

Debating childfree: The contestation of “childfree” discourses in Instagram

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Abstract

Among Indonesian netizens, the debate around “childfree” issue has become a topic of discussion in the Instagram, especially since this issue was raised by influencer Gita Savitri. Instagram netizens’ opinions are divided; some support the childfree concept, but many disagree. The debate regarding childfree has even given rise to discourse polarization between narratives that are pro and anti toward childfree. This research attempts to capture and dismantle discourse contestations related to the issue of childfree on Instagram. This research was conducted with feminist critical discourse analysis method. In this research, it was found that there were three focuses of debate between the pro-childfree and anti-childfree narratives. First, the religious perspective in viewing childfree. Second, motivation to have children. Third, women’s agency in choosing not to have children. The contestation of this discourse is motivated by patriarchal and capitalist understandings which are deeply rooted and internalized in Indonesian society in general, making it difficult for them to accept views that are different from the general views which they believe to be true.

Introduction

The term “childfree” refers to a couple’s voluntary decision not to have children in their marriage (Harrington, 2019; Tunggono, 2021). This concept is considered different from “childless”, which refers to a condition where a married couple does not have children, but not because of a voluntary decision not to have children, such as biological factors. At this level, “childfree” is interpreted as a condition of ‘childlessness’ which is produced through conscious choices made by humans.

In a patriarchal and capitalist society like Indonesia, the presence of ‘children’ in the family is a necessity and taken-for-granted. People no longer question why they have to have children after marriage, because having children after marriage is considered a common understanding and normative standard that humans should do. However, despite contrary to popular belief, childless married couples are often found in everyday

life in Indonesia, either those who have decided not to have children, or who have not had children due to certain factors.

In 2021, Instagram influencer, Gita Savitri (@gitasav) openly stated through her Instagram account that she and her husband were a "childfree" couple. This statement shocked Indonesian netizens, especially because Gita was the first public figure to openly state that she did not want and would not have children. Since Gita's upload, "childfree" and the decision not to have children has become a topic of debate on social media channels, especially Instagram. 'Having children', which until now was considered a natural thing that was never questioned, is starting to be discussed as a choice that women may not have to make in their lives.

Even though the issue had faded, the issue of "childfree" was widely discussed again in early 2022 when Gitasav wrote in the comment column on her post that not having children was the reason why she remained young. Gitasav's statement sparked various responses from netizens. Not a few netizens are against Gitasav's statement, but there are also quite a few netizens who support it, and memes have even circulated with the headline "Gitasav was right". Interestingly, this discourse attracted the attention of several celebrity figures who also expressed their opinions about 'having children' through their social media accounts.

In this phenomenon too, several feminist activists also expressed their opinions, interestingly, not all of them sided with Gitasav. Some of them think that although the spirit conveyed by Gitasav is good, the way it conveys the message has obscured the main purpose of the message regarding "childfree". Therefore, with the various debates regarding the issue of "childfree" that occur in the social media space Instagram, this research attempts to: (1) capture the existing discourse contestation between the pro and contra-childfree narratives, and (2) analyze it by looking at the socio-cultural context of Indonesian society as to why the discourse contestation existed.

Research on the issue of childfree in Indonesia has emerged a lot since this topic became a debate in 2021. However, most research in regards to "childfree" still focusing on condemning the idea of "childfree" itself, without unveiling the core problem of why there are some Indonesian who consciously choose to be "childfree". The way these research condemned "childfree" was various, from the usage of literature review approach (Rizka et al., 2021), to the usage of Islamic law perspective (Fauzan, 2022; Indah & Zuhdi, 2022; Meidina & Puspita, 2023; Mubarak et al., 2022). In another note, Haganta, et al. (2022) conducted a literature study on "childfree" issues, especially those uploaded on YouTube channels, through an anthropological approach. This research highlights the debate over religious and scientific perspectives used as a basis by anti-childfree and pro-childfree groups. These two perspectives are linked to how the issue of "childfree" is connected to the current ecological crisis (Haganta et al., 2022). In contrast to research related to the issue of "childfree" with a religious approach, this research tries to take a neutral position in viewing the issue of "childfree" through an anthropological approach. However, this research did not explore as far as to why the debate occurred in the first place.

