

## Review Article

# Stigmatization, life satisfaction, and its associated factors of childfree women: A scoping review

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Having children during marriage is a way to preserve the family lineage. To be childfree leads to negative stigma from society and even one's own family. However, not all couples want to have children, some of them choose to be childfree. Objective: This study aimed to review literature about the perspective of women who choose to be childfree.

**Methods:** The literature search about being childfree used electronic databases, namely Scopus and PubMed, with the keywords "childfree," "quality of life" and "life satisfaction." The studies included discuss the factors, impacts and satisfaction of a childfree life. This search was restricted to articles published in 2018-2023 and were analyzed by qualitative synthesis.

**Results:** There were 309 articles from both electronic databases, which were then sorted according to the PRISMA diagram, so that there were 14 articles that met the criteria. The articles were grouped into 12 qualitative articles and two quantitative articles. There are five main factors that cause women to be childfree, including individual, health, economic, family and environmental factors. Most women reported experiencing societal stigmatization, social pressure and pressure from the family. Even though they experience the negative impacts of childfree, they still feel satisfaction with life.

**Conclusion:** The perspectives of childfree women are diverse, ranging from the reasons for choosing to be childless, the social and emotional impacts and the level of life satisfaction.

**Keywords:** childfree; factors; impact; life satisfaction; women

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is the completion of half of religious obligations and aims to obtain good offspring (Hadi et al., 2022). The presence of a child is normal and considered happy (Toifah, 2020). However, not all couples want to have children; some of them choose to be childless. Childfree has become a hotly discussed issue, especially on social media. This is proven by the existence of several childfree communities in Indonesia. Childfree is a decision by a couple who choose not to have children, whether biological or adopted (Umam & Akbar, 2021).

Various pronatalist countries, such as Indonesia, view the presence of children in the marriage process as a way to preserve the family lineage (Hanandita, 2022). The birth rate in Indonesia is 2.26 and as many as 93% of people believe that the presence of children is important in marriage (Meidina & Puspita, 2023). In institutional marriages, having children is seen as important because of social expectations and demands, whereas in individual marriages having children is not the main goal because the couple are more focused on

efforts to fulfill affection and self-development needs (Patnani et al., 2021).

Every married couple has the right to plan and organize their domestic life, including having children (Fadhilah, 2022). The proportion of currently married women aged 15-49 who do not want children has fluctuated in recent years. In 2007, the percentage of married women aged 15-49 was 59% then in 2012 it fell to 56% and in 2017 it rose again to 58% (Umam & Akbar, 2021).

There are many factors that cause women to choose to be childfree. These include that having children is a big responsibility, and there are many stages that must be gone through including pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, with many more preparations that must be made (Umam & Akbar, 2021). Unpreparedness to become parents, personal factors and personal experiences, psychological, philosophical, economic, cultural, overpopulation, environmental factors and physical factors are all childfree factors (Hadi et al., 2022; Haganta et al., 2022; Mingkase & Rohmaniyah, 2022). Some parents consider having children to be a difficult for perceptions such as loss of control over themselves and their future, and the impact on marital harmony (Rizka et al., 2021).

The choice to be childfree leads to negative stigma from society and even one's own family. This stigma also opens up opportunities for social pressure to arise for couples who make the decision to be childfree (Rizka et al., 2021). Negative stigma is associated with their status as non-mothers, as well as the opinion that the absence of children makes their marriage unhappy, but there are also those who view that the absence of children actually provides benefits

