious pressure can add to the emotional burden of childfree couples, particularly if they are deeply committed to their faith but wish to remain without children for personal reasons. The Christian perspective views the childfree (CF) lifestyle choice as a complex issue that requires careful understanding. The Bible teaches that children are a gift and blessing from God (Psalm 127:3). The command to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28) reflects a part of the divine plan. From a theological perspective, having children is considered an act that glorifies God. God recommends having children as a form of obedience to those who can (1 Corinthians 10:31). Meanwhile, CF adherents' moral reasoning, which emphasizes personal autonomy and freedom as long as it does not harm others, is viewed as less consistent with biblical principles. Christian morality demands responsibility and concern for others, going beyond the principle of "not harm" and prioritizing positive benefits for others (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23). In addition, the choice of CF on a large scale is considered to have negative social and economic impacts, such as threats to population sustainability and the welfare of the older generation. Therefore, the Bible's theological and moral principles encourage Christians to view this lifestyle, considering its broader impact on society and the glory of God (Yakub Tri Handoko 2021).

Similar to Islam, Christians also emphasize the importance of cherishing children as a gift from God, rather than viewing them as burdens. They always oppose Concerns about financial problems or unpreparedness to be parents should not be a reason to avoid having children but rather motivate believers to work hard, live creatively, and have faith in God's provision. Despite the challenges of parenting, parents must raise their children in righteousness to produce godly children who will shine as the light of the world. In more detail, they often emphasize that even notable figures like Adam, Jacob, and David

experienced failure in raising their children. However, these experiences should be lessons, not reasons to choose a "childfree" life. Christians must overcome past trauma and bitterness with love and forgiveness, leveraging negative experiences to improve as parents and bestow blessings on the next generation. We can conclude that the Christian religious perspective rejects the "childfree" philosophy by emphasizing that perfection is not a requirement for parenting, but rather a continuous effort to do good according to God's will (Dias Safitri et al. 2023).

A relevant example that illustrates the tension between the Christian view on parenting and the modern childfree movement is the story of Yosefine Christi, a Christian influencer from Indonesia who has chosen a childfree lifestyle. With over 111,000 followers on social media, Yosefine often shares Instagram Reels encouraging women to confront commonly accepted gender roles and societal expectations, particularly those imposed on women in Indonesian culture. Despite being unmarried and openly supporting the childfree choice, she continues to identify as a devout Christian. She regularly attends church, participates in worship, and engages in social charity work, demonstrating her commitment to living a meaningful and moral life.

However, her stance has often sparked backlash, especially when she discusses childfree issues. Many of her posts attract negative comments from netizens, some even questioning her faith and accusing her of contradicting Christian teachings. Yosefine has responded to such criticism by asserting, "My life choice does not harm anyone. I still go to church, worship, and serve through social charity. I share life lessons that may help others. Thus, when hateful comments come, I simply ignore them." Her experience reflects the growing dialogue within Christian communities about personal freedom, modern values, and how faith can be lived out in diverse and sometimes controversial ways. While the Christian tradition strongly promotes raising godly children, Yosefine's story illustrates how some believers navigate personal convictions while maintaining their spiritual practices and values.

Thirdly, Hinduism and Buddhism have views on family and choice. Hinduism, practiced primarily in Bali and parts of Java, brings its religious expectations around family and procreation. Hindus emphasize that the family's primary role is to support both the family and the broader community. They believe that if they fulfil their family duties and provide gifts to the needy, they reach heaven and nowhere else (The Laws of Manu).

Religious teachings remind Hindus of their roles and responsibilities, such as caring for the elderly and ensuring children obey their parents. These are considered part of living a moral life, and fulfilling these duties is known as dharma. Further, children are considered a bringer of fortune. This is why Hinduism also explains that this childfree phenomenon can harm life in a household (FPMHD, 2022). According to G. Pudja and Thokorda Rai Sudharta in their 2004 publication, namely the Manavadharmasastra IX. 96 states that "To become mothers, women were created, and to become fathers, men were created; religious ceremonies are therefore stipulated in the Vedas to be carried out by husbands together with their wives" (Harsananda et al., 2022, Dias Safitri et al. 2023; Religious studies, n.d.).

Moreover, in the Hindu faith, the family plays a crucial role in the continuation and growth of the religion. A parent's role is to teach their children the spiritual way of life. For example, by having the family worship together and complete the Sacred Thread ceremony, which is largely popular with Brahmin (upper caste) families, children come to understand what it means to be a Hindu.

Hindu philosophy understands life as consisting of four stages: student, householder, hermit, and renunciate. The householder stage, which involves marriage and procreation, is considered crucial for maintaining social and cosmic order. By having children, Hindus believe they are contributing to the continuation of their family line and fulfilling their obligations to both their ancestors and society. In Hindu-Buddhist society, having children is often considered a vital part of dharma, which is why a childless family often faces social pressure. Additionally, the expectation for children to care for their elderly parents makes parenthood a key responsibility.

In Balinese Hinduism, specifically, the continuation of family lineage through children is central to spiritual practices. Rituals, including those for ancestors, rely on children to ensure the family's well-being and spiritual success. People may perceive couples without children as disrupting the dharma cycle, resulting in social and religious disapproval. The absence of children may also raise concerns about who will perform the rituals necessary for the spiritual elevation of deceased family members, further intensifying the pressure on childfree couples to conform to these religious expectations.

