

## Childfree Perspectives Among Urban Muslim Youth in Indonesia : Insight From Feminist and Indonesian Progresive Islam Perspective

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### Abstract

This study investigates the childfree decision among urban Muslim youth in Indonesia, focusing on the negotiation between contemporary personal autonomy, patriarchal traditions, and religious expectations. Employing a qualitative methodology centered on discourse analysis, the research utilizes a dual framework of feminist theory and progressive Islamic interpretation. It explores the interaction between feminist ideals of reproductive rights and gender equality and the religious discourses of Indonesia's two largest Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. The findings indicate that NU adopts a conditional, permissible (*mubah*) stance on childfree choices when justified by health or economic considerations, whereas Muhammadiyah embraces more progressive, modernist perspective that frames the decision as a matter of social responsibility. From a feminist standpoint, the childfree choice is conceptualized as an assertion of autonomy and resistance to the patriarchal "motherhood imperative." The study identifies substantial tensions between the rights-based discourse of feminism and the permission-based reasoning characteristic of progressive Islam. Nevertheless, it also identifies opportunities for alignment through reinterpreting strategies that foreground Islamic principles of public interest (*maslahah*) and the prohibition of coercion. The research concludes that fostering dialogue between feminist hermeneutics and progressive Islamic thought can promote a more inclusive understanding of family and personal choice, thereby reconciling religious faith with the evolving realities faced by urban Muslim youth in Indonesia.

### Keywords:

Feminism, childfree, progressive Islam, Muhammadiyah, and Nahdatul Ulama

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## Introduction

In many Asian cultures, marriage is regarded as both a formal union rooted in spiritual and cultural values and as a means of ensuring the continuation of the family line. for example, In Korea and Indonesia Culture. In Korea, childbearing has traditionally been associated with economic and social security (Cho & Park, 2013).Historical beliefs have maintained that having more children is directly linked to prosperity and fortune, as reflected in sayings such as "*more sons, more fortune*" (Park, 2022). These beliefs align with Confucian values that have shaped Korean society since the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1650), although this tradition strongly reinforces male supremacy, its influence continues to persist in modern Korean society (Park & Cho, 1995).

Meanwhile in Indonesia, Children hold significant value in traditional Indonesian society, being viewed not only as a continuation of the family lineage but also as vital agents of cultural perpetuation (Afriliani et al., 2023). On other side, Societal expectations regarding marriage and parenthood are significant; parenthood is widely regarded as a social norm that shapes individual identity and status within the community (Himawan, 2020). Just like in Korea, children in Indonesian culture play a key role in keeping cultural traditions , spiritual, and social values alive, (Alhadar et al., 2024).

Consequently, in both Indonesian and Korean cultures, as well as in broader Asian contexts, the voluntary decision by married couples to remain childfree (voluntarily choosing not to have children) has gained increasing significance, yet it continues to be regarded as taboo (Sapinatunajah, Ermansyah, and Nasichah 2022; Siswanto and Neneng Nurhasanah 2022). According to (Thornley 2022) because being a parent is still considered the traditional way of life. Society cannot clearly notice children's freedom because everything is set up around parenting. Childfree is a term used to describe individuals who choose not to have children. This sets them apart from parents, people who plan to have children in the future, and people who wanted children but could not have them (Neal & Neal, 2021)

More people living in cities are deciding not to have children. Amy Sood (2024) notes that across Asia, more couples are choosing a 'Double Income, No Kids' lifestyle' they have different reasons for this choice, and it is not just about money. Research also shows that gender, age, education, and income all play a big role in how people feel about staying childfree. People in cities with more education are usually more open to childfree lifestyle (Dimitrova and Kotzeva 2022; Rybakova, Mokerova, and Gurarii 2022)but research indicates that the rise in voluntary childlessness may have significant long-term implications, particularly in regions with persistently low fertility rates, voluntary childlessness as a critical factor affecting future population structures and economic stability (Aitken, 2024).