Through the explanation above, it can be seen that most research on the issue of "childfree" uses a religious approach, especially Islam. These studies frame "childfree" as something that violates religious values, threatens religious norms, and does not bring significant benefits to human life. Apart from that, these studies place discussions related to "childfree" on the dichotomy of wrong and right according to religion. Therefore, it can be said that the existing research regarding "childfree" still tends to be unequal in its judgment of "childfree" as a human life choice.

In the context of social media as the space for discourse, Instagram is a visual-based platform, namely a social media channel that prioritizes visual aspects as mediality or characteristics of its media content (Bennke & Pinchevski, 2022; Serafinelli, 2018). However, discourse can develop rapidly through platforms that emphasize this visual aspect, in two ways: (1) dissemination of messages conveyed through infographics, and (2) discussions that occur through comments columns (Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022). With the high number of Instagram users in Indonesia, especially young people (Kemp, 2023), and Instagram as main platform for disseminating information (Arisanty et al., 2020; Fardiah et al., 2023), issues developed in the Instagram space have become topics that are widely discussed by Indonesian netizens.

The Instagram's algorithm allows users to obtain information similar to their preferences (Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022). On the one hand, this benefits users because they can easily access the content they want. On the other hand, this has the potential to confine users in 'echo chambers' (Fandia, 2021; Flaxman et al., 2016). In relation to the issue of childfree, where there is discourse contestation regarding this issue, echo chambers have the potential to perpetuate digital polarization between pro-childfree and anti-childfree groups; those who are pro will always be presented with information that strengthens their argument, and vice versa, so that each side will find it difficult to understand the other side's perspective.

At this level, the presence of echo chambers related to the contestation of "childfree" discourse has the potential to perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigma against people who voluntarily choose to not have children. Moreover, with some number of studies regarding childfree that still tends to justify childfree actions as something wrong in the eyes of norms and religion. Furthermore, echo chambers have the potential to focus the issue of childfree on the 'fight' between women who have children and women who choose to be childfree, so that apart from perpetuating stereotypes and stigma, it also obscures the important focus regarding life choices, human rights, and motivations for "childfree" both in micro and macro scale.

In regards to the contestation of "childfree" discourses in Instagram, the concept of feminist critical discourse is applied in this research, as it focuses on discourse about women in the media (Lazar, 2014; Mills & Mullany, 2011). The discourse of "childfree" is closely related to the gender discourse, and in the context of gender, discourse is constructed by biased representations in which is the root of gender stereotypes (Renkema & Schubert, 2018). Feminist critical discourse perspective is intended to unveil these biased representations, by looking further to the subject-object positions of women narration in the media.

The positions of various social actors, ideas, or events are displayed in a text. This position then determines the form of text that is present to the audience. Apart from that, position also determines the building blocks of text elements, the party who has a high position to define a reality will present events or other groups in the form of a certain discourse structure that is presented to the audience (Mills & Mullany, 2011). In general, women in texts are always shown as objects, not subjects. This is because women only occupy the position of object of representation which causes women to always experience "defining", become story material, and cannot present themselves (contingent) (Lazar, 2014). In the end, the style of presentation and roles placed and displayed in this text will form a legitimate and illegitimate party, namely the party in power and the controlled minority party.

At this level, the point of attention feminist critical discourse perspective is to show how texts are biased in presenting women. In the context of the issue of childfree, the

focus of discourse that emphasizes the dichotomy between women who have children and women who choose to be childfree has the potential to give rise to bias in the construction of discourse related to women. Therefore, discourse contestations related to “childfree” should be highlighted through feminist critical discourse perspective.

