

The Pros and Cons of the Childfree Lifestyle and Reflections on the Interpretation of the Qur'an, *Surah al-Kahf* [18]: 46

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Abstract:

The childfree phenomenon gained prominence in Indonesia in 2020 after an influencer publicly declared the choice not to have children. Although this practice had already been recognized in other countries, particularly in the United States since 2018, the statement sparked strong debates ranging from support to opposition. Using a qualitative approach, this article explores why the childfree decision provoked such significant reactions. Findings indicate that the Qur'an does not explicitly prohibit the childfree choice, yet several verses are often cited as arguments by both sides. Supporters highlight Surah al-Taḥrīm [66]:6, qū anfusakum (“protect yourselves”), as a reminder that children are a heavy trust requiring serious responsibility. Surah al-Syūrā [42]:50, with the term ‘aqīman (“barren”), underscores Allah’s absolute authority in granting or withholding offspring, showing that a state of childlessness can occur by divine will. Opponents, however, refer to Surah al-Naḥl [16]:72, which describes humans created in pairs to produce descendants, and Surah al-Isrā’ [17]:31, which forbids killing children out of fear of poverty. Yet these verses do not explicitly forbid choosing to remain childfree. Surah al-Kahf [18]:46 portrays children as zīnatul-ḥayāh (adornments of worldly life), but emphasizes that enduring righteous deeds (al-bāqiyātus-ṣāliḥāt) hold greater value. Thus, while children are seen as worldly adornments and generational continuity, the decision to be childfree motivated by awareness of responsibility rather than rejection of procreation cannot be classified as haram (forbidden).

Keywords:

Pros and Cons, Childfree, Reflection.



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INTRODUCTION

Surah al-Rum [30]: 21 explains that the primary purpose of marriage is to attain tranquility, love, and mercy. Meanwhile, in Surah al-Naḥl [16]: 72, Allah affirms that He has created spouses from among their own kind. With these partners, humans can have offspring to preserve and develop their species in order to fulfill their duty as vicegerents on Earth (QS. al-Baqarah [1]: 30). Surah Āli ‘Imrān [3]: 14 illustrates that humans have a natural inclination to love various pleasures; one manifestation of these worldly pleasures is children, who are, in fact, their offspring.

To ensure the continuation of the human race, God created all creatures in pairs, including humans. Couples were created because every individual naturally yearns to fulfill their sexual needs. Although a person may feel satisfied when fulfilling their sexual desires alone, that feeling does not last long. Intimate and deep relationships with others enhance cellular resilience, enabling individuals to cope with life’s difficulties more effectively. This is the rationale behind human marriage, the formation of families, the building of communities, and the development of a nation

(Shihab, 2002).

The verses cited above serve as evidence that the Qur'an encourages procreation within the context of marriage, which is viewed not only as a reproductive process but also as a moral responsibility and an emotional bond. The values that have become deeply rooted in society will serve as a strong bulwark to prevent the negative impacts of modernity from taking hold and spreading. The "childfree" lifestyle runs counter to the societal construct that views children as part of the purpose of marriage; therefore, when a married couple decides to remain childfree even though they are capable of having children, they will face mixed reactions from society both in support and in opposition.

In Indonesia, this issue has gained popularity after several public figures voiced their choice on social media, sparking a range of responses from support to rejection (Saraswati, 2021). Nevertheless, "childfree" is not a new term; this principle has long been embraced by couples from all over the world, particularly in the United States (Healey, 2018). This phenomenon is widely embraced by millennials and Gen Z in Indonesia, who view having children not as an obligation but as a lifestyle choice (Rismarini & Adira, 2024). In fact, the majority of scholars from the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence agree that having children is a strongly recommended sunnah, not an obligation (Al-Zuhaili, 2011).

