

## **NEGOTIATION OF MARRIED WOMEN CHOOSING CHILDFREE IN THE CONTEXT OF PRONATALISM FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***Abstrak***

*Dalam konteks pronatalisme sosiokultural yang dominan dan wacana budaya yang mengadvokasi ibu sebagai persyaratan feminitas normatif, banyak wanita membungkam atau menyembunyikan pilihan mereka untuk bebas anak dan kurangnya keinginan mereka untuk menjadi ibu. Secara intrinsik menarik untuk memahami apa alasan perempuan menikah memilih untuk childfree dalam pandangan masyarakat yang menilai negatif reproduksi perempuan dalam kasus ini orang yang memilih childfree dan bagaimana perempuan menegosiasikannya dan apa yang membuat mereka bertahan dengan pilihan mereka. Penelitian ini menghasilkan bahwa tugas atau kegiatan keibuan menjadi alasan untuk memilih pilihan childfree dan individu berbicara tentang keputusan sehubungan dengan pilihan childfree mereka dalam masyarakat yang mayoritas pronatalis dan strategi yang berbeda dalam menegosiasikan identitas childfree mereka dalam konteks harapan pronatalis khususnya di Indonesia yang masih kental dengan agama dan budaya.*

*Kata kunci: Negosiasi, perempuan dan childfree*

### ***Abstract***

*In the context of dominant sociocultural pronatalism and cultural discourses advocating motherhood as a normative requirement of femininity, many women mute or hide their choice to be childfree and their lack of desire to become mothers. It is intrinsically interesting to understand what are the reasons married women choose to be childfree in the view of society that negatively evaluates women's reproduction, in this case people who choose childfree and how women negotiate it and what makes them stick with their choice. This research results that motherly tasks or activities as reasons for making childfree choices talk about their decisions in relation to their childfree choices in a predominantly pronatalist society and different strategies in negotiating their childfree identity in the context of pronatalist expectations, especially in Indonesia which is still thick with religion and culture.*

*Keyword: negotiation, woman, childfree*

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## Introduction

It is argued that existing cultural and religious discourses significantly contribute to the interpreted identity of motherhood in society. On particular note, Motherhood is said to be the most desired role for any woman and worth sacrificing for.<sup>1</sup> Marriage, religious orientation, culture and patriarchal doctrines approved motherhood and its associated identity in society.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, childlessness or failure to bear sons restricts women in the form of their reduced identity leaving them psychologically traumatized, physically and socially stigmatized.<sup>3</sup>

Choosing not to have children is perceived as a deviation from cultural norms, this dominant pronatalist discourse is especially true for women.<sup>4</sup> However, few studies have documented the experiences of women who consciously choose to remain childfree. In various studies, it has been suggested that for childfree advocates, the reasons that drive their decision not to have children are, in order to achieve gender equality and women's career orientation.<sup>5</sup> Overall, researchers have observed that couples who choose childfree are more educated.

Perhaps because of this, both parties or partners mostly wanting to train in management and professional fields, as they want to earn a high income and to live in urban areas.<sup>6</sup>

In other studies, it is mentioned that for childfree supporters, the reasons that drive a person's decision not to have children are, in order to achieve gender justice and career orientation for women.<sup>7</sup> Mingkase and Rohmaniyah's in their research states that, it is not only non-natural differences, gender construction is also problematic as its places women's nature at the biological level. The nature of women who have a uterus, are being demanded to use it in accordance with its function, so that child-free decisions are considered deviant and abnormal.<sup>8</sup>

In Indonesia, the term childfree made headlines after an influencer, Gita Savitri Devi, said that despite being married, she chose not to have children. The statement said on her social media channels sparked controversy. There were also biased comments about the life choice to go childfree. Starting with negative prejudice, calling her as a selfish person and many other stereotypes. Other than

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Ashburn-Nardo, "Parenthood As A Moral Imperative? Moral Outrage And The Stigmatization Of Voluntarily Childfree Women And Men," *Sex Roles* 76, No. 5–6 (Maret 2017): 393–401, <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11199-016-0606-1>.