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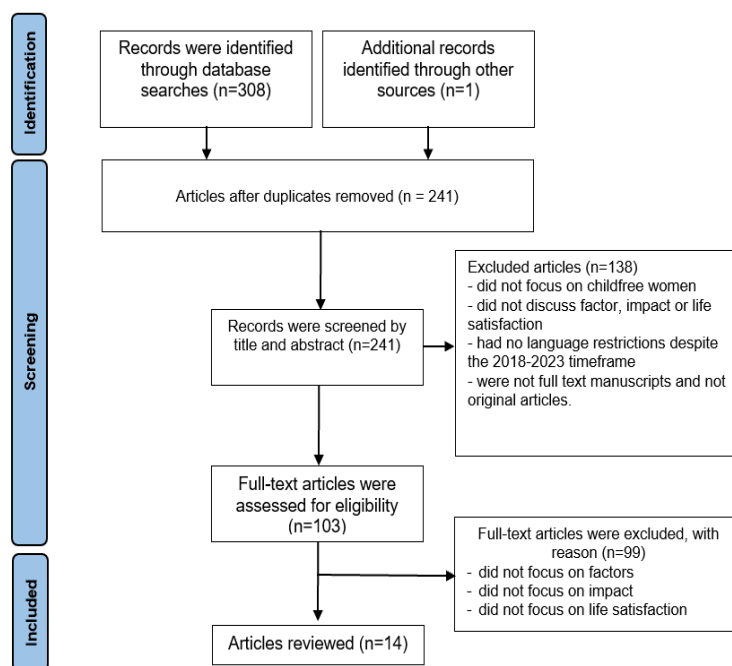
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**Figure 1.** PRISMA Flowchart of Study Selection

to their marriage (McDonald et al., 2020). The choice of being childfree becomes a high level of life satisfaction and a life without regrets (DeLyser, 2012; Stahnke et al., 2020). Childfree practitioners actually experience positive impacts, such as high life satisfaction and a strong sense of resilience (Stahnke et al., 2020). They get to know each other, respect each other, and have greater time and opportunity to pay attention to their partner by supporting and providing the help their partner needs, thereby increasing the positive assessment of their partner and ultimately making the partner assess their marriage positively (McDonald et al., 2020; Utamidewi et al., 2022). Apart from that, there is financial satisfaction, pleasure, and closer relationships with partners, family and friends (Patmani et al., 2021). In fact, for most studies, menopause, perimenopause, and reaching middle age do not evoke feelings of regret for their decision to live childfree (DeLyser, 2012). This study aimed to review literature about the perspective of women who choose to be childfree.

## METHODS

### Data Source and Search Strategy

A structured search regarding the factors, impacts and life satisfaction of childfree couples was carried out using electronic databases in the form of Scopus and PubMed, with the keywords "childfree women" and "life satisfaction." The literature search can be seen in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1). The studies included are qualitative and quantitative, and only articles containing factors, impacts and satisfaction with a childfree life will be reviewed. There is no language restriction used, and include published in 2018-2023, full text manuscripts and original articles. The aim was to identify empirical articles published in peer-reviewed journals from inception to June 2023. Articles were screened by checking for duplication, then title relevance, abstract content suitability, and finally through full-text screening. A broader search was deemed relevant to identify potential literature that may have

been missed by the database search due to limited literature in the area. The article synthesis was related to childfree women. To assess the suitability of the article quality for review, the principal investigator conducted a peer review of the articles with an expert.

### Participants and Eligibility Criteria

Literature reviews on childfree are rarely studied, particularly in Indonesia. Therefore, this study established specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The respondents or participants included women and/or couples aged 25–50 years who are not part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. The inclusion criteria encompassed published, peer-reviewed empirical quantitative and qualitative articles, as well as unpublished empirical qualitative and quantitative research such as dissertations or theses. The study specifically focused on articles that explored the perspectives of women who choose to be childfree throughout their lives. Only full-text manuscripts and original articles published between 2018 and 2023 were included. In contrast, the exclusion criteria comprised non-peer-reviewed publications, articles not written in English or Spanish, studies focusing on men's or husbands' perspectives, systematic reviews, and other forms of secondary research.

### Extraction of Data and Method of Review

The search and extraction of relevant literature is outlined in Figure 1. The overall findings were 309 articles which were then identified for duplicate articles, resulting in 241 articles that were ready for further review. After screening, 103 articles were generated by removing articles that did not meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria. One of these was a rapid review, from which one paper was extracted as relevant after screening. The papers were evaluated based on their aims, methodology, design, measures, findings and conclusions. Most of the papers maintained both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The final screening results contained 14 suitable articles that had addressed factors,