Method

This research uses a critical paradigm that examines communication as a reflective challenge to the inequality of discourse that exists in society (Griffin et al., 2018). A qualitative approach is used in this research. The method used is critical discourse analysis, as an effort to dismantle the discourse construction of the “childfree” issue on the social media Instagram. In particular, critical discourse analysis in this research adopts feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2014; Mills & Mullany, 2011). This analysis looks more at how women’s positions are displayed in the texts. These positions are divided into the subject of the story and who is the object of the story which will determine how the text is structured and how meaning is applied in the text as a whole (Lazar, 2014).

Subject of this research is the media text, contains of the content and comments of netizens who present the issue of “childfree” on Instagram. Primary data collection technique is conducted through three steps: (1) searching content through hashtag #childfree and #childfreeindonesia, (2) filtering the content by language (selecting only contents that use Indonesian language), and (3) filtering the content that directly mentions Gitasav’s controversial remarks towards childfree issue. Data analysis technique is conducted through analyzing many different contexts that surround the media texts (subject of the research), particularly focusing on the inequality and the way that discursive means are used to maintain the status quo of patriarchal social order (Lazar, 2014). The inequality in question demonstrated by analyzing the position of subjects and objects in media texts.

In order to capture a more comprehensive contextual meanings from the media texts, a secondary data collection technique is conducted through in-depth interviews toward four informants. These four informants are consisted of two husband-and-wife couples: one pro-childfree couple and one anti-childfree couple. These couples have participated by commenting on Instagram post in regards to childfree at least once. The in-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured model.

Results and Discussion

The discourse of “childfree” in Instagram is divided into two oppositional sides. One side is supporting the idea of childfree (pro-childfree), while the other side is rejecting it (anti-childfree). This polarization is created through the algorithm of Instagram which allows users to obtain only information that is similar to their preferences (Asadnezhad et al., 2021; Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022); hence, once they support or against on one idea, they will likely to gain only information that is strengthening their belief or position. In the context of childfree narratives, this polarization is clearly seen in the post and comment section of Instagram.

In this research, it is found that the pro-childfree narratives focus on five aspects: (1) introduction to the concept of “childfree”, (2) human readiness as prospective parents, (3) contribution for greater society, (4) self-agency to choose whether to have children or not, and (5) explanation of the stigma and social pressure faced by childfree couples. The first aspect, introduction to the concept of “childfree”, refers to contents in Instagram that try to explain what childfree is and why some people voluntarily choose it. This method is a

strategic step for accounts that upload content about pro-childfree narratives, in order to give a fundamental understanding in regards to childfree. Therefore, anyone could make a wise decision for supporting or rejecting the idea of childfree because they understand the concept well, rather than agreeing or rejecting the idea of childfree just because they are carried away by the mainstream opinion. Moreover, some accounts like Mubadalah (@mubadalah.id) also present the concept of childfree from Islamic religion perspective, in order to serve as the counter-narrative for anti-childfree that utilizing the Islamic religion perspective.

The second aspect is human readiness as prospective parents. It emphasizes on argument: 'because some people are aware that they are not ready to be a parent, hence they choose to be childfree'. In this narrative, it is important for people to be well-prepared both mentally and financially before they become parents.

"Becoming parents needs good mentality, because I think almost anyone can make a child, but not everyone is capable of educating them. It's a responsibility for the lifetime. Besides, having children nowadays is not cheap. I think it's rather naïve to say that every child brings their own fortune, because we can see surround us there are so many poor and abandoned children on the street." - Pro-childfree wife

Moreover, being childfree is seen as the way for people to get out of the 'sandwich generation' trap. 'Sandwich generation' itself is a term used to refer to a 'generation that is squeezed' between the parents' generation and their children's generation, and must support both generations and themselves at the same time (Roots, 2021; Tyas & Kusumaningrum, 2022). Hence, this narrative also challenges the mindset of 'children as their parents' asset'. According to this narrative, having children with that mindset is an unhealthy condition and can perpetuate existing generational trauma.

Generational trauma, in the Indonesian context, refers to the responsibility that has been placed on a child even before the child is born into the world, namely the responsibility to take care of his parents in the future (Nawantara et al., 2023). For some people (as children), this leads to psychological trauma because they are 'burdened' with responsibility, when being 'born into the world' itself was not their choice as a child, but rather their parents' unilateral choice. Sentences like "no child asks to be born into the world, but parents want a child to be born into the world, so why is the responsibility placed on the child?" is used to narrate this point.