This article will examine several arguments used as the basis for the childfree movement and reflect on the interpretation of QS. al-Kahf [18]: 46 in relation to both pro and con viewpoints.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding the "childfree" phenomenon and its implications for Islamic principles. Data were collected from various literary sources, including books, scholarly journals, and articles from relevant websites. The data collection process was conducted systematically with an emphasis on the validity and reliability of the sources, ensuring that the information obtained represents a diversity of academic and religious perspectives. This study uses Qur'anic exegetical texts as its primary reference, which are then integrated with contemporary literature to construct a comprehensive analytical framework. Thus, this research is not only descriptive but also reflective of the social and religious dynamics underlying the choice to be childfree.

The analysis phase was conducted through a process of in-depth reading, comprehension, and interpretation of exegetical texts, journals, and relevant online references. The study focused on the interpretation of QS. al-Kahf [18]:46 as a point of reflection on a number of verses cited as evidence by both supporters and opponents of the childfree lifestyle. This analysis employs interpretive techniques that emphasize the historical, linguistic, and social contexts of the Qur'anic verses, thereby revealing broader meanings regarding procreation, moral responsibility, and family values in Islam. Through this approach, the study seeks to present a balanced perspective between normative texts and social realities, as well as to make an academic contribution to understanding how the issue of the "childfree" lifestyle is positioned within contemporary Islamic discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study reveal the childfree phenomenon as a multidimensional issue that intersects with cultural norms, religious interpretations, and modern lifestyle choices. Rather than being understood merely as a deviation from traditional family structures, childfree emerges as a conscious decision shaped by personal autonomy, economic considerations, and shifting generational values. This interpretive stage is essential to contextualize the phenomenon within broader discourses, allowing us to see how individual choices interact with societal expectations and religious frameworks. To provide clarity and coherence, the findings are organized into thematic categories that highlight definitions, marital perspectives, social debates, cultural norms, reproductive freedom, driving factors, global popularity, and generational trends. The following table synthesizes these dimensions, offering a structured overview that serves as the foundation for deeper analysis and interpretation in subsequent sections.

Tabel 1. Research Findings on the Childfree Phenomenon

Key Aspect	Detailed Findings
Definition & Concept	<i>Childfree</i> is a deliberate choice made by individuals or couples who decide not to have children. It is often associated with personal freedom, autonomy, career focus, and self-development.
Marital Perspective	It represents a principle agreed upon by husband and wife to remain without children, which makes one of the traditional purposes of marriage appear less relevant.
Social Debate	The decision to be <i>childfree</i> triggers both support and opposition, as it is perceived to conflict with prevailing social norms.
Cultural Norms in Indonesia	In Indonesian society, adults are expected to marry, and marriage is culturally tied to the goal of having children. Couples who choose otherwise are often seen as deviating from tradition.
Reproductive Freedom	The choice is increasingly understood as a form of reproductive freedom rather than a deviation from traditional family norms.
Driving Factors	Research highlights that <i>childfree</i> decisions reflect lifestyle changes, economic burdens, psychological resilience, and shifting priorities in modern society.
Global Popularity	The <i>childfree</i> concept is not new; it has long been practiced worldwide, particularly in the United States.
Generational Trends	Millennials and Gen Z in Indonesia increasingly embrace <i>childfree</i> , viewing children not as an obligation but as a matter of personal choice.

In conclusion, the interpretation of these findings underscores that the childfree phenomenon represents a dynamic intersection between personal autonomy and collective cultural expectations. It reflects a shift in societal values from traditional norms that equate marriage with procreation toward modern perspectives emphasizing individual choice and reproductive freedom. The cycle of findings demonstrates how this movement evolves through interconnected dimensions: definition, marital context, social debate, cultural norms, generational trends, global influence, driving factors, and moral considerations. Together, these elements reveal that childfree is not merely a rejection of parenthood but a conscious negotiation of identity, responsibility, and modernity within both religious and social frameworks.