For example, in South Korea, marriage and fertility rates have declined steadily over the past two decades. This trend is further compounded by the increasing avoidance and postponement of childbearing, as well as a growing preference among women for remaining unmarried (Hwang 2023; Seo and Stotzer 2023; Teerawichitchainan and Ha 2024). In Japan also Over the past several decades, Japan's demographic structure also has experienced significant changes.These demographic shifts pose substantial challenges for social welfare systems, labor market stability, and sustained economic development (Coulmas, 2007; Tsuya, 2014).

Meanwhile in Indonesia, Although it is currently the fourth most populous country in the world, projections indicate that by 2050 it will rank eighth among countries contributing to global population growth (Kohler,2025) but a recent survey conducted by the ministry and the statistics agency shows that Indonesia's population growth will slow to 0.4 percent in 2045, from 1.17 percent in 2022 (Strait times Singapore, 2024). The issue of childfree in Indonesia is currently starting to emerge in the public sphere amidst the conditions of society that still adheres to patriarchal and religious beliefs, where having children in marriage is a necessity, and becoming a mother is a destiny (Lidya,2024).

According to Diandra Paramitha (2024) In recent years, an increasing number of couples in Indonesia have chosen not to have children, indicating a significant shift in family life perspectives. According to a survey conducted by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the

percentage of married women aged 15 to 49 without children rose from 7 percent in 2019 to 8.2 percent in 2022.. (Hutabarat and Himawan 2023) found that the presence of children is not a decisive factor in determining marital satisfaction among married couples in Indonesia. Despite evolving societal attitudes, a persistent stigma targets individuals and couples who choose not to have children particularly in families and communities with traditional values. The stigma surrounding childlessness acts as a negative and discriminatory label for those who decide not to become parents (Supriatna, 2023).

In many Muslim societies, childfree living remains a controversial issue, as marriage is frequently associated with procreation and the support of family and community well-being (Syahriar et al., 2023; Hasyim & Susfita, 2023). Nevertheless, an increasing number of individuals are choosing to remain childfree, and this raises important questions regarding the relationship between religious beliefs and contemporary social change (Mu'in et al., 2024; Rahmatulloh, 2025). Some scholars argue that, although the decision not to have children may appear to conflict with traditional Islamic values, Islamic law is capable of considering individual circumstances and intentions (Anam, 2025; Soim, 2025). Other studies highlight the significance of personal happiness and strong family relationships, provided that couples make these decisions thoughtfully (Firdawaty & Nurnazli, 2024; Hasyim & Susfita, 2023).

Consequently, the childfree trend continues to generate debate about how Islamic teachings can address contemporary realities while upholding core family values, especially among progressive Muslims who often reinterpret Islamic teachings to address current social, political, and ethical issues, helping Islamic principles stay relevant worldwide. with three main characters (1). Focus more on human dignity and agency, which supports social justice and liberation theology (Fajar, 2025) , (2). Conduct a critical review of traditional interpretations of Islamic law, emphasizing the importance of context when addressing modern challenges (Azwarfajri et al., 2024), and (3). linked religious beliefs with democratic and pluralistic values, encouraging discussions about inequality in both Islamic society and the broader world (Hidayah, 2020).

This discourse is particularly pronounced when examined from a feminist perspective, which often interprets the role of mothers as reinforcing patriarchal structures by positioning motherhood as the primary source of women's identity and social value (Adamova, 2023; Fernández, 2023). On other side, Feminist(Rihlah Nur Aulia, 2004) scholarship has extensively critiqued the "motherhood imperative," which refers to the cultural expectation that women inherently desire to become mothers. Recent studies demonstrate a notable transformation in societal attitudes toward motherhood, as increasing numbers of women assert their right to remain childfree as an expression of agency and personal identity (Nabila et al., 2024; Babu, 2025).

Although existing studies have effectively mapped the global rise of childfree trends by linking them to individualistic values, economic factors, and media normalization, and have documented their demographic impacts in East Asian contexts such as Korea and Japan, the discourse within Indonesia's unique socio-religious landscape remains significantly underexplored. This article addresses this gap by examining the childfree choice among urban Muslim youth in Indonesia, a demographic that navigates the intersecting pressures of modern urban life, patriarchal traditions, and strong religious expectations. Utilizing a dual analytical framework of feminist theory, which highlights issues of reproductive autonomy and the challenge to patriarchal motherhood, and with progressive Islamic interpretation that compatible with contemporary life, this study advances beyond demographic description to offer a nuanced, culturally grounded analysis of the values, negotiations, and religious compatibilities shaping this increasingly visible lifestyle decision.