**Table 1.** Article Synthesis

Title, Author, Year	Country	Design	Results		
			Causative factor	Impact	Life Satisfaction
Lived Experiences and Life Satisfaction of Childfree Women in Late Life (Stahnke et al., 2020)	USA	Qualitative study	Health problems	Community stigmatization	Have a sense of life satisfaction
“I’ve Lived My Life to the Fullest:” Life Satisfaction among Childfree Older Women (Stahnke et al., 2022)	USA	Qualitative study	N/A	N/A	Have a sense of life satisfaction
Why DID they have children? Rural midlife women who are childfree (Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022)	USA	Qualitative study	N/A	Community stigmatization	N/A
Entre La Voluntad Y El Castigo: Agresiones Contra Mujeres Que Deciden No Ser Madres (Rojas-Madrigal, 2023b)	Spain	Qualitative study	N/A	Social pressure	N/A
A Qualitative Study on the Marital Experiences of Childfree Couples in Turkey (Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023)	Turkey	Qualitative study	Parenting responsibilities and duties, loss of sense of autonomy in life, worries about finances and career, concern about the child's future, concerns about environmental impacts, togetherness of husband and wife	Social pressure	N/A
Choosing to live environmentally childfree: private-sphere environmentalism, environmental activism, or both? (Nakkerud, 2023)	Norway	Qualitative study	Eco-friendly living	N/A	N/A
Stigmatization of voluntarily childfree women and men in the UK: The roles of expected regret and moral judgment (Ekelund & Ask, 2021)	UK	Quantitative study	N/A	Community stigmatization	N/A
Perceptions and imagined performances of pregnancy, birth and parenting among voluntarily child-free individuals in Sweden (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2022)	Sweden	Qualitative study	Avoid pregnancy, avoid birth, avoiding parenting, health problems	N/A	N/A
Measuring Differentiation of Self to Evaluate Subjective Well-Being in Women Who are Childfree by Choice (Shenaar-Golan & Lans, 2023)	Israel	Quantitative study	N/A	N/A	There is no significant difference in life satisfaction between childfree women and mothers
Psychology of newly married couples in Indonesia: Is it possible to choose childfree by choice or face the gossip of society and family? (Daulay et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Qualitative study	Environment, economy, health, employment	It has a good impact, there is no public stigmatization	N/A
Sterilized and Satisfied: Outcomes of Childfree Sterilization Obtainment and Denials (Lemke et al., 2023)	USA	Qualitative study	N/A	N/A	Have a sense of life satisfaction
When Family Policy Doesn’t Work: Motives and Welfare Attitudes Among Childfree Persons in Poland (Szelewa, 2022)	Poland	Qualitative study	N/A	Social and Family pressure	Have a sense of life satisfaction
Prevalence and characteristics of childfree adults in Michigan (USA) (Neal & Neal, 2021)	USA	Qualitative study	N/A	N/A	There is no significant difference in life satisfaction between childfree women and mothers
Not a mother, yet a woman: Exploring experiences of women opting out of motherhood in India (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018)	India	Qualitative study	Freedom to be alone, the burden of caring for children, sad childhood experiences, feeling that genes are worthless	N/A	Have a sense of life satisfaction

Note: USA: United States of America; UK: United Kingdom; N/A: Not Available

impacts and life satisfaction in women who choose not to have children. To assess the quality of the articles, the review process was carried out using JBI's critical appraisal tools, with a cut off value of >50% to be reviewed. The steps taken to search for articles can be seen from the PRISMA flowchart.

## RESULTS

One article was found from another source search. Duplicate articles were removed after 241 articles remained. Articles that did not focus on factors, impacts or life satisfaction were excluded. There were 14 articles reviewed out of a total of 309 articles. These results consist of 12 articles with a qualitative design and two articles with a quantitative design (Table 1).

Childfree practices have been carried out by many women in various countries (Table 1), including the USA (four articles), and one article each in Spain, Turkey, Norway, the UK, Sweden, Israel, Indonesia, Poland and India.

There are various factors that cause women to be childfree. Our findings show five articles discussing the factors that cause such a choice. We grouped them into five factors, including individual factors, health, economic, family, and environmental factors. Individual factors include avoiding childcare or caregiving burdens (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2022), loss of autonomy in life (Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023), freedom for yourself (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018), avoiding pregnancy and birth (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2022), sad childhood experience (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018) and feeling that one's genes are worthless (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018). Health factors include the presence of health problems, such as infertility (Daulay *et al.*, 2023; Höglund & Hildingsson, 2022; Stahnke *et al.*, 2020). Economic factors include worries about finances and career/work (Daulay *et al.*, 2023; Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023) and concerns about the child's future (Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023). Environmental factors include concerns about environmental impacts and environmentally friendly living (Daulay *et al.*, 2023; Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023; Nakkerud, 2023). Family factors include the togetherness of husband and wife (Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023).