Anya Safira, a devout Buddhist and social media influencer, has been open about her choice to remain childfree, challenging the societal and familial expectations often

associated with Hindu beliefs. In her Instagram posts and during our discussion, Anya has shared that, for her, a fulfilling life doesn't require marriage or children. While her choice has brought criticism from family members and others in her community, Anya has pointed out that Hinduism itself does not strictly mandate procreation. She has argued that Hindu philosophy provides room for personal interpretation and that spiritual fulfillment can be achieved in various ways, not solely through family life. For her, remaining childfree can still be seen as a valid choice within Hinduism, as long as it is made with intention and aligns with one's moral and spiritual responsibilities. Unlike some religious frameworks that emphasize childbearing as a central duty, Hinduism, according to Anya, allows for flexibility. Hindu life stages encourage marriage and procreation during the householder stage, but they do not strictly enforce these expectations. She believes her spiritual path does not necessarily depend on following the traditional cycle of marriage and procreation. Some of her family, however, still feel that her choice challenges cultural values, as Hinduism strongly emphasizes family lineage and rituals to honor ancestors, often involving descendants. Despite the pushback, Anya remains committed to her childfree lifestyle, explaining that she values the freedom to pursue a spiritual life on her own terms. Her perspective highlights a more nuanced understanding of Hinduism, showing that while cultural traditions can shape religious practices, the faith itself can support diverse paths to fulfillment and personal growth.

In short, understanding those religious beliefs and traditional customs places a high value on family life and procreation. In any part of Indonesia, particularly in more conservative circles such as rural areas, the decision to remain childfree can still encounter resistance or criticism. In this context, religious beliefs that prioritize family expansion as a form of piety and societal contribution deeply intertwine with the stigma associated with remaining childfree.

5.3 Navigating the Challenges: How the Childfree Movement Responds to Stereotypes and Misconceptions

Another significant challenge for the childfree movement is combating the pervasive stereotypes and misconceptions that label childfree individuals as selfish, immature, unhappy, or unfulfilled. A common belief is that those who choose not to have children

avoid responsibility or focus on personal pleasures at the expense of the greater societal good. This stereotype frames childfree individuals as lacking compassion, as though they are incapable of experiencing deep love or connection without raising children. People widely hold the belief that childless individuals are either missing out on life or in denial about their future desires. People often tell these individuals that they will eventually change their minds or regret their decision. Society tends to equate fulfillment and purpose with parenthood, leading to the assumption that a childfree life is inherently less meaningful or joyful. So how do they navigate those challenges? How do they react to society? What are the alternatives to upholding their principles, ensuring they never falter in their commitment to their beliefs? Is there a group or community that still supports them? In response to these pressures, childfree individuals employ a common set of strategies to assert their choices and push back against the judgment. Consequently, this section will delve deeper into the debates surrounding these concepts.

5.3.1 Challenging Assumptions of Incompleteness and Unhappiness

One common stereotype is that childfree individuals are selfish or self-centred because they often interpret their decision as a refusal to make sacrifices for the greater good of the family. Another common judgment is the assumption that childfree individuals are somehow incomplete or destined to regret their decision later in life. Many people assume that those who choose not to have children will eventually feel lonely or unfulfilled, especially as they grow older. In the discussion session with Gita Sav and Dita Anjani, for example, those who decided to be childfree expressed that they frequently encounter well-meaning family members who urge them to reconsider their decision, warning that they will regret not having someone to care for them in their old age. In response, they often highlight the importance of building strong support networks outside of parenthood. For instance, many form close relationships with friends, particularly through social media platforms, siblings, and other extended family members, ensuring they will have emotional and social support as they age.

Moreover, childfree individuals actively push back against the idea that they are unhappy or lacking something in their lives. During the interview, both Anya and Intan expressed upset and disagreed with the assumption that their lives are incomplete simply

because they don't have children. They emphasize that their decision is not a rejection of happiness but a conscious choice to find joy and fulfillment through other means. Whether through their careers, personal growth, or relationships with partners and pets, they challenge the notion that parenthood is the only path to happiness. In fact, many childfree individuals view their choice as an opportunity to focus on themselves, their ambitions, and the things that bring them joy, demonstrating that their lives are full of purpose and satisfaction.

Similar to Anya and Intan, Lilia and Keisa, a Christian couple, coaching people on dating and relationship, support a childfree lifestyle. They appear online together in their podcast with Habib Jafar to counter against the accusation of selfishness. They asserted that everyone has the freedom to choose their own level of selfishness. Therefore, it is incorrect to criticize childfree individuals or couples like us for not having children. "What about a couple that refuses to raise their child? Isn't this another example of selfishness?".

Expanding the conversation with insights from Intan and Anya, both of whom are childfree and unmarried, we gain further perspective on the challenges faced by individuals who defy societal norms around marriage and parenthood. Intan and Anya both articulate the nuanced perspective that happiness and fulfillment are deeply personal and not universally tied to traditional milestones like marriage or having children. For instance, they argue that in this modern world getting married or having children does not guarantee happiness or a fulfilling life. Moreover, they point out that society often idealizes marriage and parenthood as the ultimate life achievements, but the reality is much more complex. "If marriage brings happiness," they question, "then why do so many people end up divorced?" Similarly, "If having children ensures fulfillment," they argue, "why do so many mothers experience postpartum depression or struggle to connect with their new role as a parent?" Their perspective challenges the deeply rooted assumption that happiness is an inevitable outcome of marriage or parenthood, highlighting that these paths may not align with personal values or aspirations for some.

