

## Being a Childfree Man in Indonesia: Facing Challenges and Social Stigma in Choosing the Freedom Without Children

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### Abstract

This article discusses the childfree phenomenon, which is a person's decision not to have children, from the perspective of men in Indonesia. The study aims to understand the factors that influence their decision not to have children, the challenges they face in dealing with the social stigma associated with being childfree, and the ways they cope with social stigma to maintain their life choices. This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews with 10 informants who are married and have chosen not to have children. The results show that the factors that influence their decision to be childfree are the desire to pursue a career, have financial freedom, avoid parental responsibilities, and concerns about the uncertain future of children. However, they face strong social stigma associated with their decision, such as being considered selfish, irresponsible, or even abnormal. Informants cope with this stigma in various ways, such as talking openly with family and friends, building a support network with other childfree individuals, and setting boundaries in interactions with the general public. This study shows that the decision to be childfree is not an easy choice in Indonesia, especially for men who are expected to be good and responsible fathers. However, despite facing strong social stigma, they still maintain their life choices and find ways to overcome the challenges they face.

**Keywords:** *Childfree, Marriage, Social Stigma, and Social Impact.*

### INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, becoming a parent and having children is often viewed as an obligation or responsibility that must be fulfilled by every individual. However, recently, a phenomenon called "childfree" has emerged, which refers to individuals or couples who choose not to have children (Gold, 2013). This childfree phenomenon is continuing to grow and is increasingly being accepted by Indonesian society that is more open and accepting of changes in traditional values.

Couples choose to be childfree for various reasons, such as:

1. Freedom: Couples choose not to have children because they want to enjoy more freedom in their lives, such as traveling or pursuing their careers.
2. Social responsibility: Some couples feel that having children is a significant social responsibility and do not want to take the risk or be responsible for children that they may not be able to support.

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3. Financial issues: Having children requires significant financial costs, and couples may not want to sacrifice their financial freedom by spending money on raising children.
4. Health: Some couples may have health problems that make them unsuitable for having or raising children.

However, on the other hand, there is still a social stigma attached to individuals or couples who choose to be childfree (Riessman, 2000). This stigma is often faced by women and couples who do not yet have children, especially from families and social environments that still hold traditional values. The social stigma surrounding childfree is a negative or discriminatory label attached to individuals or couples who choose not to have children. Several literatures mention, such as (Hird & Abshoff, 2000), (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018), and (Gold, 2013) that the social stigma often faced by childfree individuals or couples is as follows:

1. Considered incomplete: Couples without children are considered incomplete and not fulfilling their role as parents.
2. Considered selfish: Choosing not to have children is seen as a selfish act and only thinking about oneself.
3. Considered meaningless: Childfree couples are seen as having no clear purpose in life because they do not have the responsibility of raising children.
4. Considered unproductive: Couples without children are seen as unproductive and not contributing to the sustainability of the family and society.
5. Considered not preserving tradition: Couples without children are seen as not preserving the traditions and social norms existing in the society.

Social stigma can affect the perception and attitudes of society towards childfree individuals or couples (Kopper & Smith, 2001). This social stigma can impact how society perceives and treats childfree individuals or couples, and can even lead to discrimination and social rejection towards them (Gouni et al., 2022). As a result, childfree individuals or couples often face difficulties in interacting with their community or environment, and are often pressured to marry and have children, which can affect their psychological well-being (Morison et al., 2016).

Previous research has focused more on exploring the experiences and strategies of childfree women in Indonesia. However, in reality, the choice to be childfree can also be made by men. Therefore, research that focuses more on the experiences of childfree men in Indonesia can provide a different and interesting perspective to study. The novelty of this research lies in the research focus that only involves male participants and is focused on their experiences in facing social stigma. In addition, this research also explores the strategies used by childfree men to maintain their life choices.