<sup>2</sup> Chandni Bhambhani Dan Anand Inbanathan, "Not A Mother, Yet A Woman: Exploring Experiences Of Women Opting Out Of Motherhood In India," *Asian Journal Of Women's Studies* 24, No. 2 (3 April 2018): 159–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2018.1462932>.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Elias, "Comparative Reading Of Motherhood Identities In East African And Indonesian Literature," *Jurnal Humaniora* 32, No. 2 (1 Juni 2020): 170, <https://doi.org/10.22146/Jh.49832>.

<sup>4</sup> Nursyamsiah Mingkase Dan Inayah Rohmaniyah, "Konstruksi Gender Dalam Problematika Childfree Di Sosial Media Twitter," *Yinyang: Jurnal Studi Islam Gender Dan Anak* 17, No. 2 (15 November 2022):

201–22, <https://doi.org/10.24090/Yinyang.V17i2.6486>.

<sup>5</sup> Joanne Doyle, Julie Ann Pooley, Dan Lauren Breen, "A Phenomenological Exploration Of The Childfree Choice In A Sample Of Australian Women," *Journal Of Health Psychology* 18, No. 3 (Maret 2013): 397–407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105312444647>.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Clarke Dkk., "Lived Experiences Of Childfree Lesbians In The United Kingdom: A Qualitative Exploration," *Journal Of Family Issues* 39, No. 18 (Desember 2018): 4133–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x18810931>.

<sup>7</sup> Doyle, Pooley, Dan Breen, "A Phenomenological Exploration Of The Childfree Choice In A Sample Of Australian Women."

<sup>8</sup> Mingkase Dan Rohmaniyah, "Konstruksi Gender Dalam Problematika Childfree Di Sosial Media Twitter."

Gita Savitri Devi, there are many women in Indonesia who have previously stated their decision not to have children, including Veronica Wilson and Victoria Tungono. In fact, Victoria Tungono has also published a book titled *Childfree and Happy*, which discusses the choices, reasons, and obstacles of not having children in Indonesia. Victoria has confirmed that she wrote the book based on interviews with dozens of childfree community members on Facebook. Since then, the childfree trend has increased, especially among the millennial generation in Indonesia.

In the context of dominant sociocultural pronatalism and cultural discourses that advocate motherhood as a requirement of normative femininity, many women silence or hide their choice to be childfree and their lack of desire for motherhood. The findings in that study corroborate previous researches which point to the widespread stigma and disapproved childfree women's experiences in pronatalist settings and there are few kinds of research looking at women's reasons in deciding to go childfree and how women apply childfree choices in the context of pronatalism in their everyday lives.<sup>9</sup>

It is intrinsically interesting to understand what are the reasons married women choose to go childfree in the view of a society that negatively values women's

reproduction, in this case people who choose childfree and how women negotiate it and what makes them persist with their choice. Since they are often unfairly stigmatized by society in a way that belittle their choice, it remains academically interesting to examine is there any support for such views in Indonesia, especially Yogyakarta where people still cling tightly to religious and cultural norms.

## Discussion

The childfree phenomenon in Indonesia has created a stigma that society's values around children have shifted. Children who are the comfort of the heart are considered only a burden in life. Bearing children requires mental and physical preparation. This phenomenon also shows the loss of family functions that society should create in building a social society. The family should function as the main social space for children, the birthplace, and a stable place for adolescents, so they can participate in the wider society later on.<sup>10</sup>

Indonesia is a pronatalist country which can be seen that the community is pressuring married couples to bear children as soon as possible, because if a married couple does not have children then the marriage is considered imperfect.<sup>11</sup> Aulia said that people in Indonesia interpret the presence of children as the successor for married couples.<sup>12</sup> From a social and

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<sup>9</sup> Amy Blackstone Dan Mahala Dyer Stewart, "Choosing To Be Childfree: Research On The Decision Not To Parent: Choosing To Be Childfree," *Sociology Compass* 6, No. 9 (September 2012): 718–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00496.x>.