The societal pressure to conform to these traditional milestones often overlooks the emotional, financial, and social challenges associated with them. Parenthood, for instance, comes with significant demands, both physical and emotional, that can leave individuals feeling overwhelmed. Many women experience postpartum depression after

childbirth, a stark reminder that profound mental health struggles can accompany the joy of having a child. This reality underscores the need for better support systems for new mothers, rather than perpetuating the myth that parenthood automatically leads to happiness. Furthermore, structural inequalities undermine the notion of parental fulfillment. In Indonesia, for example, economic hardships force many parents into situations where they cannot adequately provide for their children. These systemic issues, such as poverty and lack of access to education or healthcare, exacerbate the struggles of parenthood. The plight of neglected children who must work at a young age reflects a societal failure to support families, contradicting the romanticized notion of parenthood as a guaranteed source of happiness. (See Chapter 4).

In both marriage and parenthood, the disconnect between societal expectations and individual experiences reveals a deeper truth: happiness is not universally defined by relationships or familial roles. Therefore, some people find happiness in personal freedom, career achievements, or alternative lifestyles that defy traditional norms. They are attempting to convey that by acknowledging this diversity, society can cultivate a more comprehensive comprehension of fulfillment, motivating individuals to pursue paths that truly align with their values and circumstances. Intan notes that societal pressure often disregards individual agency and personal choice, favouring conformity over self-determination. She observes that many people feel compelled to marry or have children to satisfy social expectations rather than pursue paths that align with their true desires. She believes that self-acceptance, pursuing passions, and building meaningful relationships, which are not exclusive to those with their own families, are the sources of happiness. Anya Safira echoes this sentiment, noting that assumptions about fulfilment in old age are often misguided. She challenges the notion that having children provides a “guarantee” of support or companionship in one’s later years. Anya explains, "There's no guarantee in life, and it's wrong to expect that children will automatically ensure happiness or care for you in old age."

Intan and Anya's perspectives resonate with a growing demographic of individuals who see fulfillment because of self-awareness and conscious decision-making rather than societal expectations. Both stress that the choice to remain childfree is not a sign of selfishness but rather a commitment to living authentically. Intan and Anya’s stories show that living authentically can mean different things to different people. For them, it means

making choices based on self-awareness and personal values, like choosing not to marry or have children. They believe authenticity comes from staying true to themselves, not just doing what society expects. But for others, especially in cultures where tradition is deeply valued, living authentically means following cultural roles like getting married and having children, as a way to honor family and community. These different views highlight that authenticity isn't one-size-fits-all; it depends on whether someone values personal freedom or cultural tradition more. For them, by focusing on meaningful connections, personal growth, and cultivating joy in their own lives, they are proving that life satisfaction comes in many forms. They assert that deliberate choices, supportive relationships, and a life lived in alignment with one's true self nurture happiness, fulfillment, and security in later life, not traditional family structures.

Furthermore, Intan and Anya are no strangers to the persistent questions that often arise at social and family gatherings. Both have experienced the common question, "When are you going to get married?" "Why don't you want to have children?" Intan describes how she responds to these questions, sometimes with ignorance or patience, but always with a firm sense of self-assurance. "It used to make me uncomfortable," she admits, "but over time, I realized that people's questions often come from their own assumptions about happiness." Rather than simply dismissing these questions, she views them as an opportunity to share her perspective and challenge those assumptions. Intan often replies by explaining her choice as a conscious path toward personal freedom, creativity, and self-fulfillment, a path she chose precisely because it aligns with her own values, not society's expectations. Anya, on the other hand, takes a more humorous approach. She acknowledges that the questions can feel invasive and repetitive, but she chooses to handle them with light-hearted responses that reflect her confidence in her choices. "I'll often joke and say, 'I'm married to myself' or 'I have too many passions to take care of right now,'" Anya laughs. This, she explains, helps defuse tension and reframe the conversation. Anya has found that by remaining confident and unwavering in her answers, she sends a clear message that her life is as complete and fulfilling as it is. She also shared with me that she gradually persuaded her parents about the principle. Initially, they prayed for her to change her ideas, but eventually, they accepted her. Despite some family members still judging her, Anya challenges them to consider that marriage and having children are not universal goals. "For some of us, we feel complete

when we focus on our own growth or invest our energy in projects that excite us. That doesn't make us any less fulfilled."

In short, the experiences both Intan and Anya shared emphasized navigating society's expectations with the importance of self-confidence and staying true to their personal goals. They highlight that the decision to remain unmarried or childfree is not a rejection of tradition but a conscious choice to live authentically, embracing the values that resonate most with them. They demonstrate through openness, humor, and a commitment to self-respect that meeting societal expectations does not determine happiness but rather honoring one's path. Thus, these different views highlight that authenticity isn't one-size-fits-all; it depends on whether someone values personal freedom or cultural tradition more.