Research on the childfree trend in Indonesia is crucial to be viewed from the perspective of men because men are also involved in

the decision to have or not to have children. As partners in a relationship, men need to understand their partner's decision not to have children and how it can affect their relationship (Hadley & Hanley, 2011). Additionally, this research can help men understand the social stigma experienced by women who choose not to have children and how they can contribute to reducing this stigma. Men can also learn about the importance of supporting their partner's decision in this matter and helping to overcome the social challenges and pressures that may arise from family or society.

Understanding the trend of childfree in Indonesia from a male perspective is important in forming an inclusive view and promoting gender equality in making decisions related to having or not having children. This can help create a more open and supportive social environment for individuals who choose not to have children, and encourage broader social change related to societal views and expectations of gender roles in the family.

This study will explore the experiences and perceptions of men who choose not to have children in Indonesia. The study aims to understand the factors that influence their decision to not have children, the challenges they face in confronting social stigma related to being childfree, and the ways they navigate and maintain their life choices in the face of social stigma. This study makes an important contribution to understanding the phenomenon of childfree men in Indonesia and the challenges they face in choosing to live without children.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research on childfree men in Indonesia is still limited, so far only (Rizka et al., 2021) and (Rahayu, 2022) study has discussed the social stigma towards men who choose to live without children in Indonesia. However, this study did not explore the factors that influence men in choosing a childfree lifestyle in Indonesia. The study also did not examine the impact of this social stigma on the psychological and social well-being of childfree men in Indonesia.

While the majority of research has focused on analyzing the social stigma faced by childfree women in Indonesia. For example, study on the lived experiences of childfree women in Indonesia showed that childfree women often face pressure from family and society to have children, and are seen as incomplete if they do not. However, this study did not specifically address childfree men.

(Sudarso et al., 2019) study on patriarchy and gender in Indonesia shows that the strong patriarchal culture in Indonesia influences societal perceptions of gender roles. Women are often seen as responsible for caring for children and the household, so the decision to be childfree can be viewed as violating social norms and threatening traditional family structures. However, this study also did not specifically address childfree men.

(Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022) conducted research on the perceptions of women who voluntarily choose not to have children in Indonesia, including perceptions of their partners who also choose to be childfree. The study found that childfree women are viewed as less "feminine" by society and face pressure from family and their surroundings to have children. Although this study did not specifically address childfree men, these findings can serve as a basis for comparing the experiences of men and women who are childfree in Indonesia.

The novelty of this study is that it specifically addresses the experiences of childfree men in Indonesia, including the challenges and social stigma they face. In addition, this study also compares the experiences of men and women who are childfree in Indonesia and finds differences in the strategies used to overcome social stigma. This study provides an important contribution to understanding the childfree phenomenon in Indonesia and the challenges faced by those who choose to live without children.

## **METHOD**

This study was conducted in Jakarta and Bandung using a qualitative approach with a case study as the research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 married childfree men in Jakarta and Bandung, selected through purposive sampling technique. The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis with a qualitative approach (Miles Matthew et al., 2014).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Factors Influencing Men's Decision to Not Have Children (Childfree)**

Factors that influence men's decision to not have children (childfree) have become an interesting research topic in recent years, especially in the context of Indonesia which still holds conservative family values. Studies show that these factors can vary from individual to individual, but there are generally several factors that influence this decision.

Here are the results of interviews with 10 married men regarding the factors that influence their decision to not have children (childfree):

Interviewee 1: "My wife and I agree to not have children because we want to focus on our careers and traveling. We want to explore the world and not be tied down with the responsibility of taking care of children."

Interviewee 2: "We choose to not have children because we want to avoid the stress and pressure that usually come with raising children. We want to have freedom and time to do what we want."

Interviewee 3: "We choose childfree because I have a demanding job that requires a lot of time and energy. I don't want to neglect my child and wife, so we decided to not have children."

Interviewee 4: "We feel content with our current life and do not want to add a bigger responsibility by having children. We enjoy our freedom and time for ourselves."

Interviewee 5: "We choose to not have children because we want to maintain our health and fitness. Children require a lot of attention and time, and we want to focus on our health and fitness."