This study provides a closer examination of the childfree movement, not just as a trend in numbers, but as a genuine, lived negotiation of culture and faith especially among urban Muslim youth in Indonesia. This group is situated at the intersection of global change, Islamic identity, and emerging ideas about personal freedom. Our objectives are twofold: first, to examine the strong

social and religious expectations that often associate womanhood with motherhood; and second, to explore how the choice not to have children can align with progressive Islamic thought, particularly through the Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama approaches, which can help bridge tensions and foster alignment with feminist perspectives (Ashry & Firdausiyah, 2022), which values independent reasoning and the well-being of society. By focusing on this, we try to move the conversation beyond Western feminist ideas and show that religious values can actually support different life choices, not just stand in the way. Ultimately, this article helps fill an important gap by providing a practical, local perspective on how family, gender (Chen, 2017), and faith are evolving in Indonesia and to understanding the causes and solutions to childlessness for fostering a resilient society (Yueyue, 2023) among urban Muslim landscape.

## Methods

This analysis is based on qualitative studies that focus on discourse, specifically examining how urban Muslim youth shape, reflect on, and negotiate the meaning of being childfree. In qualitative social research, different approaches to data analysis exist, but they share a common focus. The principal strategy in qualitative analysis is comparing and contrasting, finding similarities and differences (Vogl et al, 2017). The study explores how discursive practices reveal tensions, alignments, and contestations between feminist ideals such as autonomy, gender equality, reproductive rights, and the religious and cultural frameworks espoused between feminism and progressive Islam. Through this lens, the research uncovers how youth construct and articulate their childfree identities, negotiate societal expectations, and challenge or reaffirm dominant narratives about family, gender, and faith.

The analysis of childfree discourse in both feminism and Muhammadiyah contexts must consider intersectional realities. Within certain interpretations of Islamic feminism, there exists recognition of women's rights to choose their paths, including the decision to remain childfree. This complexity highlights that even within religious frameworks, there is room for feminist reinterpretation (Wahyuningsih, 2025). Critical discourse analysis can reveal how Muhammadiyah advocates negotiate these themes with reference to social norms and values, reflecting an innovative synthesis of feminism and Islamic ethics (Chatterjee, 2024) and how feminism perspective dwells on the deconstruction of the meaning, stigma, and practice of those who practice and desire childfree.

Data collection for this analysis is guided by a comprehensive literature review, which establishes the theoretical framework. Prior to engaging with urban Muslim youth, the researchers immersed themselves in relevant scholarly work. The review addresses key areas, including feminist theories on autonomy, gender equality, and reproductive rights; the doctrines and social teachings of Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and global discourses on childfree identities. This scholarly foundation informs the data collection strategy, shaping the design of interview protocols and focus group questions to probe specific tensions and alignments among these frameworks. Methods such as in-depth interviews and analysis of social media discourse are employed to gather detailed narrative data on how urban youth Muslim "shape, reflect on, and negotiate" their childfree identities within this complex ideological context. Analysis of the collected data is conducted in ongoing dialogue with the literature review. The principal strategy of comparing and contrasting is applied both within the data and between the data and established theories.

## Results

The discussion of the childfree phenomenon within the context of progressive Islam in Indonesia, particularly through the perspectives of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, sheds light on evolving views regarding family planning and personal choice. This discourse is pivotal as it not only addresses personal autonomy but also highlights the ideological differences and common ground between the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia. Progressive

Islamic views in Indonesia, as advocated by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, play a significant role in understanding and mediating the issue of childfree. Meanwhile, The discussion of the childfree phenomenon within the context of feminist thought based on complex ways, highlighting themes of gender identity, autonomy, and societal expectations.