Discussion

Some Arguments in Favor of the Childfree Lifestyle. There is no specific text that explicitly addresses the childfree lifestyle. However, some verses are believed to contain references to the childfree lifestyle, which serve as arguments for its supporters. The cycle can be illustrated as shown in the following figure:

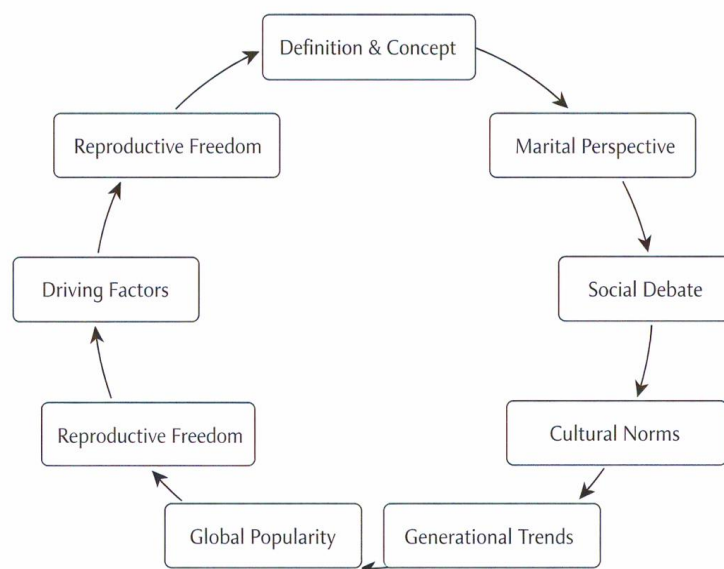


Figure 1. childfree findings cycle

Based on Figure 1 regarding the “childfree findings cycle,” the findings described above can be interpreted as follows. The following is an explanation from the perspective of the Qur'an:

1. QS. al-Taḥrīm [66]: 6

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا قُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ عَلَيْهَا مَلَائِكَةٌ غِلَظٌ شِدَادٌ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ

In interpreting this verse, Sayyid Quṭb states: Indeed, the burden of responsibility that a believer bears for himself and his family is a very heavy and terrifying one. For Hell awaits him there, and he and his family are threatened by it. It is therefore his duty to protect himself and his family from Hell, which is always lurking and awaiting them (Quṭb, 2004). A child is both a part of the family structure and a trust that must be safeguarded with full responsibility by his or her parents; otherwise, the threat is Hell. The word *انفسكم* in the verse above refers to every individual believer, including believers who are parents. Being a parent is a huge responsibility because parents play a vital role in the well-being of each of their children including their moral, physical, and intellectual development.

Furthermore, parents also have the duty to care for, guide, and educate their children (Islahuddin et al., 2021). Given the immense duties and responsibilities placed on parents, many people worry that in the future they will be unable to be good parents to their children. This is what

leads many people to choose a childfree lifestyle as a solution to the various problems and concerns they face in their lives (Fitria et al., 2023).

2. QS. al-Syūrā [42]: 49-50

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمُوتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ يَهْبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ إِنَّا وَيَهْبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ الذُّكُورَ ۚ أَوْ يُزَوِّجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَإِنَّا وَبِجَعْلٍ مَنْ يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ

Allah declares that He is the Creator, Owner, and Ruler of the heavens and the earth and all that they contain. Whatever He wills will surely come to pass, and whatever He does not will certainly not come to pass (Alū Syaikh, 2008). This verse discusses sustenance in the form of offspring. Offspring are a form of provision from Allah, just as wealth is (Qutb, 2004).

Furthermore, Allah has divided humanity into four categories: some are given only daughters, some are given only sons, some are given both, and some are given neither being rendered barren, having no descendants or children (Kaṣīr, 2008). From this interpretation, it can be understood that عقيماً, meaning “barren,” is a decree of Allah equivalent to “being granted children” regardless of their gender. All fall under the category of sustenance granted by Allah to His servants. In this state of biological infertility, one is assured of being free from sin and error for being childfree, even though it is not definitively the same as the contemporary concept of “childfree.”