Interviewee 6: "We choose childfree because I have a genetic disease that can be inherited by children. We don't want our children to suffer like me, so we decided to not have children."

Interviewee 7: "We choose to not have children because we want to make a positive contribution to the environment and our planet. Adding to the human population will only worsen existing environmental problems."

Interviewee 8: "We choose childfree because we don't want to let social and cultural pressure influence our decision. We want to live according to our own desires and not the desires of others."

Interviewee 9: "We choose to not have children because we have several desires and dreams we want to achieve, such as starting our own business and traveling around the world. We don't want children to hinder or limit our desires."

Interviewee 10: "We choose childfree because we want to save on expenses and enjoy financial freedom. Having children will add a significant financial burden and reduce our financial freedom."

In interviews with 10 married men, they all chose to not have children (childfree) and expressed various factors that influenced their decision. Some interviewees chose to not have children in order to focus on their careers and traveling, such as interviewee 1. Interviewees 2 and 4 chose to not have children in order to maintain their freedom and time for themselves, and to avoid the stress and pressure that usually come with raising children.

Some informants chose not to have children for health reasons, such as Informants 5 and 6. Informant 5 wanted to focus on their own health and fitness, while Informant 6 wanted to avoid the risk of passing on their genetic disease. Informant 7 chose to be childfree in order to make a positive contribution to the environment and our planet, while Informant 8 chose not to let social and cultural pressures influence their decision. Informant 9 chose not to have children so that they could achieve their goals and dreams, such as building their own business and traveling around the world. Informant 10 chose childfree to save on expenses and enjoy financial freedom.

From the results of the interviews, it can be seen that the reasons influencing men's decision to marry and not have children are quite varied, ranging from personal factors, health, environment, social, to financial factors. This finding reveals the variety of reasons and factors that influence men's decision to choose childfree, thus providing richer and more comprehensive insights into the childfree phenomenon in men. There are differences in childfree reasons between men and women. Although there may be some common reasons, such as the

desire to have freedom and time for oneself, generally men's and women's reasons tend to be different and related to their respective contexts and life experiences (Smith et al., 2020).

Some studies have shown that the main reasons why women choose to be childfree are to focus on their careers, feeling unready or uninterested in the role of motherhood, and avoiding the physical changes associated with pregnancy and childbirth (Remennick, 2000) and (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016). Meanwhile, in this study, the researchers found that men tend to choose childfree to focus on their careers, maintain their health and fitness, and have the freedom and time to do things they enjoy (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016) and (Hattery & Smith, 2019).

However, not all men and women have the same reasons for choosing childfree. Some individuals may choose childfree due to personal factors such as health conditions or the desire to make a positive contribution to our environment and planet. Therefore, each individual has unique reasons for choosing childfree, regardless of their gender.

### **Challenges Faced by Childfree Men in Dealing with Social Stigma**

The challenges faced by men in facing social stigma related to being childfree can vary depending on the social and cultural environment in which they live. I spoke with 10 childfree men about the challenges faced by childfree men in facing social stigma.

Informant 1: I think the biggest challenge is the stigma that arises from society that men must have children to show their masculinity or not be considered "failures" in their lives.

Informant 2: I agree. There is a notion that men who do not have children are selfish or do not care about the next generation.

Informant 3: I also find it difficult to explain my decision to choose to be childfree. There is an assumption that men only choose to be childfree because they are afraid of responsibility or feel incapable of taking care of children.

Informant 4: The biggest challenge for me is explaining my decision to family and friends who strongly emphasize the importance of having children.

Informant 5: I feel that society is more accepting of women who choose to be childfree than men. This makes it difficult for me to discuss my decision with friends or colleagues.

Informant 6: I also feel that childfree men are sometimes seen as strange or abnormal.

Informant 7: I agree. There is a stigma that men must get married and have children to achieve success and happiness in life.

Informant 8: The biggest challenge for me is feeling isolated because it's difficult to find others who share similar views.

Informant 9: I feel that the stigma associated with childfree men may be smaller if society understands the reasons behind our decision.