<sup>10</sup> Tin Herawati Dkk., "Faktor-Faktor Yang Memengaruhi Pelaksanaan Fungsi Keluarga Di Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmu Keluarga & Konsumen* 13, No. 3 (30 September 2020): 213–27, <https://doi.org/10.24156/jikk.2020.13.3.213>.

<sup>11</sup> Karunia Haganta, Firas Arrasy, Dan Siamrotul Ayu Masuroh, "Manusia, Terlalu (Banyak) Manusia: Kontroversi Childfree Di Tengah Alasan Agama, Sains, Dan Krisis Ekologi," *Konferensi Integrasi Interkoneksi Islam Dan Sains* 4, No. 1 (23 Februari 2022): 309–20.

<sup>12</sup> Nuria Febri Sinta Rahayu Dan Fatimah Aulia Rahmah, "Keputusan Pasangan Subur Untuk Tidak Memiliki Anak" 8 (2022): 14.

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economic perspective, the presence of a child can improve the economy of a family because children are considered to bring sustenance and will get positive social recognition in social life. Patnani et al. also said that these reasons strengthen the demand to have offspring for pronatalist societies.<sup>13</sup>

For this research, informants are needed to assist in obtaining data and information about the research problems. Researchers took several informants who were considered to know about the problems in the field. In this study, the authors interviewed 3 female informants who all came from Yogyakarta. First, informant AB is a 28-year-old woman who has been married for 4 years. AB and her husband decided to be childfree long before they got married. Second, informant MS is a 25-year-old woman who has only been married for 9 months and lives in Bantul, Yogyakarta. MS and her husband decided not to have children before they got married. Third, informant SY is a 35-year-old woman who has been married for 10 years living in Yogyakarta. SY and her husband decided to be childfree after they got married mostly because of the economic factor.

## Individual's Reasons for Choosing Childfree in a pronatalist context

The stigmatization of those who are deliberately choosing not to have a child can also stem from their environment and lifestyle, with the growth of individualism, the disintegration of the family, and the dominance of rationalized impersonal roles and relationships in society. McMahon argues that within this background, motherhood is symbolized as caring, tenderness, and self-sacrifice.<sup>14</sup> As children are also constructed as sacred objects, with their concerns defined as important social issues, mothers are symbolized as "guardians of the innocent" and motherhood emerges as a significant moral endeavor, albeit one that is seen increasingly applied.<sup>15</sup>

Gillespie identified two distinct but related factors for childfree decision-making: the attraction, or pull, of not having children and the rejection of motherhood, the former characterized by increased independence and improved relationships with partners and others while the latter is characterized by loss of identity and rejection of childbirth-related activities.<sup>16</sup>

Previous research concluded that the most commonly reported reasons by respondents included not wanting to take on the responsibility of childcare, more opportunities for self-care and higher mobility, higher marital satisfaction, women's career priorities, financial benefits,

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<sup>13</sup> Miwa Patnani, Bagus Takwin, Dan Winarini Wilman Mansoer, "Bahagia Tanpa Anak? Arti Penting Anak Bagi Involuntary Childless," *Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi Terapan* 9, No. 1 (15 Januari 2021): 117, <https://doi.org/10.22219/jipt.v9i1.14260>.

<sup>14</sup> Mariya Bicharova, Irena Lebedeva, Dan Pavel Karabushchenko, "Russian Childfree Community: Reality And Illusions," *Procedia - Social And Behavioral Sciences* 214 (Desember 2015): 925–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.674>.

<sup>15</sup> Oksana Bayer Dan Olga Glushko, "Childfree As A New Phenomenon And Its Individual Psychological

Correlates," *Journal Of Psychology Research* Vol. 25 No. 8 (2019), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337826543\\_Bayer\\_O\\_Glushko\\_O\\_Childfree\\_As\\_A\\_New\\_Ph\\_enomenon\\_And\\_Its\\_Individual\\_Psychological\\_Correlates\\_Journal\\_Of\\_Psychology\\_Research\\_2019\\_Vol\\_258\\_Pp\\_20-26](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337826543_Bayer_O_Glushko_O_Childfree_As_A_New_Ph_enomenon_And_Its_Individual_Psychological_Correlates_Journal_Of_Psychology_Research_2019_Vol_258_Pp_20-26).