3. HR. Abū Dāwud: 1856

A hadith that is also cited as an argument for the childfree lifestyle is the narration of Abū Dāwud. In a pro-choice context where women have full autonomy over their own bodies, the decision to be childfree is a woman's reproductive right that must be respected. A person may choose not to have children, as long as that choice is the result of an agreement with their partner. Islam does not oppose this choice, based on the hadith narrated by Abu Sa'īd al-Khuẓrī, which explains the permissibility of practicing 'azl. (Aulia et al. 2022). The text of the hadith is as follows:

حَدَّثَنَا مُوسَى بْنُ إِسْمَاعِيلَ حَدَّثَنَا أَبَانُ حَدَّثَنَا يَحْيَى أَنَّ مُحَمَّدَ بْنَ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ بْنِ ثَوْبَانَ حَدَّثَهُ أَنَّ رِفَاعَةَ حَدَّثَهُ عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ الْخُدْرِيِّ أَنَّ رَجُلًا قَالَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ إِنَّ لِي جَارِيَةً وَأَنَا أَغْزَلُ عَنْهَا وَأَنَا أَكْرَهُ أَنْ تَحْمِلَ وَأَنَا أُرِيدُ مَا يُرِيدُ الرِّجَالُ وَإِنَّ الْيَهُودَ تُحَدِّثُ أَنَّ الْعَزْلَ مُؤْوَذَةُ الصُّغْرَى قَالَ كَذَبَتْ يَهُودُ لَوْ أَرَادَ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَخْلُقَهُ مَا اسْتَطَاعَتْ أَنْ تَصْرِفَهُ

According to Imam al-Ghazali, 'azl or ejaculating outside the vagina is permissible and not makruh (neither makruh tahrim nor makruh tanzih). According to al-Ghazali, the establishment of a prohibition must be based on a text (naṣ) or analogy (qiyās), while there is no text or analogy that deems 'azl makruh; rather, the basis for analogy that permits it is: not marrying at all, not having sexual intercourse after marriage, or not inzāl ejaculating after inserting the penis into the vagina. These are acts of forgoing a virtue, not acts of committing a prohibition.

These activities are equivalent (in the process of a child's conception). This is because a child has the potential to come into existence once sperm is present in the woman's womb (Al-Ghazali, 1982). If Al-Gazālī's opinion is applied to the “childfree” lifestyle with the intention of preventing

the conception of a child before it is potentially possible, that is, before sperm is present in the woman's womb then the default ruling regarding the "childfree" lifestyle is that it is permissible (Muntaha AM, 2023).

The childfree response is not based solely on religious values but is also linked to a human rights perspective. From a human rights perspective, being childfree is viewed as a personal right that is fully permissible, because every individual has reproductive freedom to have children without coercion from any party. The childfree choice can be seen as a form of individual control over one's own body, particularly for women who are willing to bear the biological, social, and economic consequences of the reproductive process (Ayu et al., 2024).

The decision not to have children is an expression of the right to privacy and bodily integrity; therefore, coercion, social pressure, or government policies that interfere with reproductive choices can be considered contrary to human rights principles (Nasution & Saputra, 2024). Pro-choice also refers to an individual's right to choose whether or not to have children. It is a movement that advocates for individuals' freedom to make their own decisions regarding their reproductive health and family planning (Hintz & Brown, 2020).

Some Arguments Against the Childfree Lifestyle

1. QS. al-Nahl [16]: 72

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ بَنِينَ وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِّنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ ۚ أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ وَبِنِعْمَتِ اللَّهِ هُمْ يَكْفُرُونَ

Allah describes the various blessings He has bestowed upon His servants by creating spouses from among their own kind. If Allah had created spouses from a different kind, there would certainly be no harmony, love, or affection. By His mercy and compassion, He created humankind as pairs of men and women. And from their marriages, Allah bestows children and grandchildren (Alū Syaikh, 2008). The emphasis on the self, one's spouse, children, and grandchildren in this verse evokes a profound sense of sensitivity. In this verse, Allah links the gift of children and grandchildren with the gift of abundant provision all of which are blessings from Him (Qutb, 2004).