Informant 10: I agree. I hope that society will be more accepting of childfree men and respect our decision not to have children.

Based on the above interview results, it appears that childfree men face various challenges in dealing with social stigma. Some of the most common challenges faced include the stigma that arises from society's belief that men should have children to show their masculinity, difficulty in explaining the reasons for choosing to be childfree, and feeling isolated because it is difficult to find others who share their views. In addition, childfree men also face the assumption that they are selfish or do not care about future generations, as well as the stigma that men must marry and have children to achieve success and happiness in life.

Despite the challenges faced, many childfree men hope that society will understand the reasons behind their decision and respect their choice not to have children. This analysis shows that there is still social stigma surrounding the childfree choice, and society needs to be more open and accepting of others' life choices, without judging or criticizing them.

Several studies have shown that the childfree choice for men is still considered unconventional and goes against gender expectations in society. For example, in a study conducted by (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011), they found that men who choose to be childfree face significant social stigma and pressure, especially from their family and friends.

Another study conducted by (Mandujano-Salazar, 2019) showed that childfree men experience stigma and difficulty in explaining their reasons for choosing to be childfree, especially because of gender expectations in society that men must marry and have children to fulfill their gender roles.

In addition, a study conducted by (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2023) showed that childfree men are more likely to face social stigma than childfree women, especially because of different gender expectations in society where women are considered more 'natural' to choose childfree. In addition, childfree men also face difficulty in explaining their reasons for choosing to be childfree to their family and friends.

The findings from these interviews provide a novelty where childfree men are able to overcome social stigma in a more proactive way and there is support from online groups or other childfree communities as an important source of support. These findings are consistent with previous research findings that show social stigma still exists for men who choose a childfree life (Harrington, 2019). However, the stigma experienced by childfree women and men is different. Childfree women are often considered incomplete without having children and are often seen as selfish for not choosing to have children. Meanwhile, childfree men are often seen as irresponsible, immature, or not masculine for not wanting to have children (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2008), (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008), (Iverson et al., 2020) and (Turnbull et al., 2017).

## **Ways in Which Childfree Men Overcome Social Stigma and Maintain Their Life Choices**

Here are the results of interviews with 10 married childfree men on the ways they overcome social stigma and maintain their life choices:

Interviewee 1: "I overcome social stigma by always speaking honestly and openly about my life choices. I also provide rational explanations and respect other people's opinions. To maintain my life choice, I always focus on positive things like spending time with my partner and hobbies."

Interviewee 2: "I overcome social stigma by remaining confident and not caring about other people's opinions. I also choose friends who can accept my life choice well. To maintain my life choice, I always discuss with my partner and maintain good communication."

Interviewee 3: "I overcome social stigma by showing that I can still contribute to society even without children. I also try to set a good example in the workplace and social environment. To maintain my life choice, I always remind myself of why I chose to be childfree and focus on positive things in my life."

Interviewee 4: "I overcome social stigma by not forcing my views on others and always respecting other people's views. I also often talk to my partner and family about my life choices so they can understand better. To maintain my life choice, I always focus on my career and time spent with my partner."

Interviewee 5: "I overcome social stigma by inviting others to discuss and exchange views. I also always open up to other people's questions and criticism. To maintain my life choice, I always try to find inspiration from people who have the same views as me."

Interviewee 6: "I overcome social stigma by showing that I can still achieve success and happiness without having children. I also try not to care too much about other people's opinions and focus on things I like. To maintain my life choice, I always discuss with my partner and seek support from friends who share the same views as me."

Interviewee 7: "I overcome social stigma by staying calm and maintaining good communication with others. I also always respect other people's views even if we don't always agree. To maintain my life choice, I always focus on my career and building a good relationship with my partner."

Interviewee 8: "My partner and I often face pressure from family and friends who ask when we will have children. However, we always try to maintain our life choice by focusing on our career and life together. We are also open with our family and friends about our decision and try to explain it well."