Third aspect is the contribution for greater society. It is associated with the 'noble cause' factors of choosing to be childfree. First factor is in regards to ecological problems, in which is highlighting the climate-change issue. Considering the worsening natural conditions on planet Earth, as well as the carbon footprint left by humans, the pro-childfree narrative argues that the decision not to have children is a good contribution to ecological problems. Second factor is in regards to population explosion. The pro-childfree narrative assumes that there are many other people who want to have children even though they themselves choose not to. So, predictions of an increase in the human population on planet Earth, especially Indonesia, are unlikely to increase significantly if they choose to be childfree. Third factor is in regards to social frustration. The pro-childfree narrative assumes that the alarming crime rate is a rational enough reason not to give birth to children and bring them into this 'evil' and 'dangerous' world.

Fourth aspect is the self-agency. The pro-childfree narrative is demonstrated by emphasizing that the choice to have children or not is a matter of self-agency. Self-agency refers to individual choices made consciously and not under conditions of coercion or under any pressure from external parties outside the individual (Buckingham, 2017; Young,

2018). At this level, self-agency is a significant factor for someone not to have children.

“Having kids or not, it should be a decision of both husband and wife, even if we decide to have kids, being pregnant and giving birth is another thing, as a husband we might have our opinion, but in the end, the final decision rests with the wife, because it’s her body that will experience everything.” – Pro-childfree husband

The last aspect in pro-childfree narratives is the explanation of stigma and social pressure faced by childfree couples. This kind of content aims to provide an understanding of why women are more cornered (than men) when talking about childfree, while at the same time raising awareness that this stigma itself is a social construction. This narrative is used to dissect why this topic is so controversial in society. Even though it seems like a ‘neutral’ content, this kind of content is actually a strategy to dismantle people’s mindsets that are more inclined to traditional view to have children, which tends to lead the general public to judge people who choose to be childfree. Therefore, this kind of content falls into the pro childfree narrative because it ultimately tends to lead the audience to better understand why people choose childfree, instead of judging them.

In contrast to the pro-childfree narratives, the anti-childfree narratives have more limited argument and only focus on using two perspectives: religion and cultural. Religion perspective, mainly Islam, emphasizes on three aspects. First, religion (Islam) encourages its followers to continue their descendants. Second, the belief in religion (Islam) is that a child’s pious prayers will become good deeds for their parents. Third, the belief in religion (Islam) that being a parent can be an immeasurable reward for Muslims. The main point that links those three aspects is that, in religion perspective, children tend to be seen as assets for their parents, because they only emphasize the benefits of children towards their parents, and do not emphasize the responsibility of parents towards their children.

Interestingly, the anti-childfree’s religion (Islam) perspective that is seen in Instagram did not elaborate on the Koran’s verses (or hadists) which forbid the childfree-view or oblige Islam people to have children. Both the anti-childfree husband and wife, as informants in this research, also admitted that they cannot point out the exact Koran verse or hadist that oblige people to have children. They only argued that their religion (Islam) forbids the childfree. On the other hand, Instagram account of Mubadalah (@mubadalah.id) explained the Islamic religion perspective that does not against childfree by mentioning the Islamic laws.

“Yes, the hadith text is in the history of Sunan Nasa’i. But, that’s not a mandatory. This is general advice for someone who wants to get married, usually and generally, looking for a partner who is fertile and can have children. The (Muhammad) Prophet’s recommendations in the text are only general guidance and recommendations (lil irsyad). It is not a mandatory order (la yadull ‘ala al-wujub). Because, if it were mandatory, there would be a prohibition on marriage for those who are infertile. In fact, many infertile men and women also want to get married. They, in the view of the majority of fiqh scholars, are permitted to marry.” –Faqih Abdul Kodir (@mubadalah.id)

Moreover, Mubadalah also responded to the Koran verse that often being used to against childfree: QS. Al-Isra, 17:31. They explained that it is *qiyas ma’a al-fariq*, or an inappropriate analogy (misguided), because the verse talks about killing children, which was a tradition in several Arab tribes at that time; namely, about something that already exists, namely the child who was the target of murder. Meanwhile, childfree is about attitudes towards something that doesn’t exist yet; namely, refrain from having children. The actions are also different. The first is active (killing) and the second is passive (restraint).