5.3.2 Reframing the Narrative of Social Contribution

The childfree movement also addresses and reframes the narrative around social contribution, challenging the stereotype that those without children lack a meaningful impact on society. Many cultures view parenthood as an essential contribution to the next generation, suggesting that those who choose not to raise children are "opting out" of a crucial societal role. However, many childfree individuals argue that there are multiple ways to contribute meaningfully to society that do not involve raising children. By focusing on careers, volunteering, and social activism, they contend that their efforts are just as valuable as parenting. For example, Intan Pertiwi, who worked as a lecturer before transitioning into her career as a designer, offers a powerful perspective on social contribution and its many forms. For her, the notion that women must have children to "give back" or contribute meaningfully to society is a narrow and limiting view. Reflecting on her years as an educator, she asserts, "If contributing to the nation as a woman means educating children, I did it, and I'm still doing it by sharing knowledge with others." Intan believes that the impact she has made on her students' lives is a genuine form of social contribution, one that transcends traditional expectations tied to motherhood. Even in her current role as a designer, she remains committed to mentorship and knowledge-sharing, helping younger colleagues develop their skills and pursue their passions. People view Intan's perspective as a challenge to the stereotype that individuals

without children disengage from social responsibilities. She feels her career shift is not a departure from contributing to society but a way of evolving her impact. As a former lecturer, she spent years working with young minds, teaching them critical thinking skills and encouraging their personal growth, actions she considers just as impactful as raising children of her own. Now, as a designer, she continues to mentor younger designers and contribute to a field that influences how people experience the world around them. For Intan, this work fulfills her personally and represents a commitment to fostering creativity and innovation within her community.

Additionally, another figure in this narrative shift is Evangelina Tessia Pricilla, a content creator and author. Evangelina uses her social media platforms to educate girls and women, encouraging them to resist patriarchal pressures that often dictate marriage and motherhood as life's primary goals. She actively supports the choice to remain childfree, emphasizing that this decision does not preclude making a difference. Evangelina often participates in volunteer programs where she travels to remote Indonesian villages to teach children, offering education and inspiration to young people in areas that lack adequate schooling resources. She perceives her volunteer work as a significant contribution to society, equal in impact to that of raising her own children. Her outreach to rural children and her activism for women's autonomy directly challenge the belief that childfree people are selfish or disconnected from societal needs.

Similarly, online ethnography for data collection in this research revealed that Yosefine Christy, another influencer who shares lifestyle content and discusses social issues, is deeply committed to raising awareness about poverty in Indonesia, particularly its impact on children. Yosefine also sheds light on the challenges many Indonesian children face, such as limited access to education and the economic pressures that force them to work at very young ages. She tried to explain here that her choice to remain childfree is not about avoiding responsibility in society but rather about confronting harsh social realities. She expressed that being childfree allows her to dedicate more time and resources to shedding light on these issues and advocating for change, as well as bringing greater public attention to the underlying economic and social hardships that make raising children so challenging for many families. In doing so, she aims to create broader awareness and drive community support for impoverished children who might otherwise

go unnoticed. This work, she argues, reflects a deep understanding and sense of responsibility toward society.

Online communities, where childfree individuals like Evangelina and Yosefine, often discuss their experiences and motivations, provide them with a sense of solidarity and validation for their choices. People use these platforms to discuss how the childfree lifestyle enables significant contributions to cause like environmental protection, social equality, and educational initiatives. They hold the belief that childfree individuals, by investing time and resources in these areas, not only demonstrate their engagement with the social fabric but also their commitment to shaping a better world in their unique ways. This narrative reframes childfree individuals as conscientious, community-minded, and invested in the welfare of society at large. In this way, the childfree movement challenges the assumption that raising children is the only, or even the most meaningful, way to contribute to future generations. By highlighting non-traditional paths of social contribution, childfree advocates like Intan Pertiwi, Evangelina, and Yosefine underscore that opting out of parenthood does not equate to opting out of responsibility. Rather, it's a deliberate choice to contribute in other meaningful ways, whether through professional achievements, mentorship, or community engagement. Furthermore, their experiences shed light on a wider issue within the childfree movement, such as the necessity to redefine social contribution beyond the boundaries of parenthood.

5.3.3 Dealing with Familial Expectations and Cultural Pressures

As I mentioned earlier, childfree individuals in Indonesia often find themselves navigating the difficult terrain of family expectations and cultural pressures. For many, the decision to remain childfree can lead to tension within their families, as parents and extended relatives may view their choice as a rejection of traditional values. Dita Anjani described how her in-laws frequently ask when she and her husband will start a family, although they are already married, this seemingly simple question reveals a deeper cultural assumption like in many Indonesian families, having children equates to being a "real" family. This is why, when in-laws ask such a question, they are implicitly expressing the belief that a married couple without children is somehow incomplete or in transition rather than fully established. It is important to highlight how deeply ingrained

societal norms can influence personal expectations and definitions of family. For childfree individuals, this creates emotional and psychological pressure to conform, even when they are confident in their choices. In response, many take a patient but firm approach, explaining that their decision is not meant to offend or disappoint others but rather is a personal choice based on what feels right for them.

As previously mentioned, the only avenues that support childfree living are online platforms. For instance, on Instagram accounts dedicated to childfree forums, discussions often center around managing family pressures. Some choose to have open, honest conversations with their parents, explaining their reasons for not wanting children and reassuring them that they are pleased with their choice. Others choose to set boundaries and refrain from engaging in conversations about parenthood, aiming to avoid further judgment or pressure.