We found seven articles discussing the impact of being childfree. Most women reported being stigmatized by society (Ekelund & Ask, 2021; Ruegamer & Dziengel, 2022; Stahnke *et al.*, 2020), social pressure (Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023; Rojas-Madrigal, 2023; Szelewa, 2022), and family pressure (Szelewa, 2022). However, one article reported no public stigmatization (Daulay *et al.*, 2023).

Our findings highlight that, seven articles, five revealed that women who chose to be childfree had life satisfaction (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018; Lemke *et al.*, 2023; Stahnke *et al.*, 2020, 2022; Szelewa, 2022) and two articles revealed that there was no difference in life satisfaction between women who were childfree and those who became mothers (Neal & Neal, 2021; Shenaar-Golan & Lans, 2023).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the literature review about whether someone who chooses to be childfree is happy or not are based on several underlying factors, such as their causative factor, the impact and their life satisfaction.

### Factors Influencing the Decision to be Childfree

According to decision theory, intentional choices are made from various available options (Schick, 1997). Women in this study had the choice of being childfree or becoming mothers.

The gap between making a choice from the various available alternatives and implementing it requires certain motivational factors that push them toward the childfree choice. Avoiding childcare/the burden of childcare is one of the reasons why women choose to be childfree. Many women view education, work and financial security as more important for a happy life than motherhood (Rizka *et al.*, 2021). The culture of long working hours, intense competition, and pressure to publish does not always align with childcare responsibilities (Bonache *et al.*, 2022). Their personal needs are generally underestimated, as demands outside work tend to be solely associated with childcare responsibilities (Giles & Oncescu, 2021). Becoming a mother reflects 'correct' female gender performance, and motherhood is framed as central to women's bodies and desires.

The loss of autonomy in life and freedom to be alone is also the reason why women choose to be childfree. The childfree option allows them the freedom to develop close relationships with partners and friends, as well as the freedom to travel (Stahnke *et al.*, 2022). When someone becomes a parent, they will not be able to attend many social activities, and this will create difficulties in maintaining friendships (Simon *et al.*, 2019). Other research also reveals that, when they don't have children, they actually feel socially disadvantaged because it will limit their social relationships with other groups (Fiori *et al.*, 2018). It can be said that being childfree is a manifestation of women's awareness of their right to choose and fight gender constructions in society regarding the necessity of being mothers (Mingkase & Rohmaniyah, 2022). The most frequently cited reason for choosing not to bear or raise children is the desire to maintain intimacy with one's partner; many childless women report that they enjoy a higher level of consensus and are better able to discuss and exchange ideas with their partners (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2022). Avoiding pregnancy and birth is the reason why women prefer to be childfree rather than become mothers, and this is true in Indonesia.

Sad childhood experiences are another reason why women choose to be childfree. This is in accordance with previous research that many people choose not to have children because of bad childhood experiences with their parents, they are worried that they will pass on toxins to their offspring because they realize that they are mentally incapable (Rizka *et al.*, 2021). This makes them feel guilty for destroying the lives of their parents, who struggle hard to raise three children.

Several articles reveal reasons women choose to be childfree for health reasons such as infertility. Reproductive health is associated with chronic diseases necessitating sterilization, and infertility is considered an appropriate and sustainable way to maintain being childfree in women (Höglund & Hildingsson, 2022). Field study findings support the idea that infertile married couples are seen as inflexible, hedonistic, and reckless because they choose a childfree life (Utamidewi *et al.*, 2022). Understanding and accepting the condition of infertility affects a woman's life satisfaction and her self-worth.

The study showed that they also see not having children as an opportunity to focus on their partner's happiness. This is realized by having many opportunities to do activities with your partner so that it has an impact on bringing your relationship with your partner closer (Rizka *et al.*, 2021). Another study revealed that women choose to be childfree because they think their husbands are not mature enough to have children and they think their husbands will not be good parents (Ruegamer & Dziengel, 2022). For this couple,

the most important thing about their current marriage is that they can live in peace, fulfill all life's needs and maintain a harmonious relationship with their family.