### **NU's Perspective on Childfree Choices**

From the standpoint of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the childfree option is not categorically dismissed but rather examined through a framework that assesses the health, financial, and psychological readiness of couples. NU adopts a nuanced view where childlessness can be deemed mubah (permissible) when justified by legitimate reasons aligned with sharia principles (Zuhriah et al., 2023). Studies indicate that NU prioritizes a well-rounded understanding of family law, which recognizes the diverse contexts in which couples may choose to forego parenthood (Abdussalam & Ali, 2022). This stance reflects a willingness to adapt traditional teachings to contemporary societal needs while maintaining core Islamic values. Furthermore, NU's approach acknowledges the elements of maslahah mursalah (public interest) that can inform family planning decisions, thereby allowing for flexibility when individual circumstances demand it (Fakhrudin et al., 2020). However, within NU, there exist diverse opinions, with some traditionalists arguing vehemently against childfree choices, viewing procreation as an essential purpose of marriage (Fakhrudin et al., 2020). This ongoing debate illustrates the complexities within NU regarding childfree perspectives, often creating a tension between progressive interpretations and more conservative beliefs about familial roles.

### **Muhammadiyah's Modernist Approach**

In contrast, Muhammadiyah presents a more progressive stance on the topic of childfree living. Emphasizing education and rational discourse, the organization encourages its members to consider contemporary issues such as health, economic stability, and social well-being when making family planning decisions (Zuhriah et al., 2023). This modernist approach posits that refraining from having children may not necessarily contradict Islamic principles but rather reflects a broader understanding of social responsibility and family dynamics in a rapidly changing world. This engagement helps mitigate stigmas attached to being childfree, framing it instead as a choice that can align with Indonesian Muslim cultural values when approached thoughtfully (Zuhriah et al., 2023). By actively fostering dialogue among its membership, Muhammadiyah serves to bridge differing views, creating an environment where individuals can explore their choices within an informed Islamic framework.

### **The Role of Moderate Islam**

The convergence of views from NU and Muhammadiyah contributes significantly to the discourse on childfree lifestyles within the Indonesian Muslim community. Both organizations acknowledge the importance of inter-dialogue, which proves essential in mediating differing perspectives on family planning issues (Jamaluddin et al., 2023). Through organized workshops, seminars, and community engagements, NU and Muhammadiyah foster a climate where diverse opinions can coexist, ultimately reducing the stigma surrounding childfree choices and facilitating discussions rooted in mutual understanding (Khoiri, 2022). This shared commitment to moderation highlights their roles as custodians of Islamic values that allow for personal autonomy while acknowledging societal norms. As both organizations promote Islamic teachings that resonate with contemporary values, they exemplify how dialogue within the community can pave the way for a more inclusive approach to complex issues such as childfree decisions (Abdussalam & Ali, 2022).

### **Feminism perspective regarding childfree**

The concept of being childfree, defined as the decision not to have children, is increasingly examined through feminist theory, which reveals varied perspectives on its relationship to gender roles, individual autonomy, and social norms. From a liberal feminist perspective, choosing to be

childfree is regarded as an expression of personal autonomy and a valid lifestyle option. This approach emphasizes individual rights and freedoms in reproductive decision-making. For example, the normative review by Nabila et al. highlights that Generation Z interprets being childfree within a context of individual liberty and societal expectations, stressing the importance of choosing one's life path without external pressures related to motherhood (Nabila et al., 2024).

Radical feminism interprets childfree choices as acts of resistance against patriarchal structures and societal norms that assign women the primary role of caregivers. This perspective views the decision to remain childfree as both a rejection of traditional gender roles and an affirmation of personal autonomy. Brooks notes that women who intentionally choose to be childfree are frequently stigmatized and associated with selfishness and materialism, especially in cultures that idealize motherhood (Brooks, 2019).

However, these perceptions are increasingly contested within feminist discourse, where choosing not to have children is recognized as an exercise of autonomy and a challenge to patriarchal definitions of female identity (Hayfield et al., 2019). Research by Shenaar-Golan and Lans demonstrates that, although social expectations frequently encourage women toward motherhood, those who choose a childfree life often report feelings of empowerment and enhanced psychological well-being (Shenaar-Golan & Lans, 2022). Radical feminist theorists contend that prevailing social structures linked to motherhood frequently marginalize individual preferences and needs. The growing visibility of childfree lifestyles across diverse contexts reflects a broader societal acceptance of alternatives to traditional motherhood and signals a shift in attitudes toward women's autonomy (Salyakhieva & Савельева, 2017).