Therefore, using the verse as a basis for forbidding childfree is not appropriate at all.

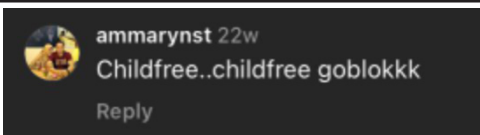
Meanwhile, the cultural perspective used by the anti-childfree narratives mainly highlight three aspects. First, the common view on “many children, much fortune (*banyak anak, banyak rezeki*)”. This view means literally, that if we have many children, then we will have a lot of fortune. Second, the common view on “*who will take care of us when we are old if not the children?*”. Third, the common view that “*it is the destiny of women to become pregnant, give birth and have children*”. In line with the religious perspective, the first and second aspects of the cultural perspective are still related to the view that children are assets for their parents. Meanwhile, the third aspect depicts the engraved patriarchal view that tend to see women as a tool for producing children.

Apart from the arguments used in the narratives of pro and anti-childfree, one difference that also stands out is in the way people express their arguments. Pro-childfree narratives tend to be expressed in an informative way, without any emotional sentiment. On the other hand, anti-childfree narratives are delivered in three variety of expressions: (1) aggressive, (2) passive-aggressive, and (3) patronizing. Aggressive expression is shown by the choice of words that tend to be harsh to vilify people who are pro-childfree, or even vilify the idea of childfree itself. Harsh words that tend to be ‘hate speech’ are shown through the words: “stupid (*bodoh, goblok, tolol*)”, and other profanity. They even call out to “extinct” and “destroy” the pro-childfree people. Most of these expressions are not accompanied by supporting arguments for the anti-childfree position.

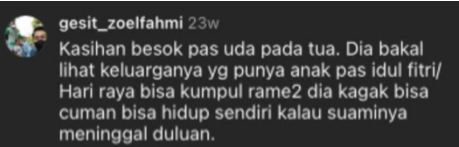
Passive-aggressive expression is shown through the packaging of sentences that are not as harsh as aggressive expressions, but still contain a condemnation of childfree’s views. However, the criticism in this expression is conveyed more subtly and often uses a religious or cultural perspective as a supporting argument for the anti-childfree position. For example, a passive-aggressive expression is shown with the sentence “*I’m sorry for people who choose to be childfree, when they get old, they don’t have children to take care of them.*” In other examples, netizens express their disapproval of childfree by bringing narratives that blame childfree thinking or conveying bad hopes for those who choose to be childfree, such as: “*when you get old, you will be lonely and miserable*”, but close the argument with “*but that’s just my opinion*”.

The last expression, which is also the most frequently encountered expression, is the patronizing expression. This expression does not use harsh words, nor does it contain criticism or bad wishes for those who choose to be childfree, but the tendency to blame childfree views is very pronounced. This tendency appears to use a religious or cultural perspective (or a combination of both) to condemn childfree views. The advice given to people who choose to be childfree is delivered in a ‘just a reminder’ tone which implies that people who choose to be childfree don’t know anything; meanwhile, those who are against childfree are the ones who best know and understand religious teachings and uphold cultural values in Indonesia.

