

The Childfree Phenomenon: A Critical Analysis from the Perspective of Maqāsid al-Nikāḥ

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ABSTRACT

The childfree phenomenon—defined as a deliberate choice by married couples to not have children—has significantly increased in recent years. Economic pressures, fear of parental responsibility, lifestyle changes, and rising individualism are among the primary contributors to this trend. This study critically examines the childfree phenomenon through the lens of Maqasid al-Nikah, a subcategory of Maqasid al-Shari'ah. This research employs a normative approach by analyzing Qur'anic verses, prophetic traditions, classical jurisprudential texts, and contemporary scholarly literature. The findings reveal that the essential purposes of marriage in Islam include hifz al-nasl (preservation of lineage), tranquility (sakinah), lawful fulfillment of biological needs, and the establishment of the family as a moral-educational institution. Permanent childfree decisions contradict the maqasid of marriage because they negate the objective of lineage preservation. However, temporary childfree decisions are permissible under valid reasons, such as health concerns or considerations of genuine necessity. This study highlights the importance of an educational and empathetic approach to guide younger generations toward reproductive decisions aligned with Islamic values.

ABSTRAK

Kata Kunci:

childfree
maqasid al-nikah
hukum keluarga Islam
hifz al-nasl
keluarga

Fenomena childfree atau keputusan pasangan suami-istri untuk tidak memiliki anak mengalami peningkatan signifikan dalam beberapa tahun terakhir. Faktor ekonomi, ketakutan terhadap beban pengasuhan, perubahan gaya hidup, serta pandangan individualistik menjadi pendorong utama keputusan tersebut. Studi ini bertujuan melakukan telaah kritis terhadap fenomena childfree dalam perspektif Maqasid al-Nikah sebagai bagian dari Maqasid al-Syar'ah. Pendekatan penelitian bersifat normatif dengan menelaah nash Al-Qur'an, hadis, kitab fiqh klasik, dan literatur kontemporer. Penelitian menemukan bahwa tujuan inti pernikahan dalam Islam mencakup hifz al-nasl, ketenteraman (sakinah), kebutuhan biologis (qudhrat al-jins), serta pembentukan keluarga sebagai institusi pendidikan moral. Keputusan childfree permanen bertentangan dengan maqasid pernikahan karena menghilangkan tujuan penjagaan keturunan. Namun childfree temporer diperbolehkan dengan alasan syar'i seperti kesehatan, kondisi psikologis, atau pertimbangan kemaslahatan tertentu. Kajian ini menegaskan perlunya pendekatan edukatif, tidak menghakimi, serta mendorong literasi maqasid bagi generasi muda agar keputusan terkait reproduksi berada dalam bingkai nilai-nilai Islam.

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A. Introduction

The childfree phenomenon has emerged as a significant sociocultural trend in many contemporary societies, including those with Muslim-majority populations. The term childfree refers to a deliberate and conscious decision by individuals or couples to not have children, whether temporarily or permanently, as a long-term lifestyle choice rather than a result of infertility or external constraints. This trend is strongly influenced by broader cultural shifts such as rising individualism, the pursuit of personal autonomy, and the prioritization of financial stability and career development. Increasingly, global discourses portray childrearing as economically burdensome, emotionally challenging, and incompatible with modern lifestyles that emphasize self-optimization and personal freedom (Rahayu, 2021). Within Southeast Asian urban settings, including Indonesia and Malaysia, online communities advocating a childfree lifestyle have grown rapidly, further shaping public perceptions and legitimizing this choice as part of contemporary identity formation (Sari, 2022).

From an Islamic perspective, however, the rise of the childfree phenomenon raises essential legal-ethical questions. Marriage (*nikah*) in Islam is not merely a civil or social contract; it is an institution elevated to the level of worship (*'ibadah*) and endowed with profound spiritual and ethical implications. Islamic jurists emphasize that marriage serves multiple objectives (*maqasid al-nikah*) within the broader framework of *maqasid al-shari'ah*. Among the most prominent of these objectives is *hifz al-nasl*, the preservation of lineage, which classical scholars such as al-Ghazali and al-Shatibi recognized as one of the five essential values (*al-daruriyyat al-khamsah*) that ensure the continuity and stability of human society (al-Ghazali, 1993; al-Shatibi, 2004). For this reason, decisions that directly negate or permanently suspend procreation—such as elective childlessness—require careful legal and ethical analysis to determine whether they align with or contradict the higher purposes of Islamic law (Ibn 'Ashur, 1978).