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Gillespie, "Childfree And Feminine: Understanding The Gender Identity Of Voluntarily Childless Women," *Gender & Society* 17, No. 1 (Februari 2003): 122–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202238982>.

concerns about population growth, general dislike of children, concerns about parental competence.<sup>17</sup>

The results found were that informants MS and AB both cited their familiarity and experience with some of the tasks associated with motherhood as reasons for choosing not to have children. Based on their experiences, both respondents realized that they did not enjoy doing motherhood activities and did not want to be a mother. In addition to disliking the experiences associated with maternal duties within the extended family circle. In contrast, SY reflected on her childhood experience as the eldest child in a family of seven children and was reluctant to have children.

As indicated above, the informants who talked about having done maternal duties or activities as a reason for making the childfree choice were talking about their decisions in relation to their childfree choice in a predominantly pronatalist society. The association of women's rights with maternal duties that these women addressed by justifying their childfree choices claimed that they had performed maternal duties, even though the maternal duties they performed were not for their own biological children. The women also constructed motherhood and childcare as a negative thing, as it consists of hard work, a responsibility or burden and filled with tedious and troublesome tasks.

This corroborates findings from previous research that found childless women got negative early experiences of parenting as a reason for choosing not to have children themselves. Other findings saw that some women made the decision not to have children based on their desire not to extend their negative childhood experiences to the next generation.<sup>18</sup>

In Bimha and Chadwick's research, the study found three main reasons that influenced women's decision to go childfree: real-life experience with maternal duties and activities, impracticality of having children, and personal advancement.<sup>19</sup> The findings in the study corroborate previous research that points to the widespread stigma and disapproved experiences of childfree women in pronatalist settings and there is little research looking at how women negotiate the norms of pronatalism in their everyday lives.<sup>20</sup>

Previous researchers have noted that the negative construction of motherhood as a burden, a demand, or responsibility is a common theme found in qualitative literature on childfree women.<sup>21</sup> This is in line with the findings where informants said that they did not want to perform maternal duties because they felt they could not perform it well. Gillespie, in her study of 25 childfree British women, found that motherhood was viewed by participants as 'a sacrifice, a duty and a burden', thus

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<sup>17</sup> Primrose Z. J. Bimha Dan Rachele Chadwick, "Making The Childfree Choice: Perspectives Of Women Living In South Africa," *Journal Of Psychology In Africa* 26, No. 5 (28 Oktober 2016): 449–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2016.1208952>.

<sup>18</sup> Kristin Park, "Choosing Childlessness: Weber's Typology Of Action And Motives Of The Voluntarily Childless\*," *Sociological Inquiry* 75, No. 3 (Agustus 2005): 372–402, <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1475-682x.2005.00127.X>.

<sup>19</sup> Primrose Z. J. Bimha Dan Rachele Chadwick, "Making The Childfree Choice: Perspectives Of Women Living In South Africa," *Journal Of Psychology In Africa* 26, No. 5 (28 Oktober 2016): 449–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2016.1208952>.

<sup>20</sup> Blackstone Dan Stewart, "Choosing To Be Childfree."

<sup>21</sup> Doyle, Pooley, Dan Breen, "A Phenomenological Exploration Of The Childfree Choice In A Sample Of Australian Women."

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justifying their refusal and becoming childfree.<sup>22</sup>

In this study, it can be concluded that maternal duties are the main reason for the three informants to decide to be childfree because they feel unsuitable and cannot do it well because of past experiences that informants have experienced. There are also economic factors that influence informants to choose childfree because the cost of living is expensive, including the cost of a child starting from the womb until they grow up. Informants argue that being a parent has a big responsibility to provide a decent life for children.