Moreover, the stories of unrestricted travel are among the most celebrated aspects of the childfree lifestyle shared in online and offline communities. On online platforms such as Instagram, many users post vivid accounts of their journeys to both domestic and international destinations, emphasizing how being childfree allows them to embrace spontaneity and adventure. For instance, Gitasav and her husband, Keisa and his wife, Angelina, and Yosefine shared a photo essay documenting their trip around the world, highlighting how they were able to hike long trails, join local tours on a whim, and spend peaceful mornings journaling in cafes, experiences they believe would have been difficult with the demands of caring for children. Another couple, Dita Anjani, shared about their annual ritual of taking a month-long sabbatical to explore different parts of the world, something they say helps them grow individually and as a couple. Their posts reflect a quiet yet powerful assertion that their lives are full, intentional, and free of regret. These narratives are not just about travel; they're subtle rebuttals to the societal assumption that parenthood is the only path to a meaningful and accomplished adult life.

Another recurring theme in the childfree community is the freedom to deeply pursue personal interests and hobbies, such as activities that might otherwise be sidelined due to the responsibilities of parenting. One account featured a video diary by a woman named Wanda, who described how her weekends are filled with things she genuinely enjoys: attending pottery workshops, volunteering at an animal shelter, binge-reading novels, and participating in women's communities. She notes how much mental peace

and creative energy she gains from living a life not dictated by the schedules and needs of children. These shared experiences show that joy, connection, and personal fulfillment can stem from choosing oneself, again not out of selfishness, but out of clarity and self-awareness. For many in the childfree movement, hobbies aren't just pastimes; they are active rejections of the narrative that adult identity must revolve around child rearing.

In this way, they navigate the cultural pressures of a society that highly values children while remaining true to their personal beliefs and values. One of the primary ways the childfree community navigates societal challenges is by emphasizing that happiness and fulfillment can stem from sources other than raising children. Platforms such as the Q&A section of the Instagram account *Childfreelife.id* frequently share this perspective.

In a society like Indonesia, where cultural norms place significant importance on family and procreation, childfree individuals counter these expectations by showcasing alternative pathways to meaningful lives. They emphasize personal growth, planning for a future without children, nurturing small yet meaningful relationships, and deepening the bond between partners. Keisa and Lilia for instance, actively share on their social media accounts how their relationship has blossomed through shared experiences, such as traveling and pursuing mutual interests. By focusing on their personal goals and partnership rather than the traditional trajectory of raising children, they present an inspiring narrative of fulfillment rooted in intentional living and shared aspirations. This approach challenges conventional expectations and redefines the concept of a purposeful life in a culturally nuanced context. Additionally, the online communities centered around the childfree lifestyle provide a space for like-minded individuals to share their experiences, reinforcing the idea that happiness comes in diverse forms. By embracing these alternative sources of joy, childfree individuals demonstrate that one's life can be just as rich and rewarding without the presence of children.

5.3.4 Freedom, Financial Stability, and Career Focus

One of the significant appeals of the childfree lifestyle is the increased sense of freedom and financial stability it offers. Without the financial obligations associated with raising

children, such as education, healthcare, and daily necessities, many childfree individuals feel they have more flexibility in managing their finances.

Intan Pertiwi stressed how choosing not to have children allowed her to focus on building her savings and investing in her future. Similarly, Evangelina Tessia and Yosefine Christi believe financial independence is a cornerstone of their lifestyle, giving them the freedom to pursue personal goals, such as early retirement, travel, or entrepreneurial ventures. This financial freedom also provides a sense of control over their lives, allowing them to navigate life without the economic strain that typically comes with parenthood. Many childfree individuals prioritize career advancement over financial freedom. Both men and women, especially in Indonesia's urban areas, often tie the decision to remain childfree to their career aspirations. Intan Pertiwi added that choosing not to have children allowed her to dedicate more time to her professional development, leading to promotions and increased job satisfaction. By not having to balance work with the responsibilities of raising children, childfree individuals can focus entirely on their careers, often achieving higher levels of success and fulfillment.

In addressing society's frequently posed questions, such as, "What will you do in old age without children to care for you?" This actually raises a bold response among childfree individuals or couples like; when society pressures individuals, especially those without children by asking "who will take care of you in old age?" This subtly masks and even justifies the government's failure to fulfill its role in providing adequate social support, because isn't elderly care fundamentally the responsibility of the state? In a true welfare state, citizens who have paid taxes throughout their working lives should expect, at minimum, accessible and dignified elder care. However, in Indonesia, government-provided elderly care remains extremely limited and often difficult to access. Typically, only retirees from government institutions receive pensions and have access to state-supported healthcare facilities. Those who work in the private sector are left to fend for themselves, as there is no standardized government retirement fund or eldercare safety net available to them. As a result, cultural norms have filled this institutional gap; where traditionally expected that children will take care of their aging parents, in other words the warranty for the future (Kompasiana 2024). This cultural expectation persists not just from filial piety, but from a practical need because without children or personal wealth,

elderly individuals in Indonesia may find themselves with no one and nowhere to turn for care.

This sentiment reflects a growing reliance on financial independence and institutional care as alternatives to traditional family-based support systems. This reflects a shift in societal values, where individuals view personal effort and economic planning as sufficient solutions to the challenges of aging, instead of relying on familial structures or offspring for long-term care. A compelling example of this phenomenon is the emerging trend on Instagram where individuals share pictures depicting themselves in a wheelchair alongside their future caregiver or nanny. This imagery symbolizes their perceived preparedness for old age, suggesting that they believe financial resources alone can ensure a comfortable future. By emphasizing their ability to pay for healthcare and caregiving services, these individuals imply that traditional notions of relying on children for support in old age are no longer a necessity. This trend reflects shifting societal attitudes toward aging and caregiving, underscoring the growing emphasis on individual autonomy and the role of economic security in shaping life choices.