Anarcho-feminism, while sharing core principles with radical feminism, places greater emphasis on dismantling hierarchical structures. It frames the choice to be childfree as both a personal decision and a political statement opposing norms imposed by patriarchal society and state control over individuals' bodies. Anarcho-feminists regard motherhood not only as a personal choice but also as an institution capable of perpetuating systemic oppression. They frequently critique societal pressures that present motherhood as an obligatory role for women and advocate for a fundamental rethinking of caregiving and relationships, prioritizing self-determination and liberation from societal obligations (Szalma et al., 2025).

The neoliberal feminist perspective highlights the psychological dimensions and social pressures associated with childfree choices, while advocating for the importance of personal freedom and social privacy in reproductive decision-making. Deulin and Penkov's psychological analysis further emphasizes the complexities of emotional well-being among childfree individuals, illustrating a shift in societal narratives that enables women to pursue goals beyond motherhood (Deulin & Penkov, 2025).

### **Intersectional realities that influence childfree**

Intersectional realities encompass the unique experiences and systemic advantages or disadvantages that arise from the interconnectedness of various social identities and positions. This concept operationalizes intersectional theory by advancing beyond the mere recognition of identities toward an understanding of how these identities interact simultaneously to shape individual experiences. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of an individual's reality cannot be achieved by examining a single factor in isolation. This study identifies three categories of intersectional realities: individual, cultural, and economic.

For individual aspect such as Recognition of the individual's right to reproductive autonomy, including the option to refuse procreation, is essential (Rybakova et al. 2022) ; Individualistic ideologies and societal acceptance of childfree living (Aitken, 2024); implement pro-environmental behaviour (Nakkerud, 2023); The application of shared values and agreements between partners prioritizes aligned goals and mutual understanding over societal expectations regarding parental roles (Zhang et al, 2025); or according to (Tori et al. 2023) threatened priorities ,uncertainty about the continuation of life, negative experiences of having children' fear of

becoming a parent, and diminishing religious beliefs. For Cultural aspect, , the depictions of childlessness and the childfree lifestyle often manifest within popular culture, serving to normalize and promote these choices. For instance, media portrayals, such as those found in Gita Savitri's "Childfree Podcast," unpack societal expectations surrounding parenthood, presenting childfree lifestyles in a favorable light and thereby influencing listeners' attitudes towards such choices (Cindy & CINDY, 2025).

Pop culture continues to spread these childfree ideas, often showing childfree lifestyles as empowering and liberating. According to Jody Day (2023) This approach reduces the influence of Symbolic Annihilation, as identified by Gaye Tuckman, which serves as a form of condemnation. When marginalized groups are represented, they are frequently depicted in a negative manner. This phenomenon is not limited to contemporary responses to gender equality; for example, in fairy tales, villainous women are often portrayed as childless.

This progressive redefinition in media basicly helps destigmatize childfree choices, presenting them in a favorable light that emphasizes autonomy and personal fulfillment (Abubakar et al., 2020). Moreover, it has been noted that visual media can educate audiences about such narratives, using them as tools to explore themes of identity and social reality, thereby contributing to the dismantling of stereotypes surrounding childlessness (Fatima, 2023). These portrayals challenge old stereotypes about motherhood and help create a new view of fulfillment that goes beyond having children (Símonardóttir, 2024). A key reason childfree ideas are spreading is that more well-known people in entertainment are choosing childfree as lifestyle. Celebrities and influencers use new media to share messages that connect with younger people and help change cultural norms. They often present childfree living as a way to express freedom and self-determination, which matches the values of empowerment in today's society (Chen, 2024). As these public figures interact with their audiences, they help make childfree choices more accepted and even appealing.