### **Individuals Negotiating Childfree Choice in a Pronatalist context**

It is mentioned in various studies that childfree supporters, among those who encourage a person's decision not to have children is in order to achieve gender justice and career orientation for women.<sup>23</sup> Other research suggests that it is not only non-natural differences, but also the gender construction is also problematic as it places women's nature at the biological level. The nature of women who have a uterus, are being demanded to use it in accordance with its function, so that child-free decisions are considered deviant and abnormal.<sup>24</sup>

While informants acknowledged and internalize pronatalist norms, but also disregarding them, participants simultaneously saw norm compliance as unsuitable for them. The respondents' stated some motivations for living on their own,

including the freedom to pursue their interests and new opportunities, suggest a rational assessment of how and why adhering to procreative norms might lead to the rejection of their aspirations.

According to Blackstone and Stewart, women who make the childfree choice are aware of the negativity of social views associated with their childfree status in pronatalist contexts, but they are often indifferent to social norms. Previous findings showed that five participants played along (in different ways) with pronatalism, while only two participants took a strong pro-child choice stance. In the context of dominant sociocultural pronatalism and cultural discourses that advocate motherhood as a requirement of normative femininity, many women silence or hide their preference for childfree and their lack of desire for motherhood. Those women who actively resist and challenge social norms in relation to motherhood act as potentially powerful agents of social change.<sup>25</sup>

Three Informants showed different strategies in negotiating their childfree identities in the context of pronatalist expectations, especially in Indonesia where religion and culture are still strong. Individuals who choose not to become parents are viewed as negative stereotypes and experience social pressure to change or

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<sup>22</sup> Gillespie, "Childfree And Feminine."

<sup>23</sup> Doyle, Pooley, Dan Breen, "A Phenomenological Exploration Of The Childfree Choice In A Sample Of Australian Women."

<sup>24</sup> Mingkase Dan Rohmaniyah, "Konstruksi Gender Dalam Problematika Childfree Di Sosial Media Twitter."

<sup>25</sup> Blackstone Dan Stewart, "Choosing To Be Childfree."

justify their status.<sup>26</sup> The stigma arises because the culture of the society expects women to conceive and accept motherhood. According to Khasanah and Rhido, Indonesian society with its culture and customs that strongly uphold the importance of offspring or successors will be difficult to accept the childfree concept.<sup>27</sup>

Respondent AB negotiated her childfree identity by substituting into another identity that she felt more ready to defend or that can be accepted easily in the society. Respondent AB replaced the childfree identity with an infertility so that the environment did not ask further questions, respondents MS and SY demonstrated passivity as a strategy to negotiate pronatalist norms and showed that she never made any effort to maintain her chosen childfree status or pretend to conform to pronatalism.

From the results of the interview with informant AB, it can be concluded that the informant replaced the childfree identity with another identity to build and maintain his appearance and to protect others. This is in line with Ting-Toomey's theory. According to Stella Ting-Toomey's theory, people from different cultural backgrounds have different concerns about the "face" or image of others. This concern makes AB informants resolve conflicts in different ways without having to produce parties who

feel they have won or lost. In this case, face is defined as one's self-image in the eyes of others.<sup>28</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey based many parts of her theory on face. Informant AB has a strategy to replace the childfree identity with the infertile identity..

In contrast, Informant MS demonstrated passivity as a strategy to persist with the childfree choice in a pronatalist context and showed that they never made any effort to defend their childfree choice or pretend to conform to pronatalism. MS was able to be passive because she was less likely to be questioned about her choice or encouraged by the environment to have children as informant MS still considered as a newlywed couple.

Based on MS's experience, it can be concluded that being passive can influence people who expect childless women to become mothers to continue to believe that one day they will eventually become mothers. From the results of the interview with informant MS, it can be concluded that informants replace childfree identities with other identities to build and protect their likeness and to protect others

The researcher used face negotiation theory as one of the few theories that explicitly recognizes that people from different cultures have different ideas about

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<sup>26</sup> Kristin Park, "Stigma Management Among The Voluntarily Childless," *Sociological Perspectives* 45, No. 1 (Maret 2002): 21–45, <https://doi.org/10.1525/Sop.2002.45.1.21>.