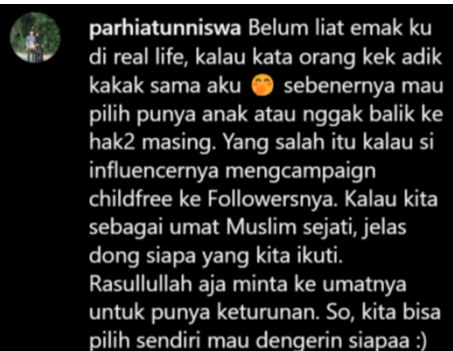
Table 1. Examples of expressions in anti-childfree narrative (source: author’s analysis)

Example of aggressive expression	
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Examples of passive-aggressive expression

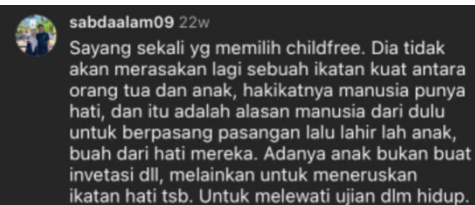


gesit_zoelfahmi 23w
Kasihannya besok pas uda pada tua. Dia bakal lihat keluarganya yg punya anak pas idul fitri/ Hari raya bisa kumpul rame2 dia kagak bisa cuman bisa hidup sendiri kalau suaminya meninggal duluan.



parhiatunniswa Belum liat emak ku di real life, kalau kata orang kek adik kakak sama aku 😏 sebenarnya mau pilih punya anak atau nggak balik ke hak2 masing. Yang salah itu kalau si influencernya mengcampaign childfree ke Followersnya. Kalau kita sebagai umat Muslim sejati, jelas dong siapa yang kita ikuti. Rasullullah aja minta ke umatnya untuk punya keturunan. So, kita bisa pilih sendiri mau dengerin siapaa :)

Example of patronizing expression



sabdaalam09 22w
Sayang sekali yg memilih childfree. Dia tidak akan merasakan lagi sebuah ikatan kuat antara orang tua dan anak, hakikatnya manusia punya hati, dan itu adalah alasan manusia dari dulu untuk berpasangan pasangan lalu lahir lah anak, buah dari hati mereka. Adanya anak bukan buat investasi dll, melainkan untuk meneruskan ikatan hati tsb. Untuk melewati ujian dlm hidup.

Pro and anti-childfree narratives which continue to compete with one another, has given rise to several understandings regarding the discourse on childfree issue which is constructed through the Instagram arena. Childfree narratives in the Instagram arena have shown various positions regarding subjects and objects within the framework of feminist critical discourse. Therefore, the next section will dissect the subject-object positions in more detail.

Women as Object, Patriarchal Society as Subject

Narratives about childfree on Instagram show that childfree discourse tends to frame women as objects in the patriarchal order of Indonesian society. This positioning mainly appears in counter-narratives against “childfree”. Women are considered to be someone who is obliged to conceive and give birth to children. This is described by words such as ‘*kodrat*’, ‘*fitrah*’, ‘*takdir*’, and so on, which illustrate that ‘having children’ is a basic duty for women, therefore women must have children. So, when they choose not to have children, they are considered to have violated their ‘*kodrat*’, ‘*fitrah*’, and ‘*takdir*’.

Interestingly, this positioning is not only carried out by men towards women, but also by fellow women. This can be seen from the comments submitted by female-identified accounts (seen through profile photos and user names) in the anti-childfree narrative which states that it is a woman’s duty to have children. This practice shows how patriarchal-based understanding has been internalized into Indonesian people’s minds to the point that it is believed to be a common truth; and this is not related to their sex (Amraeni et al., 2021; Ernanda, 2023; Vioni & Liansah, 2022) Tanah Ibu Kami, which depicts women’s movements defending nature from corporations in four islands in Indonesia. It utilizes feminist critical discourse analysis which incorporates critical discourse analysis and feminist studies to disclose perplexing hegemonic power relations. The data in this study are taken from the transcription of the dialogues in the film. Some extracts constructing the representations of

women in the film are extracted for further analysis. Interviews were conducted with the film's producer and female figures. The four themes constructing the representations of women are: (1. Therefore, 'patriarchal society in general' in this context refers not only to men, but also women who internalize the patriarchal understanding.