Figure 15. The Instagram Reel Post Portraying Evtesia and Her Future Nurse

Figure 16. The Instagram Reel Post Portraying Nana and Her Saving, also Her Future Nurse

5.3.5 Pets as Companions: Replacing the Kids

For some childfree individuals, pets serve as an emotional and meaningful substitute for children. Pets provide companionship, love, and a sense of responsibility, without the long-term financial and emotional obligations that come with raising a child. Anya Safira, in our discussion, shared how having a pet has enriched her life, filling the nurturing role that children might have otherwise occupied. Online communities like childfreelife.id and Quora also show that pets are a common feature among childfree individuals, with many expressing how these animals offer them the emotional fulfillment they seek. This sense of companionship allows them to lead fulfilling lives while still maintaining the freedom and flexibility that comes with being childfree. Lilia, a married woman without children, provides a similar example by choosing to have a dog as a companion in her life. The term "pet parent" itself has gained popularity, underscoring how pets are now seen as family rather than property.

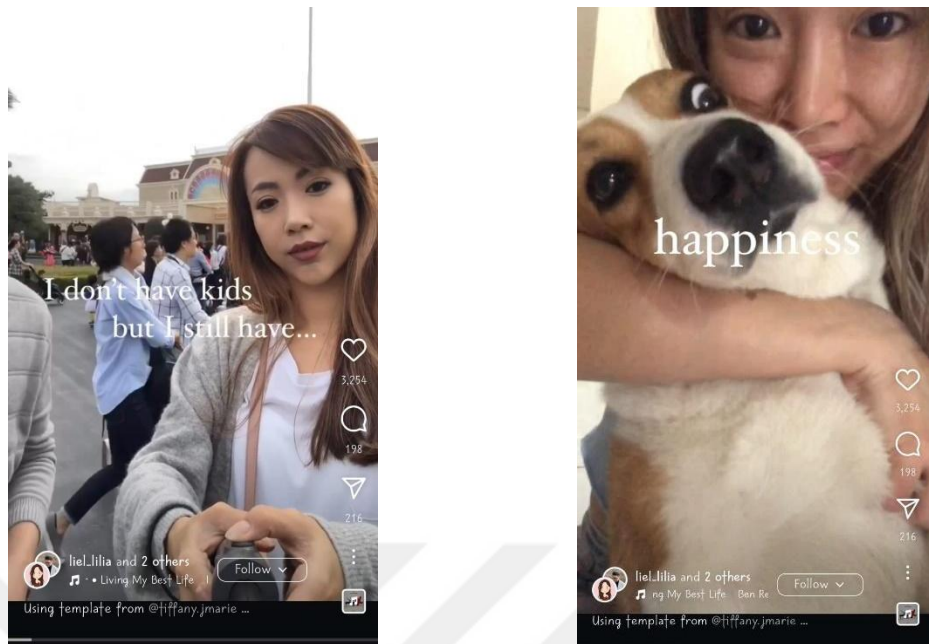


Figure 17. The Instagram Reel Post Included a Video of Lilia, Keisha's Wife, Showing the Meaning of Happiness with Her Lovely Pet

This trend aligns with broader societal shifts toward individualism and the pursuit of happiness through nontraditional means. As reflected in media, such as shared images, many childfree individuals, such as Lilia and Anya Safira, emphasize the joy and fulfillment pets bring into their lives. This suggests that pets have become a valuable substitute for traditional family roles in contemporary society, supporting a childfree lifestyle. For instance, Anya Safira opened up on her Instagram about a deeply emotional experience of losing her beloved dog. In a heartfelt post, she shared her frustration and sadness, describing how devastated she felt when her pet went missing. Determined to find her furry companion, Anya reached out to her followers and the public for help, even offering a reward to anyone who could bring her dog back safely. Her story resonated with many, highlighting just how deeply people can love their pets so much that they are cherished like a child, not just an animal. It was a powerful reminder of the emotional bond between humans and their pets.

Furthermore, the self-determination theory¹⁵ serves as a reference for comprehending this phenomenon. This theory posits that humans possess three primary

¹⁵ Self-determination refers to a person's [ability to make choices and manage their own life](#). Being self-determined means that you feel in greater control, as opposed to being non-self-determined, which can leave you feeling that others control your life (Verywellmind 2024; Wikipedia n.d.)

psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Particularly among Generation Z, who grew up in the digital era with wide access to information, they tend to seek greater autonomy in their lives. Caring for a pet can provide a sense of “connection” and affection without sacrificing autonomy and personal freedom. By having a pet, individuals can feel responsibility (autonomy), the ability to care (competence), and emotional attachment to the animal (relatedness), without facing the social pressures associated with having children.

There are several important reasons for young people today to choose to adopt a pet rather than having children; firstly, less responsibility; where keeping a pet is considered easier and more flexible than raising a child because animals such as cats or dogs do not require 24-hour attention, making them suitable for a busy lifestyle. Secondly, with emotional satisfaction, they believe that pets can provide unconditional love and companionship, which helps reduce stress and support the mental health of their owners. Because animals are often a strong source of emotional support. Thirdly, social awareness, many young people feel compelled to save animals through adoption rather than buying. This is their contribution to reducing the population of homeless animals in shelters and avoiding unethical animal industry practices. Fourthly, community engagement, adopting a pet also provides an opportunity to join a community of animal lovers, expand their social network, and create new, life-enriching experiences. Lastly, lifestyle flexibility is an important reason among younger generations, who are often more mobile and value freedom, find that having a pet fits their lifestyle better than having children, which requires long-term commitment and stability.