<sup>27</sup> Uswatul Khasanah Dan Muhammad Rosyid Ridho, "Childfree Perspektif Hak Reproduksi Perempuan Dalam Islam," *Al-Syakhsyiyah: Journal Of Law &*

*Family Studies* 3, No. 2 (11 Desember 2021): 104–28, <https://doi.org/10.21154/Syakhsyiyah.V3i2.3454>.

<sup>28</sup> Deandra Syarizka, Kinanthi Nareswari, Dan Irwansyah Irwansyah, "Citra Diri Individu Dan Negosiasi Muka Warga Dengan Budaya Kolektivisme Di Negara Berbudaya Individualisme," *Interaksi: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 10, No. 1 (3 Juni 2021): 44–54, <https://doi.org/10.14710/Interaksi.10.1.44-54>.

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the "face" of others.<sup>29</sup> Informant MS chose the strategy of being passive with the environment because the face is an important image in life. Face is also used as a metaphor for self-image which is believed to cover all aspects of social life. Therefore, MS informants choose to protect their identity so as not to get oppression from people around them.

Furthermore, Informant SY showed the passive strategy to survive with childfree choices, as SY and her husband did not prioritize having children because they are facing difficulties in their life and they did not think about having children at all because of their difficult circumstances, SY admitted that they can't meet their daily necessities including foods, so they did not prioritize having children. They also mentioned that if their economic conditions slowly improved, instead of having children, they will focus on improving their quality of life.

Based on the three Informants' statements above on the pronatalist context in Indonesia, corroborates previous research that points to the widespread stigma and disapproving experiences of childfree women in pronatalist settings.<sup>30</sup> While previous research has shown the negative responses that childfree women face from friends, family, and acquaintances related to

their decision to go childfree, there is only few researches discussing at how women negotiate the childfree choice in the context of pronatalism in their everyday lives.<sup>31</sup> Our findings suggest that childfree women in the pronatalist context that exists in Indonesia adopt various strategies to navigate socio-cultural norms that labelled them as 'deviant', unnatural or strange.

Interviews with informants gave a variety of reasons for their childfree choice and it also found that the childfree choice was influenced by negative past experiences with motherhood in their families. Furthermore, the perception of motherhood as a distraction to professional goals and a better life was cited by some women as a reason for deciding not to have children. Practical issues such as the financial situation and the lack of a suitable parenting partner also proved to be factors that influenced the decision to have children. The researchers also found that in everyday life and social encounters, women used a variety of strategies to negotiate and defend their childfree choice in the context of pronatalism in Indonesia, including playing along, being passive, and colluding with pronatalistic norms and expectations.

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<sup>29</sup> Tianyu Gu Dkk., "Comparisons Of The Different Views Of Face Negotiation Theory:" (2021 3rd International Conference On Economic Management And Cultural Industry (Icemci 2021), Guangzhou, China, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211209.421>.

<sup>30</sup> Kathleen Peters, Debra Jackson, Dan Trudy Rudge, "Surviving The Adversity Of Childlessness: Fostering

Resilience In Couples," *Contemporary Nurse* Vol 40, No. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5172/Conu.2011.40.1.130>.

<sup>31</sup> Maura Kelly, "Women's Voluntary Childlessness: A Radical Rejection Of Motherhood?," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, No. 3/4 (2009): 157–72.

## Conclusion

Maternal duties or activities as the reason for making a childfree choice speaks to their decisions with regard to their childfree choice in a predominantly pronatalist society. The association of women's rights with the maternal duties that these women addressed by justifying their childfree choices claimed that they had performed maternal duties, even though the maternal duties they performed were not for their own biological children. The women also perceived motherhood and childcare as a negative thing consists of hard work and responsibility or burden, also filled with tedious and troublesome tasks.

In this study, informants applied different strategies in negotiating their childfree identity to the context of pronatalist expectations, especially in Indonesia, which is still thick with religion and culture. Individuals who choose not to become parents are seen with negative stereotypes and experienced social pressure to change or justify their status. The interviews with informants provided a variety of reasons for their childfree choice and found that the choice was influenced by various past negative experiences with performing maternal duties within their extended families.

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