The internalized understanding of patriarchy, by both men and women, is the basis of their arguments for judging people who choose to be childfree, especially women. For them, women who choose to be childfree are considered as selfish for running away from their social responsibility to produce offspring. Without realizing it, they are trapped in a patriarchal perspective to place judgment on women who choose to be childfree, by wrapping it in (Islamic) reasons regarding the narrative about sin and in human benefit reasons regarding the narrative of human extinction (Aziz et al., 2020; Kloos & Ismah, 2023; Riyani, 2021).

However, when explored further regarding the motivation of anti-childfree people to have children, their arguments emphasize the importance of the presence of children, such as: "children are the people who will take care of their parents in old age", "children are an investment in this world and the hereafter", "children are people who will pray for their parents and become good deeds for their parents", "children are the successors of descendants", "children are the successors of the religious community (Islam)", and so on. When asked further toward the anti-childfree informants regarding to the motivations, they could not point out the motivations that are not related to the children's duty or obligation towards parent. Apparently, they consider it as the normality to think of children as an asset instead of human being who has their own agency, and in Indonesia, this view is not considered as a wrong one.

The pro-childfree narrative attempts to dismantle this positioning, by placing the understanding that when people make social judgments against women who choose to be childfree, it means they have been trapped in a patriarchal understanding that tends to place women (and children) as objects. However, even though they attempt to position women (and children) as subjects who have agency in making choices related to their bodies, this effort is hit by various comments with anti-childfree narratives. Arguments like "if you have womb then it's your job to have children", "women's body belongs to their parents and their husband", "it's a child's job to look after their parents when they're old, right!", and "parents have given energy and money to raise their children, it is natural for children to repay this service by taking care of their parents in old age" were being used to defend their patriarchal logic.



Figure 1. Pro-childfree narrative content that highlighting about 'having children' as women's choice (source: Instagram @magdaleneid)

The pro-childfree narrative, which is shown by emphasizing that the choice to have children or not is a matter of self-agency, also raises issues regarding women's body and reproductive rights. In the patriarchal and capitalist society that prevails in Indonesia, women are considered as objects that have a reproductive role, namely to give birth to children as prospective workers in the future. Without women giving birth, capitalism would not survive (Engels & Untermann, 2021). This understanding is so pervasive that it is believed to be a common truth in Indonesia; that being a woman means having duties and being responsible for having children. Cultural and religious narratives have framed this task as something 'noble'. So, society generally believes that becoming a mother is the point of perfection for a woman.

From the anti-childfree narrative, there are two main perspectives used to place women in the object position. First perspective is the religion perspective, in which views that having children is women's nature. The second perspective used is the cultural perspective that considers 'having children as woman's destiny that she must fulfill'. Culturally, in the patriarchal society in Indonesia, women are considered as '*sejati*' (true woman), 'successful', 'good', and all other positive labels, when they marry, become a wife, have children, and become a mother (De Beauvoir, 2023; Suryakusuma, 2021). On the other hand, when a woman does not fulfill even one of these four practices, she will tend to be considered as a woman who has failed to fulfill her obligation as a woman.

However, this dogma covers up the bitter reality that behind this 'noble' value, women are actually placed as objects and seen as nothing more than machines for producing children/future workers. However, this view is considered unusual because the patriarchal-capitalist dogma has already been internalized in the minds of society in general. Therefore, discussions about childfree are used to remind people that all decisions women make regarding their bodies are actually the rights of the women themselves; not another woman's right, let alone a man's.

Pro-childfree as Object, Anti-childfree as Subject

The dominance of the anti-childfree narrative as seen through Instagram's comment section shows the pro-childfree position as an object that is inferior to the anti-childfree position. It is because the anti-childfree position is still considered as a more 'correct' general view than the pro-childfree position. So, even though there are quite a few parties who are pro-childfree, their narrative seems to be silenced by the anti-childfree narrative which is superior and has unlimited room for movement.

The silencing of the pro-childfree narrative was expressed through explicit comments, which were more or less conveyed like this: "*If you have an opinion for childfree, it's better not to share it with the public, keep it to yourself, because it could have a bad influence on the public.*" Comments like this show that the majority view regarding childfree is a view that is tolerated, and tends not to be challenged by other opposing views. Furthermore, such statements imply that the pro-childfree view is wrong. So, sharing opinions about being pro-childfree is also wrong because it is thought to have a negative impact on society.