The results show that the other factors are higher economic needs when they have a child. Based on interviews with informants, couples who choose not to have children for financial and psychological reasons are considered to have prevented the birth of someone who would otherwise have been born below the poverty line (Utamidewi et al., 2022). Apart from that, having children is a long process, so financial and mental preparation must be considered carefully (Roux & Figeac, 2022). Although the intention not to have children in the UK is generally comparable between men and women of the same age, the results of the study show a link between socioeconomic disadvantage if they have children (Fiori et al., 2018). Apart from that, responsibility as a mother may hinder a woman's career (França, 2022) because they think that when they have wealth, children are not an investment in the future (Rizka et al., 2021). Economic factors include concerns about finances and career/work which cause women to choose to be childfree. Financial and economic considerations are the main factors for couples who choose not to have children.

Environmental factors are one of the reasons why women choose to be childfree. The population of the earth is increasing but it is not balanced with the 'health' of the earth and the availability of food, so childfree is finally chosen as a step that can be taken. However, in its development, generativity is not only limited to the realm of marriage and parenthood, so that people who decide to live single or childfree will usually express their generativity through various areas of life, such as becoming environmental volunteers (Rizka et al., 2021). Caring about the negative impacts of the environment which can cause overpopulation and scarcity of natural resources is a choice and right for someone to want to have children or not.

### The Impact of Childfree Choices

Childfree status is less accepted among society. Almost all of the women interviewed had experienced social pressure; this is in line with previous research (Ekelund & Ask, 2021; Erkaya & Ustunel, 2023; Rojas-Madrigal, 2023; Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022; Stahnke et al., 2020; Szelewa, 2022). Society's stigma blames women who choose to be childfree because women's role is as mothers and society considers them selfish, very career-oriented, and only interested in fulfilling their own aspirations (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018), although some of them choose childfree because they are infertile, so they suffer from shame and guilt about this condition (Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022; Stahnke et al., 2020). Some of them also received rude questions and disappointment and even discrimination (Stahnke et al., 2020). For those with fertility-related health problems, the hope of having children can cause pain, feelings of inadequacy, and lifelong challenges (Stahnke et al., 2020). An unsupportive environment does not affect their happiness. They have accepted their condition and are looking for positive values in every phase of their lives, such as creating useful activities

When a woman gets married, family and friends will calculate when the woman becomes pregnant and the status of the pregnancy is often questioned (Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022). Feelings of isolation and exclusion are also felt, they sometimes avoid family gatherings or social activities that prioritize their role as mothers, for example baby showers (Ruegemer & Dziengel, 2022). Other findings also reveal that when someone decides to live childfree, they will be

considered disabled, deviant, and unnatural (George-Allen, 2022). The perspective of happiness by childfree women is that the existence of children is not the main thing; there are many factors that can increase their passion for life without leaving their environment.

### Life Satisfaction in Choosing to Be Childfree

Five literatures report that, even though they choose childfree, they still feel life satisfaction (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018; Lemke et al., 2023; Stahnke et al., 2020, 2022; Szelewa, 2022). Other findings also revealed that childfree women who underwent sterilization reported higher self-esteem, better sexual quality, and higher well-being than those who did not undergo the procedure (Lemke et al., 2023). There is something unique about being childfree that contributes to their positive perception, so they experience enjoying life. Initially they felt resentment when they were with people who had children and talked about children and grandchildren, but they experienced increased life satisfaction as time went on (Stahnke et al., 2022). Perhaps the childfree option adds a uniquely satisfying element to a person's life, such as the opportunity to develop self-awareness, dreams, or unlimited abilities and time.

### CONCLUSION

Some women don't want to have children. Some women think that having children hinders their careers, restricts their freedom, means having to care for children, they worry about giving birth, had bad childhood experiences, and so on. We highlight the factors that cause childfree status in women and group them into five factors including individual, health, economic, family, and environmental factors. Most women reported experiencing societal stigmatization, social pressure, and pressure from the family. Many people consider them selfish, deviant, unnatural, and even disabled, even though some of them choose to be childfree because of conditions that make them seem to be infertile and they feel embarrassed by this. Even though they experience the negative impacts of being child-free, they still feel satisfaction with life. Our article findings show the current perspectives of women who choose not to have children, most of whom stated that the impact of not having children is social pressure and stigma in society, but quite a few of them expressed that they were quite satisfied with their lives.

### Declaration of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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None.

### Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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