In South Korea, Numerous films and dramas incorporate a Childfree context, such as the television series Search: WWW (2019) centers on three successful women in the technology sector. One of the main couples, Scarlett (Lee Da-hee) and Seol Ji-hwan (Jang Ki-yong), explicitly discuss their future, with Scarlett firmly stating her desire not to marry or have children. She expresses contentment with her independent career and relationship, without prioritizing parenthood. Similarly, the film Little Forest (2018) portrays a young woman (Kim Tae-ri) who, disillusioned with urban life, returns to her rural hometown. She adopts a simple lifestyle, cultivates her own food, and rediscovers personal fulfillment, presenting an alternative perspective on life that emphasizes individual passion and tranquility over societal expectations. On other side, In Indonesia, several public figures like Gita Savitri, Cinta Laura, Ariel Tatum, Juna Rorimpandey (Chef Juna), Anya Dwinov, Rina Nose, and Leony Vitria (a former child artist) have openly chosen to be childfree and help educate the public about this lifestyle (Dhanira Tri,2025). In South Korea, some K-pop artists with large international followings, such as Kim Nam Joon (BTS), Yeon Woo (former Momoland), Wonho (former Monsta X), and The8 (Seventeen), have shared similar views (Nurul Hafiza Rizalia Putri,2025).



Figure 1. *From left to right* Korea movie Little forest (A), Korean drama Search: WWW (B), and Cinta laura podcast about childfree with Armand Maulana (Indonesia musician)

For Economy aspect, One important factor impacting the decision to remain childfree is the high cost associated with raising children particularly in urban settings where the cost of living is substantially higher. In places where housing, education, and healthcare present significant financial strains, individuals may opt for a childfree lifestyle as a strategy for economic stability and personal freedom (Dimitrova & Kotzeva, 2022). Many individuals perceive that pursuing career advancement or enjoying disposable income is more feasible without the burden of children (Aitken, 2024).

But the dynamics surrounding childcare decisions differ by marital status. For unmarried individuals, research shows a substantial inclination towards remaining childfree, supporting the notion that many single women consciously choose to forgo motherhood compared to their married counterparts. This observation aligns with findings from Neal and Neal, who reported consistent patterns across demographics where the decision to remain childfree is made early in adulthood, often during adolescence or early adulthood (Neal & Neal, 2022). In contrast, married couples display varying motivations, often influenced by a combination of social pressures and personal aspirations (Daulay et al., 2023).

## Discussion

Feminist scholarship consistently positions reproductive rights, including the right to remain childfree, as central to women's bodily autonomy, economic independence, and emancipation from patriarchal norms that equate womanhood with motherhood. When progressive Islamic leaders within NU and Muhammadiyah provide religious legitimacy for the choice to be childfree, they engage in religious interpretation that aligns with core feminist objectives. These interpretations challenge deterministic notions of women's destinies as primarily reproductive, enabling women to construct identities and life trajectories beyond conventional maternal roles. This approach frames childfree as permissible and redefines it as a legitimate, intentional choice within a religious context (Sabililhaq, 2024), directly contesting patriarchal interpretations that restrict female agency.

However, this convergence is characterized by significant tensions, particularly concerning sources of authority. Secular feminism typically grounds its arguments in universal human rights and explicit critiques of patriarchy, whereas even the most liberal forms of progressive Islamic discourse must derive legitimacy from religious texts such as the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as established interpretive traditions (*fiqh*). This reliance can result in conditional autonomy, where a woman's choice is validated only if justified through specific Islamic legal reasoning (*ijtihad*), which

may not always align with the more absolute assertions of bodily sovereignty found in feminist thought.

For instance, a progressive *fatwa* may permit childfree on the basis of health or economic necessity, yet refrain from endorsing it as a lifestyle choice without what are considered legitimate religious or pragmatic grounds. Furthermore, while feminism often seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures within religious interpretation, progressive Islam generally aims to reform these structures from within. Feminism broadly conceptualizes patriarchy as a systemic structure of male dominance that permeates various societal facets, advocating for the dismantling of these hierarchies to achieve gender equality. This perspective aligns with radical feminist theory, which emphasizes the transhistorical oppression of women by men and argues for a comprehensive overhaul of societal systems that uphold patriarchal norms (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020).