Despite all these reasons, societal acceptance of this lifestyle varies significantly across cultures. This is why, in Indonesia, choosing to raise pets instead of children can still attract judgment, particularly from older generations who hold traditional views on family and legacy. Childfree individuals and couples who choose to be pet parents rather than biological parents for children are often perceived as selfish or irresponsible, and their attachment to pets is sometimes dismissed as an immature substitute for “real” parenthood. For instance, social media images of individuals celebrating birthdays for their cats or dressing up their dogs may be met with mockery, reinforcing cultural expectations that true adulthood involves marriage and child-rearing.

Despite such societal pressures, the trend of replacing children with pets continues to grow, especially among urban, educated, and financially independent individuals. Whether as a form of companionship, emotional support, or a chosen expression of caregiving, pets are increasingly becoming legitimate and celebrated parts of modern family life. As global attitudes evolve and more people prioritize mental health, freedom, and personal happiness, the role of pets as child substitutes will likely continue to expand, challenging traditional assumptions about what makes a family complete.

5.4 Conclusion

The childfree movement in Indonesia is pushing against a tide of deeply rooted cultural and religious norms that have long equated adulthood with parenthood. While social media has given greater visibility to those who choose not to have children, this increased exposure often brings with it a wave of criticism and misunderstanding. In the public eye, being childfree is frequently associated with selfishness, immorality, or even cultural betrayal, seen by some as a rejection of Indonesia's religious duties and national ideals.

This societal scrutiny is especially harsh for women. Those who opt out of motherhood are often seen as denying their "natural" role, facing accusations of being incomplete or unfulfilled. Men, too, face backlash, with questions about their masculinity, maturity, and sense of responsibility. Gender expectations and cultural ideals of family life create a hostile environment in which childfree individuals are forced to justify personal decisions that, in many cases, are grounded in thoughtful ethics and self-awareness.

Religious doctrine adds another complex layer. The major religions practiced in Indonesia; Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, all elevate procreation as a sacred duty. As a result, those who consciously choose a childfree life may carry not only social judgment but also internalized guilt. Religious and political leaders often reinforce these pressures, portraying childfree choices as dangerous departures from moral and national integrity. Still, many childfree Indonesians are courageously reclaiming their narratives. Rather than being defined by what society expects of them, they emphasize autonomy, ethical living, and the right to chart their own course. In doing so, they

challenge narrow definitions of adulthood and fulfillment, calling into question the assumption that parenthood is the ultimate measure of a meaningful life.

At the heart of this movement is a quiet but powerful defiance against stereotypes that label the childfree as lonely, selfish, or somehow lacking. These individuals find meaning in personal growth, creative pursuits, community involvement, and deep friendships. For them, happiness is not found in conformity, but in authenticity. Conversations with family for instance often require a delicate balance of honesty and boundary-setting. Many childfree individuals engage their loved ones with empathy while firmly asserting their choices. Online communities play a vital role here, offering solidarity, support, and a sense of belonging for those walking a path less taken.

Financial freedom is another significant factor. Without the high costs associated with raising children, childfree individuals often channel resources into travel, education, career development, or other personal goals. Many also form profound emotional bonds with pets, who provide companionship and love without the lifelong responsibilities of parenting.

In essence, the childfree movement in Indonesia is not just about opting out of parenthood, it's about reshaping society's understanding of purpose, success, and identity. By choosing lives rooted in intention rather than obligation, childfree individuals are expanding the cultural narrative, proving that there are many ways to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of rejecting motherhood among women in Indonesia is a complex, multi-layered act of resistance that challenges long-standing cultural, religious, and political narratives about gender and womanhood. From the colonial period to the present, Indonesian history has positioned motherhood as an essential part of a woman's identity and social duty. Feminist theories, ranging from radical to Marxist to third-wave perspectives, help deconstruct this normative framework, highlighting how motherhood has been used as a tool to reinforce patriarchal structures for state interest and control women's bodies, labor, and aspirations.

The deeply entrenched gender expectations in Indonesian society significantly influence the decision to forgo motherhood. Women are frequently expected to embrace the belief that their primary role is centered around reproduction and caregiving, with motherhood depicted as the ultimate expression of femininity and moral value. This normative pressure renders childfree women vulnerable to social stigma, familial disappointment, and accusations of being selfish, unnatural, or incomplete. In contrast, men generally have more freedom in shaping their identities, as fatherhood is not seen as central to masculine values in Indonesia. However, this perceived flexibility masks an underlying hierarchy within masculinities. While dominant or hegemonic masculinity affords men power and freedom, subordinate masculinities, such as men who reject traditional family roles, or those express non-normative sexualities, or challenge patriarchal expectations, are similarly marginalized. Thus, both women and men who resist prescribed gender roles face varying degrees of social control, though women disproportionately bear the emotional and social weight of defying reproductive norms.