One group that strongly opposes the childfree lifestyle argues that this mindset goes against human nature, as humans were inherently created by God to have children. Thus, having children is viewed as one of the primary purposes of marriage (Mubarok & Nurkholis, 2025). Marriage and procreation are inherent aspects of human nature in this world. God has provided many opportunities for humanity to experience the blessings of worldly life through companionship with a spouse and the joy of raising children. Nevertheless, the majority of scholars across the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence agree that having children is a strongly recommended sunnah, not an obligation (Al-Zuhailī, 2011). Allah concludes this verse with a question: why do they show ingratitude for the blessings that have been bestowed upon them while believing in falsehood that leads them to be ungrateful for those blessings?

Having children or descendants is not a meaningless thing; rather, it brings many benefits to those who have them, including: 1) Receiving blessings in this world and the hereafter, 2) Serving as a continuous act of charity, 3) Increasing piety, 4) Receiving intercession, and 5) Attaining a high rank in Paradise (Hadi et al., 2022). From the blessings mentioned above, it can be concluded that having children is a gift because parents will eventually reap many blessings from having them (Fitria et al., 2023). That is why many married Indonesians who have not yet been able to have children are seeking various methods and solutions to conceive quickly. Moreover, in Islam, children are a blessing and a form of sustenance; preventing the birth of a child is tantamount to rejecting that sustenance itself (Tunggono, 2021).

2. QS. al-Isrā' [17]: 31

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةً إِمْلَاقٍ تَحْنُ نَرُزِقُهُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطًا كَبِيرًا

This verse strongly opposes the fear of being unable to provide for one's livelihood, for Allah guarantees sustenance for every creature on earth (Quran 11:6). Sayyid Qutb states that as long as sustenance is in Allah's hands, there is no connection between poverty and the number or type of children one has (Qutb, 2004). Allah loves His servants more than parents love their children; therefore, He forbids humans from killing their children. During the pre-Islamic era, there was a man among them who killed his daughter so that his burdens in life would not increase (Alū Syaikh, 2008).

The sustenance of parents and children is in Allah's hands; killing a child is a form of harboring ill thoughts toward Allah. This is especially true when the act is motivated by fear of disgrace or concern over the condition of daughters; killing them only serves to corrupt the world (Al-Zuhailī, 2005). In urban life in this era of rapid development, many children have become such a heavy burden that some poor people even sell their children. Meanwhile, many wealthy people undergo sterilization procedures to prevent pregnancy (Amrullah, 2007).

Reflections on the Interpretation of the Qur'an, *Surah al-Kahf* [18]: 46

الْمَالُ وَالْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَالْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمَلًا

In the book "Lubāb al-Tafsīr min Ibn Kašīr", this verse explains that turning to Allah and setting aside free time to worship Him is better than being preoccupied with wealth and children, seeking riches, and showing excessive affection for them. Ibn 'Abbās and several Salaf scholars interpreted *الْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ* as the five daily prayers, while 'Aṭā' bin Abī Rabāḥ interpreted it as *سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَلَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ*. 'Umr ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Uṣmān ibn 'Affān interpret as *سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَلَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ أَكْبَرُ*, 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib interpret as *سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ*, الحمد لله تبارك الله لا حول ولا قوة الا بالله استغفر الله, Fasting, prayer, the Hajj, charity, and all good deeds are among *الْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ* which will keep its perpetrators in paradise. (Alū Syaikh, 2008).

The Jalālaīn commentary states that wealth and children can serve as adornments in this worldly life. As for *الْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ* interpreted as *سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَلَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ أَكْبَرُ*. Something that is eagerly anticipated and longed for by humanity in the sight of Allah the Almighty (Al-Suyūṭī, 2012). This verse illustrates that children are a blessing, an adornment, and a source of comfort for the

heart. The decision to remain childfree is considered a rejection of one of the primary purposes of marriage, namely, to have offspring.