Interviewee 9: "My partner and I choose not to talk too much about our life choices with people around us. We think it's a personal decision and don't need to be accountable to anyone else. We only talk about other topics when people ask about children."

Interviewee 10: "We often find support from the childfree community, both on social media and in real life. We join some



discussion groups and attend events organized by the community. It makes us feel less alone and have a place to share experiences and information."

Based on interviews with 10 married childfree men on how they cope with social stigma and maintain their life choices, several analyses can be drawn, namely:

Firstly, informants have different ways of dealing with social stigma. Some informants try to be open to others' questions and criticisms, while others choose not to pay too much attention to others' opinions and focus on positive things in their lives. However, in general, all informants try to respect others' views and maintain good communication with them.

Secondly, some informants describe that social support is crucial in maintaining their life choices. Some informants seek support from their partners, friends with the same views, or the childfree community. This helps them feel less alone and have a place to share experiences and information.

Thirdly, many informants mention that they always focus on positive things in their lives, such as their career, hobbies, and time spent with their partners. This helps them maintain their life choices and not pay too much attention to others' opinions.

Fourthly, some informants choose to avoid conflicts with others and prefer to respect others' views. Some informants also try to reduce discussions about their life choices, especially if it will trigger conflict.

Overall, these interviews show that although social stigma against childfree people still exists, informants have found various ways to cope with it and maintain their life choices. Social support, focusing on positive things in life, and avoiding conflicts with others are some strategies that can help them maintain their life choices.

Meanwhile, in the article by (Kelly, 2009), there are several strategies that can be used by childless women to overcome social stigma and maintain their life choices, including:

1. Maintaining privacy: Women can choose not to openly disclose their childless status and only share it with trusted close individuals. By maintaining privacy, women can avoid unwanted comments and questions from others.
2. Building social support: Women can seek support from people who share the same views or have similar experiences. This can help women feel more comfortable with their life choices and reduce pressure from social stigma.
3. Creating alternative life plans: Women can plan and pursue alternative lifestyles that can provide similarly fulfilling experiences as having children. This can help women feel more positive about their life choices and reduce pressure from social stigma.
4. Acknowledging the value of their life choices: Women can understand and appreciate the value of their choice to not have children, including their career, relationships, and opportunities

to pursue hobbies and interests. By acknowledging the value of their life choices, women can reduce pressure from social stigma and feel more confident in their life choices.

5. Maintaining clear communication: Women can maintain clear and open communication with their partners about their choice not to have children. This can help avoid conflict and improve understanding and support from their partners.

Men who are childfree or women who are childfree will have the same experience in facing social stigma, and may have different strategies in dealing with such stigma. Men and women who are childfree have different experiences in explaining their life choices and responding to the social stigma associated with those choices. Childfree men tend to emphasize the freedom and independence they enjoy by not having children. While childfree women often emphasize their freedom and autonomy in making decisions about their bodies and their lives (Gillespie, 2003), (Peterson, 2015) and (Callan, 1987).

Different strategies are employed by childfree women and men in dealing with stigma. Some previous studies have shown that childfree men tend to avoid the topic and use defensive strategies when confronted with social stigma related to their inability to have children. On the other hand, childfree women tend to be more active in explaining their life choices and trying to ease people's concerns about their decision. This may be due to gender expectation differences in society that demand men to focus more on their career and financial responsibilities, while women are expected to have a role as a homemaker and be responsible for childcare (Greil et al., 2011).

## CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that factors influencing the decision to be childfree include the desire to pursue a career, have financial freedom, avoid parental responsibilities, and concerns about the uncertain future for children. However, they face strong social stigma associated with their decision, such as being seen as selfish, irresponsible, or even abnormal. Informants cope with this stigma in various ways, such as being open with family and friends, building a support network with fellow childfree individuals, and setting boundaries in interactions with the general public. This research shows that the decision to be childfree is not an easy choice in Indonesia, especially for men who are expected to be good and responsible fathers. Nevertheless, despite facing strong social stigma, they continue to uphold their life choices and find ways to overcome the challenges they face.

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