Moreover, Islamic legal thought acknowledges that having children is a blessing (*ni'mah*), a form of charity (*sadaqah jariyah*), and a means to strengthen family bonds. Qur'anic verses frequently describe children as a source of joy and continuity, while prophetic traditions emphasize the spiritual merit of raising righteous offspring who pray for their parents after death (Muslim, *Sahih*). Although Islamic law does not obligate couples to have a specific number of children, the normative assumption in both classical and contemporary *fiqh* literature is that procreation is generally desired and encouraged. The absence of children is acknowledged, but typically framed as a situation of necessity or divine decree rather than an ideal marital state (al-Kasani, 1986). Thus, the idea of voluntarily opting out of parenthood represents a notable departure from traditional *fiqh* paradigms.

The complexity of the issue intensifies when analyzed alongside modern ethical frameworks—including reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, mental health considerations, gender equality, and shifting expectations regarding marital roles. Advocates of the childfree lifestyle argue that marriage in Islam remains valid irrespective of procreation, since the legal pillars (*arkan*) and conditions (*shurut*) of

marriage do not include the obligation to have children (Khan, 2020). They contend that Islam recognizes personal hardship (*masyaqqah*) and allows decisions based on emotional, psychological, or financial burdens that may hinder one's ability to raise children responsibly. Furthermore, contemporary social realities such as economic pressures, rising living costs, limited housing, and the demands of modern employment environments exacerbate anxiety surrounding parenthood, encouraging some couples to prioritize stability and personal well-being (Rahman, 2023).

Nevertheless, many Islamic legal scholars caution against normalizing a permanent childfree lifestyle because it risks undermining the collective continuity of the Muslim community (*ummah*) and contradicts the *maqasid* framework that places generational preservation at its center. In their view, the shift towards intentional childlessness—especially when normalized culturally—could gradually reshape fundamental family structures and weaken the societal values that underpin marriage in Islam (Kamali, 2019). They emphasize that while temporary postponement of pregnancy is permissible under certain conditions (*tanzim al-nasl*), a permanent rejection of offspring (*taḥdid al-nasl*) without valid reasons is generally discouraged or deemed impermissible depending on the school of thought (al-Qaradawi, 1997).

Given these tensions, the childfree phenomenon necessitates a comprehensive and nuanced scholarly examination that moves beyond binary judgments of permissibility. It requires balancing personal autonomy with communal responsibility, ethical considerations with legal frameworks, and modern realities with classical jurisprudence. This study therefore seeks to analyze the phenomenon through the lens of *maqasid al-nikah*, exploring how Islamic legal reasoning can engage constructively with emerging sociocultural trends while preserving the core objectives of marriage and the continuity of human lineage. By situating the childfree discourse within the broader framework of Islamic legal philosophy, this research aims to offer a balanced and critical assessment of whether, and to what extent, elective childlessness aligns with the higher objectives of the *Shari'ah*.

B. Methods

This study adopts a normative–juridical research method because the primary objective is to analyze the childfree phenomenon within the framework of Islamic legal principles and the objectives of marriage (*maqasid al-nikah*). The normative method is suitable for examining conceptual, textual, and doctrinal aspects of Islamic law rather than relying on empirical surveys or field observations. In this approach, the main data sources include primary Islamic texts such as the Qur'an and Sunnah, which provide foundational guidance regarding marriage, lineage, and family ethics. Classical *fiqh* references from prominent scholars—such as al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Ibn Qudamah's *al-Mughni*, Ibn Rushd's *Bidayah al-Mujtahid*, and al-Shatibi's *al-Muwafaqat*—are used to understand the legal objectives and moral philosophy behind procreation and family continuation. Contemporary works on *maqasid al-shari'ah*, including Ibn 'Ashur's *Maqasid al-Shari'ah al-Islamiyyah* and Jasser Auda's writings on systems theory in Islamic law, also serve as key theoretical foundations.