Feminists recognize that manifestations of patriarchy often differ across cultures, with intersectionality playing a crucial role in understanding how various identities converge to shape women's experiences (Allen, 2016). The critique of patriarchy thus extends beyond mere gender issues to encompass class, race, and colonial implications, thereby seeking a multifaceted liberation strategy (Bieler & Morton, 2024). But progressive Islam takes a different approach to patriarchy by trying to bring Islamic beliefs in line with modern ideas of equality. Islamic feminism, which is part of this movement, questions traditional readings of the Qur'an that have supported gender inequalities in the past (Constance, 2023; Bakhshizadeh, 2023). Progressive Muslims also attempt to interpret the scriptures in a manner that is based on the understanding that the general human perception and hope is that God's word and message must transcend the boundaries of humanity, time, and space to be applicable to all people in all eras (Constance, 2023).

However, puritans reject this perspective, asserting that progressives relativize the divine authority as a product of culture rather than as an agent of radical change. According to Puritans, everything conveyed by the Prophet, including both the Quran and the Sunnah, constitutes revelation and possesses universal validity. Puritanical movements believe that any changes or reforms could weaken Islamic orthodoxy, so they oppose modern interpretations that try to balance traditional Islamic values with current social norms (Yakin, 2018). They believe that only by strictly adhering to traditional texts and practices can the community maintain its identity and integrity in a changing world (Susanto, 2018). On other side, The paradox within Progressive Islam lies in efforts to create gender equality and empower women, yet remain bound to patriarchal norms rooted in religious traditions. Proponents of Progressive Islam strive to advance women's rights and reinterpret religious texts. However, they often do not fully reject existing patriarchal structures. Instead, these structures are sometimes accepted as part of a larger social system. Rather than undertaking a complete deconstruction, proponents of Progressive Islam negotiate within the existing framework (Alfirdaus et al., 2022; Hadinata, 2024). As a result, women's rights are often viewed within the context of family and traditional roles. This leads to tension between aspirations for equality and acceptance of patriarchal gender norms (Afrianty, 2019; Hidayah, 2020).

For example, the Progressive Islam approach often presents the argument that certain aspects of Islamic law can be adapted to modern norms for the sake of social justice, yet it retains elements that can reinforce male dominance within these dynamics (Guo et al., 2022). Furthermore, many discussions regarding the interpretation of religious texts, such as concerning Surah An-Nisa verse 34, focus on efforts to implement principles of justice while acknowledging the traditional position of women (Maula, 2025). This trend is also evident in various movements inspired by the recognition of women's traditional rights, where reformers tend not to fully challenge the patriarchal system but rather focus on internal reforms to improve women's status without opposing the existing social structures (Grzyb, 2023). As a result, this paradox presents its own challenge for gender empowerment, where the aspiration for equality must contend with social and traditional norms that still dominate Muslim societies.

The paradox in secular, anarcho-feminist, and liberal feminist movements on the issue of being childfree centers on the claim of absolute reproductive freedom. This claim may overlook

the collective dimension. These movements fight for individual autonomy, seeking liberation from patriarchal structures by rejecting motherhood. But childfree choices based on capitalist motives, like financial or lifestyle reasons, can reinforce a neoliberal system that commodifies women's bodies. Anarcho-feminism rejects all authority, including state regulation of reproduction. Yet, it may lead to social isolation if the chosen family cannot replace traditional support networks. The feminist movement that supports a childfree lifestyle can, if it becomes too radical—such as the "Four Nos" (4B) movement in South Korea, which rejects marriage, childbirth, beauty product consumption, and traditional gender roles in an effort to oppose women's oppression and gender hierarchy (Jenkins & Kim, 2024)—end up inadvertently harming women themselves, despite its global influence.

Tensions within religious circles arise because being childfree is seen as eroding the foundations of the family. In many religions, the family is considered a sacred social unit. For religious communities, rejecting motherhood is viewed not only as a moral deviation but also as a threat to the continuity of society and the transmission of religious values. While liberal feminists view women's bodies as autonomous private property, religious perspectives assign social and spiritual responsibilities to women's bodies. This conflict demonstrates a clash between the ethics of individual autonomy, as asserted by secular feminism, and the communitarian ethics embraced by religious communities. Both sides often fail to find common ground due to differing beliefs about humanity and the purpose of life.