Wealth and children are transient and will be surpassed by righteous deeds, which are more enduring. Tafsīr fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān provides an extensive discussion regarding the meaning **الْبَيْتِ الْمَلِكِ**, indeed, wealth and children are adornments, but neither of them constitutes true value. Therefore, people should not be measured by them or judged on the basis of them. Indeed, true value lies only in that which is eternal and righteous whether in the form of deeds, words, or acts of worship. People's hopes usually depend heavily on wealth and children; therefore, deeds that are eternal and righteous yield greater rewards and are a better source of hope (Quṭb, 2004).

Type of Motive	Description
Childfree Motive (General)	Based on the book <i>No Kids: 40 Reasons for Not Having Children</i> by a French author and psychoanalyst, cited by Victoria Tunggono in <i>Childfree & Happy</i> , there are multiple reasons individuals consciously choose to live without children.
Personal Motive	Individuals may decide to be <i>childfree</i> to focus on self-development, maintain the quality of romantic relationships, or due to the absence of parental instincts (maternal/paternal).
Psychological & Medical Motive	Rooted in experiences with toxic parents or traumatic upbringing, leading to emotional harm. Others feel unprepared for the responsibilities of parenthood, or face medical issues such as health risks or genetic conditions that could endanger the mother or fetus.
Economic Motive	The high costs of basic needs, healthcare, and children's education make financial burden a significant factor influencing the choice to remain <i>childfree</i> .
Philosophical Motive	Grounded in human rights and individual freedom, this motive reflects the rejection of traditional social norms (pronatalism) and emphasizes autonomy in life choices.
Environmental Motive	Concerns about overpopulation and depletion of natural resources drive some individuals to choose <i>childfree</i> as a way to contribute to environmental sustainability.

The Issue of Overpopulation: There is a concern that the Earth is already too crowded and that natural resources are dwindling. In his explanation, Imam Al-Gazālī elaborates in detail on the intentions or motives behind a person's decision to avoid having children. These motives are summarized into four criteria (Al-Gazālī):

Type of Motive	Description
Financial Motive	Historically linked to slavery practices, where masters engaged in intercourse with female slaves using 'azl (coitus interruptus) to prevent pregnancy, thus retaining them as property. In modern contexts, financial motives include concerns that children may become burdens, require harder work or even lead to involvement in unlawful jobs.
Sexual & Safety Motive	Some couples choose <i>childfree</i> to preserve the wife's beauty and physical attractiveness, or to safeguard her health due to fears of complications or death during childbirth.
Misguided Belief Motive	Rooted in cultural prejudice, where individuals fear having daughters, considering them a disgrace similar to pre-Islamic Arab beliefs that even led to infanticide.
Female Hygiene Motive	Women may reject the presence of children due to strict concerns about personal cleanliness, discomfort with childbirth, postpartum recovery (<i>nifas</i>), and breastfeeding.

To conclude this discussion on the various motivations behind the “childfree” lifestyle, it can be affirmed that the decision not to have children is not a simple, singular phenomenon, but rather the result of a variety of interrelated factors ranging from personal, psychological, medical, financial, and philosophical motivations to environmental considerations. Each motive reflects the social, cultural, and belief dynamics that shape how individuals and couples view marriage, family, and reproductive responsibilities. Thus, “childfree” can be understood as a complex life choice, arising from the interplay between personal needs, socioeconomic conditions, and reflections on traditional and modern values, thereby requiring a balanced and critical interpretation in both academic and social contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that:

1. Being a parent is a huge responsibility, given the role parents play in their children’s well-being physically, morally, and intellectually. Allah warns us to protect ourselves and our families (our children) through obedience so that we may avoid the fires of Hell.
2. The concept of “childfree” can actually be understood from the meaning of “Aqīmā,” which refers to being biologically infertile; although it is not exactly the same as “childfree” by definition, their status in terms of not having children is the same. The difference lies in the reason: those who are “childfree” have the potential to have children but choose not to, whereas those who are biologically infertile lack that potential altogether.
3. The childfree choice is deemed permissible if it refers to rejecting the possibility of having a child before it has the potential to come into existence that is, before sperm enters a woman’s womb. This is analogized to the ruling on ‘azl. However, the ruling on the childfree choice may vary depending on the motive.

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