For the women interviewed in this study, the decision to reject motherhood emerges as both a deeply personal and undeniably political stance. Their subjectivities reflect varying degrees of secular consciousness, not necessarily a rejection of religion itself, but a critical distancing from institutionalized religious dogma and moral expectations imposed upon women's roles. These women demonstrate moral courage in articulating life choices outside the dominant religious and nationalist norms, which continue to frame motherhood as a sacred duty. Their resistance, though, not always couched in explicitly secular or feminist terms, besides it shows an alignment with secular

values in practice: bodily autonomy, individual moral reasoning, and self-actualization beyond reproductive roles. Although it's premature to claim that Indonesian society is fully transitioning to secularism, the emergence of such counter-narratives, particularly among educated urban women, indicates a fracturing of the dominant religious-nationalist consensus on gender and family.

In the relation between gender and nation, these findings confirm how women are not only biological reproducers of the nation but also symbolically positioned to uphold national morality and cultural identity. When women opt out of motherhood, they are perceived as betraying this symbolic national function, thus explaining the intense societal backlash they face. This rejection of reproductive roles is, therefore, not merely personal, but represents a challenge to the nation's gendered architecture.

Therefore, all these factors, economic precarity, political disillusionment, growing feminist movement and rising awareness of mental health have all contributed to this re-evaluation of motherhood as a default life path. Childfree individuals are choosing to define fulfillment through personal growth, careers, creative pursuits, meaningful relationships, and community engagement, rather than conforming to traditional family structures. Importantly, many are finding empowerment in forming alternative narratives around adulthood, success, and contribution that are not centered on parenthood.

In regards to the Policy-wise, the Indonesian government must recognize the changing aspirations of its population and address systemic gender inequality beyond the scope of traditional family planning. It is crucial to expand reproductive health services that include not just access to contraception, but also support for mental health, counselling on reproductive choices, and destigmatization campaigns around voluntary childlessness as well as the maternal leave policy for working women. Additionally, legal frameworks and public discourses around gender equality must move beyond the "ideal mother" archetype and embrace more pluralistic understandings of womanhood and citizenship.

In essence, the choice to remain childless in Indonesia is not just about the absence of children or negation of motherhood; it is an articulation of a different life script that profoundly political and personal choice. As a result, it represents a new vision of what it means to be a woman, to live meaningfully, and to resist systems that equate femininity with sacrifice and motherhood. As this movement continues to grow, it expands the

cultural imagination around gender and autonomy and national belonging, challenging Indonesia to embrace more inclusive and diverse understandings of womanhood.



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APPENDICES

1. List of Interlocutors

NO	Name	Age	Education	Occupation	Marital Status	Religion	Collective Data Methods
1.	Intan Pertiwi (Name withheld)	38 yo	Bachelor Degree	Designer	Single	Muslim	Interview on November 10th 2024
2.	Dita Anjani (Name withheld)	28 yo	Master Degree	Wife	Married	Muslim	Interview on October 3, 2024
3.	Anya Safira Cahyati (Name withheld)	35 yo	Master Degree	-	Single	Hinduism	Online Interview on October 5-15, 2024
4.	Yosefine Christi	41 yo	Master Degree	Education Consultant, Content creator	Single	Christianity	Analysis of social media
5.	Evangelina Tessia Pricilla	30 - 35 yo	Bachelor Degree	Author, Content Creator	Single	-	Analysis of social media
6.	Lilia	-	-	Content Creator	Married Couple	Christianity	Analysis of online broadcast and social media
7.	Gita Savitri Dewi	30 yo	Master Degree	Author, Content Creator, Cosmetic Chemist	Married	Muslim	Analysis of social media, online broadcasting and YouTube
8.	Wanda Roxanne Ratu Pricillia	30-35 yo	Master Degree	Author, Psychology	Single	Muslim	Analysis of social media
9.	Nana	32 yo	-	Content creator,	Single	Christianity	Analysis of social media

2. Glossary

Term	Meaning
Jihad	Struggle or effort in the path of God; can be spiritual or physical.
Niqmah	Punishment or calamity as a consequence of wrongdoing.
Qawwam	Protector, maintainer, or guardian (typically refers to a man's role in the family).
Reformasi	Reform or reformation; refers to political and societal reform, especially in Indonesia post-1998.
Ummah	The global community of Muslims bound by faith.
Rezeki	Sustenance or provision, including income or blessings, believed to be granted by God.
Orde Baru	"New Order" refers to the regime of President Suharto in Indonesia (1966–1998).
Orde Lama	"Old Order" refers to the regime of President Sukarno in Indonesia (1945–1966).
Kodrat Wanita	A woman's natural role or divine nature, often referring to traditional roles like motherhood.

ÖZGEÇMİŞ

Adı, Soyadı	Dinie		HANIFA
Doğum Yeri ve Yılı			
Bildiği Yabancı Diller	İngilizce		Türkçe
ve Düzeyi	B2		C1
Eğitim Durumu	Başlama - Bitirme Yılı		Kurum Adı
Lise	2012	2015	Gontor Putri 1
Lisans	2017	2022	Sakarya Üniversitesi
Yüksek Lisans	2022	2025	İstanbul 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi
Doktora			
Çalıştığı Kurum/lar	Başlama - Ayrılma Yılı		Çalışılan Kurumun Adı
1.			
2.			
3.			
Üye Olduğu Bilimsel ve Mesleki Kuruluşlar			
Katıldığı Proje ve Toplantılar			
Yayınlar:			
Diğer:			
İletişim (e-posta):			
Tarih İmza		02.07.2025	
Adı Soyadı		Dinie HANIFA	