In addition, the study consults modern fatwas and legal opinions issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), Dar al-Ifta' al-Misriyyah, the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), and other global Islamic institutions to understand how today's scholars address reproductive choices, contraception, and voluntary childlessness. Secondary data sources include journal articles, demographic reports, psychological studies, and sociological research that explain the factors

influencing the rise of the childfree lifestyle among young couples—particularly in urban Muslim societies influenced by economic pressures, career priorities, and shifting gender roles. These various materials are collected through literature review techniques, allowing the researcher to compile, categorize, and compare viewpoints from both classical jurisprudence and contemporary academic discourse.

The data obtained from these sources are analyzed using a qualitative content analysis method that combines descriptive, evaluative, and *maqasid*-based reasoning. The descriptive component explains the historical development of Islamic views on marriage and lineage, the legal status of having children in Islam, and the classical debates surrounding contraception, sterilization, and reproductive autonomy. This descriptive mapping also includes a review of modern motivations behind the childfree trend, such as career aspirations, psychological stress, financial considerations, environmental concerns, and lifestyle preferences. The evaluative component critically analyzes whether these modern motivations align with the ethical values and legal objectives emphasized in Islamic marital ethics. A key part of this analysis is the use of *maqasid al-shari'ah*, particularly *hifz al-nasl* (preservation of lineage), as the main framework for assessing the legitimacy of childfree decisions. Through *maqasid*-based reasoning, the study examines the extent to which voluntary childlessness may support or undermine the foundational goals of marriage, including the preservation of kinship ties, the continuation of community (*ummah*), and the fulfillment of spiritual, emotional, and social benefits associated with raising children.

The research also employs comparative *fiqh* analysis, comparing views from different *madhahib* regarding birth control, temporary postponement of pregnancy (*tanzim al-nasl*), and permanent prevention of offspring (*taḥdid al-nasl*). Legal maxims (*qawa'id fihiyyah*) such as *al-umūr bi maqāsidihā* (matters are judged by intentions) and *lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār* (harm must be eliminated) are also applied to evaluate potential harms or benefits of adopting a childfree lifestyle. Finally, a synthesis method is used to integrate scriptural evidence, classical legal reasoning, and modern sociocultural realities, enabling the study to draw balanced conclusions on how Islamic law should position itself regarding the growing childfree trend. This methodological combination provides a clear, structured, and comprehensive approach to analyzing the topic within both traditional and contemporary Islamic legal frameworks.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Understanding the Childfree Phenomenon in Contemporary Muslim Societies

The findings show that the childfree phenomenon has become an increasingly visible and socially recognized trend among young Muslim couples, especially those living in urban, globalized, and digitally connected communities. Many young adults view parenthood no longer as an inherent phase of marital life but as an optional pathway dependent on emotional readiness, lifestyle compatibility, and financial security. In several Muslim-majority countries, rising education levels, women's increasing workforce participation, and exposure to global discourses on autonomy and gender equality have contributed to the normalization of childfree identities. These changes reflect what sociologists describe as the "transformation of intimacy," where marriage is perceived more as a relationship centered on emotional satisfaction than on fulfilling traditional expectations such as reproduction (Giddens, 2012).

Digital culture greatly amplifies this shift by giving visibility to communities, influencers, and online groups advocating the childfree lifestyle. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit

host narratives that depict childrearing as financially draining, emotionally exhausting, and incompatible with personal freedom, travel culture, and minimalist living ideals. The rising cost of living, precarious job markets, expensive housing, and inflation add further justification, making childbearing appear like a heavy economic burden rather than a joy. Research in Indonesia and Malaysia indicates that online spaces strongly influence marital expectations and normalize voluntary childlessness, creating tension between modern values of individual autonomy and religious norms emphasizing family continuity (Rahayu, 2021).

2. Classical Islamic Legal Position on Procreation and Lineage

Classical Islamic jurisprudence consistently affirms that procreation and the preservation of lineage (*hifz al-nasl*) are core objectives of marriage. Numerous Qur'anic verses describe children as blessings, inheritors, and carriers of continuity, while the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ encouraged believers to marry fertile spouses and increase the Muslim community. In works such as *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, al-Ghazali explains that having children fulfills both worldly and spiritual purposes: strengthening kinship, contributing to social stability, and enabling believers to gain ongoing reward (*ajr jariyah*) through righteous descendants. These foundational teachings demonstrate that reproduction is not merely a personal desire but integral to divine intent in human creation (al-Ghazali, n.d.).