Figure 2. 4B propaganda for Muslim women

This distinction can produce a precarious consensus, making the acceptance of practices such as childfree susceptible to changes in religious leadership or political context, in contrast to the more stable, principle-driven position of feminism. Terminology further underscores this divide: feminism emphasizes "rights," whereas progressive Islamic discourse frequently refers to "permissions" (*rukhsah*) or "considerations," illustrating the gap between rights-based and piety-based frameworks for autonomy. Both NU and Muhammadiyah have historically played significant roles in promoting moderate Islamic teachings that resonate with contemporary values. Dialogue between these organizations can foster an inclusive discourse on childfree lifestyles, emphasizing areas of commonality rather than division. This allows progressive Muslims to express their views on autonomy and rights while also acknowledging the deep-rooted beliefs surrounding family and legacy that both organizations support.

A key bridging strategy builds upon ongoing dialogue by applying feminist hermeneutics to Islamic texts and traditions, a methodology advocated by progressive Muslim scholars. Rather than dismissing religious sources, this approach reinterprets them through a framework that emphasizes justice, equity, and the lived experiences of women. Within the context of the childfree debate, organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah may be encouraged to examine Islamic principles that resonate with feminist values, including *maslahah* (public interest) and the prevention of *darar* (harm), to conceptualize reproductive choice as an issue of personal and social well-being. By highlighting the Quranic focus on voluntary decision-making and the prohibition of coercion (Quran 2:256), a feminist-informed dialogue can position the childfree choice not as a rejection of family, but as a legitimate exercise of a woman's *wilayah* (authority) over her own body and life trajectory. This approach facilitates a nuanced discussion that respects religious commitments to family while also creating theological space for the ethical legitimacy of choosing not to have children, thereby reconciling faith with the core principle of gender equality: bodily autonomy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that the childfree trend among urban Muslim youth in Indonesia is more than just a rejection of parenthood. It is a complex process shaped by global feminist ideas, modern economic challenges, and changing religious views. The findings highlight a careful balance between feminist views, which see reproductive choice as a basic right and a way to challenge patriarchy, and the changing positions of progressive Islamic thought in NU and Muhammadiyah. NU's conditional acceptance (*mubah*) and Muhammadiyah's modern, socially-aware approach give religious support to the childfree choice, but they are still based on *ijtihad* and interpretation of texts, which is different from the absolute autonomy promoted by secular feminism. This creates a fragile agreement, but it also gives urban Muslim youth room to make their own choices while keeping their religious identity.

Ultimately, navigating this complex landscape requires a sustained and empathetic dialogue that moves beyond ideological stalemates. The path forward lies in leveraging ongoing conversations and understanding that go beyond ideological disagreements. Progress can be achieved by focusing on shared values such as justice (*maslahah*) and preventing harm (*darar*) through education, community workshops, and open discussions with religious leaders, gender experts, and young people. Using feminist interpretations of Islamic texts, the choice to be childfree can be seen not as a violation, but as a responsible use of personal authority (*wilayah*) over one's life and body, in line with Quranic principles against force. This approach does not undermine the traditional family, but instead broadens its ethical meaning, helping to build a more inclusive and resilient society that respects both personal choice and community faith in today's Indonesia.

Future research should expand this discourse through empirical, mixed-methods studies that quantitatively measure the prevalence and motivations for childfree choices among specific Muslim demographics, while using qualitative approaches to capture the lived experiences and psychological impacts on couples navigating this decision. It is also crucial to conduct comparative studies across different Indonesian regions, including rural and semi-urban areas, to understand how locality influences this phenomenon, and to longitudinally track how these choices and their social receptivity evolve over time. Based on these findings, we recommend that Islamic organizations, such as NU and Muhammadiyah, develop formal, compassionate guidance and educational modules for community leaders and youth on Islamic ethics related to family planning and reproductive choice, framing the discussion within the principles of *maslahah* and well-being. Furthermore, public health and social services should create supportive, non-judgmental platforms and resources that enable couples to make informed decisions, thereby reducing stigma and

fostering a society that respects personal autonomy within a framework of shared religious and cultural values.

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