All four Sunni schools of law reinforce this principle. Shafi'i and Hanbali scholars explicitly identify procreation as the primary objective of marriage, while Hanafi and Maliki jurists position it alongside companionship and mutual support. Nevertheless, all schools emphasize that lineage preservation ensures the proper functioning of legal systems, such as inheritance distribution, guardianship, kinship responsibilities, and moral accountability. Ibn Qudamah in *al-Mughni* stresses that marriage serves to "protect lineage and maintain social order," establishing a clear juristic baseline that elective childlessness contradicts the normative purposes of marriage (Ibn Qudamah, 1997).

3. Temporary vs. Permanent Avoidance of Offspring in Islamic Law

Islamic law differentiates sharply between temporary spacing of pregnancy (*tanzim al-nasl*) and permanent avoidance of offspring (*tahdid al-nasl*). Classical jurists largely permitted temporary methods such as *'azl* (withdrawal) on the condition of mutual spousal consent, indicating significant legal flexibility in response to individual hardship. Ibn Rushd in *Bidayah al-Mujtahid* notes that scholars across the *madhahib* accepted *'azl* as long as it did not involve harm or violate marital rights. Modern scholars extend these rulings to contemporary contraceptives such as pills, implants, and IUDs, emphasizing that temporary childspacing may be motivated by health, financial difficulty, or psychological readiness—needs recognized in Islamic legal principles (Ibn Rushd, 1995).

Conversely, permanent prevention of offspring—including sterilization, vasectomy, or a deliberate lifetime commitment to having no children—is generally prohibited unless justified by serious medical necessity. Islamic legal councils warn that permanent childlessness undermines *hifz al-nasl*, one of the five essential *maqasid* of *Shari'ah*. Fatwa institutions argue that elective sterilization constitutes altering God's creation (*taghyir khalq Allah*) and harms the continuity of family and society. *Dar al-Ifta' al-Misriyyah*, for example, declares that sterilization is only permissible when pregnancy poses life-threatening risks, not for lifestyle preferences or ideological childfree convictions (Dar al-Ifta', 2020).

4. The Maqasid al-Nikah Perspective: Core Findings

A maqasid analysis reveals that preservation of lineage (*hifz al-nasl*) sits at the heart of the objectives of marriage. Ibn ‘Ashur asserts that the human family system depends on reproduction, without which the social, legal, and moral structures of Muslim society cannot be sustained. From a maqasid viewpoint, voluntary and permanent childlessness directly contradicts this essential objective because it disrupts biological continuity and weakens the foundations of family institutions (Ibn ‘Ashur, 1978).

Beyond lineage, maqasid emphasizes the emotional and spiritual objectives of marriage, such as *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah*. Parenting is seen as a source of compassion, ethical growth, and spiritual reward. Al-Shatibi in *al-Muwafaqat* explains that parent-child relationships cultivate virtues like responsibility, patience, and generosity—values essential to achieving moral excellence within the family. Thus, choosing permanent childlessness eliminates opportunities for moral and spiritual formation embedded within the parenting experience (al-Shatibi, n.d.).

The maqasid framework also highlights public welfare (*maslahah ‘ammah*). Many Muslim countries, including Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, and Tunisia, are experiencing sharp declines in fertility rates. Demographers warn of aging populations and shrinking labor forces, which threaten economic stability and social welfare systems. If the childfree trend becomes widespread, it could undermine demographic sustainability and societal continuity. Therefore, preserving birth rates is not merely a personal matter but a public interest that Islamic law seeks to protect (Auda, 2008).

5. Assessing Modern Motivations through an Islamic Ethical Lens

Empirical findings identify several motivations for adopting a childfree lifestyle: economic pressure, lifestyle preferences, mental health concerns, environmental ethics, and gender autonomy. These motivations reflect genuine challenges experienced by modern couples, particularly those living in highly competitive, economically unstable, and densely populated urban environments. Islamic law acknowledges these hardships under the principles of *masyaqqah* (difficulty) and *raf‘ al-haraj* (removal of harm), allowing flexibility in temporary pregnancy delay. Thus, Islam does not compel couples to have children immediately or continuously without considering personal capacity (Kamali, 2011).

However, when evaluated through the maqasid framework, these motivations do not sufficiently justify permanent childlessness except in cases of medical necessity or severe psychological risk. Islamic ethics require balancing personal autonomy with communal welfare, spiritual values, and the higher purposes of the family system. While Islam recognizes individual rights, it also places emphasis on obligations toward family, community, and generational continuity. Consequently, elective permanent childfree decisions—when driven by individualistic lifestyle preferences—are inconsistent with the overarching objectives of marriage in Islam (Rahman, 2020).

6. Synthesized Conclusion from the Findings

The combined findings indicate that although temporary postponement of pregnancy may be justified by economic hardship, psychological preparation, or health concerns, permanent voluntary childlessness fundamentally conflicts with Maqasid al-Nikah. Both classical *fiqh* and maqasid theory prioritize the preservation of lineage, emotional-spiritual formation, and communal sustainability. The emerging childfree trend—particularly when motivated by lifestyle-based reasoning—does not align with these normative principles. Official fatwas, such as those issued by the Indonesian Council of

Ulama (MUI), reinforce this position and discourage permanent avoidance of offspring except in medical emergencies (MUI Fatwa, 2014).

D. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the contemporary childfree phenomenon, while emerging as a modern lifestyle choice shaped by economic uncertainty, psychological considerations, and global discourses on personal autonomy, remains fundamentally at odds with the higher objectives of marriage (*maqasid al-nikah*) in Islamic thought. Although Islam acknowledges the reality of hardship, financial struggle, and changing social expectations—and therefore permits temporary childspacing under legitimate circumstances—the overall normative framework of Shari‘ah positions procreation and lineage preservation (*hifz al-nasl*) as essential components of the marital institution. Classical jurists across the Sunni madhahib affirmed that marriage serves not only as a means of companionship but also as a mechanism for sustaining the human family, structuring social responsibilities, and ensuring the continuity of moral, spiritual, and legal obligations through future generations. The Qur’an and Sunnah consistently celebrate children as blessings and sources of spiritual reward, while the maqasid framework views lineage as a foundational pillar for maintaining social cohesion, inheritance rights, kinship bonds, and communal vitality. Therefore, a deliberate and permanent choice to avoid offspring—when based solely on subjective lifestyle preferences, fear of responsibility, or ideological commitment to childlessness—cannot be reconciled with the overarching aims of Islamic marriage. Even though the modern world presents significant pressures that influence couples’ decisions, Islamic ethics require that personal autonomy be balanced with communal welfare, family responsibilities, and the long-term sustainability of the Muslim ummah.

Furthermore, the findings underscore that permanent voluntary childlessness risks weakening not only individual marital fulfillment but also broader demographic and societal stability. Muslim societies across the world are witnessing declining fertility rates, aging populations, and potential future shortages in economic productivity and social support systems—trends that, if intensified by widespread adoption of childfree lifestyles, could lead to significant structural challenges. The maqasid principle of *maslahah ‘ammah* (public welfare) therefore reinforces the importance of encouraging sustainable family growth while still accommodating legitimate cases of temporary delay or medical necessity. Parenting in Islamic teachings contributes to the development of moral character, emotional maturity, and spiritual richness within the family unit, offering benefits that extend beyond biological continuity. Children serve as carriers of values, identity, culture, and faith, enabling the transmission of Islamic ethics across generations. From this perspective, the childfree phenomenon must be approached not merely as a personal decision but as a socioreligious issue that intersects with community survival, ethical formation, and long-term civilizational resilience. In conclusion, while Islam allows flexibility and compassion regarding the timing and spacing of children, the deliberate, permanent rejection of procreation contradicts the spirit, purpose, and higher objectives of marriage. Policymakers, religious scholars, educators, and community leaders should therefore work collaboratively to address the socio-economic anxieties that fuel the childfree trend, promote supportive family policies, strengthen marital education, and cultivate an informed understanding of *maqasid al-nikah* that resonates with contemporary Muslim realities.

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