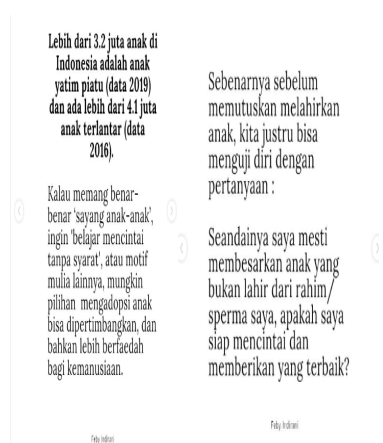
Apart from that, there is a tendency towards double standards that exist in society regarding the childfree narrative. In comments that have a pro-childfree narrative, statements like this are found: "*people who are happy when they have children are considered normal (to share their happiness on social media) but people who are happy when they don't have children should not share their happiness on social media, or they will even be blasphemed when they share their happiness on social media.*" This double standard is related to the discussion above regarding the silencing of pro-childfree narratives. The pro-childfree narrative is

considered a misguided and bad view, so society tends to normalize insults (ridicule/condemnation) for expressions of feelings of happiness regarding this view. On the other hand, the view of 'having children' is a view that is considered correct, so society tends to normalize the happiness that this view brings (Ahmed, 2020; Siahaan, 2023). They reject the fact that childfree can indeed bring happiness to people who choose it.

Through this analysis, it can be seen that the childfree narrative tends to be a 'black or white' or 'positive or negative' battle narrative between 'having children vs not having children'. This narrative has negative implications for people who choose to be childfree, because they are the ones who receive all the insults and judgments as parties who are considered as 'negative' and must be defeated in the battle of this narrative. From what is found in this research, the pro-childfree narrative never implies that they blame the decisions of people who have children.

What the pro-childfree narrative highlights is that there are alternative choices and people can choose those choices, and it is important for us to respect each person's choices. However, the narrative of the battle between 'having children vs not having children' has clouded the message. Based on the findings in this research, those who are against childfree seem to feel attacked by the pro-childfree narrative. On the other hand, the pro-childfree narrative only defends their views (and their right to choose) without attacking opposing parties.

The positioning of pro-childfree (who are considered a minority) as objects is also shown through the glorification of 'having children from your own womb'. At this level, it is not only the pro-childfree (who are considered as minority) who are placed as objects, but also those who are unable to have children (for biological/health reasons). The anti-childfree narrative in its discourse construction also 'attacks' those who are childless; who are unable to have children due to health or biological factors. This is shown through the comments of women who are proud of being pregnant and giving birth to children, as well as sharing moments of happiness with the children they gave birth to in their own wombs -and using their pride to attack/insult the childless and childfree people. In contrast, pro-childfree narrative never blames mothers who share their moments of happiness with the children they carry and give birth to. However, this glorification has obscured one of the messages of the pro-childfree narrative which emphasizes the welfare of children.



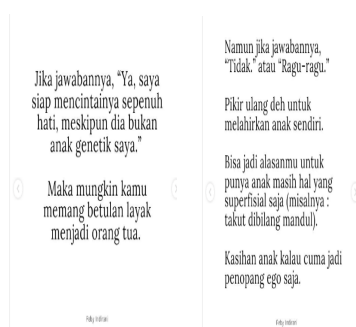


Figure 2. Pro-childfree narrative content that brings up the issue of child welfare (source: Feby Indirani's Instagram)

The pro-childfree narrative criticizes the glorification of ‘having a child from one’s own womb’ which is used as a basis for argument to refute the pro-childfree narrative. In this glorification, we often find the words “*from whom else can we learn if not from children?*”, “*children are a source of happiness*”, and so on. However, those who are against childfree never mention that we can also obtain children through the adoption process, not just born from our own womb. In the arguments used by the anti-childfree narrative, they simplify the narrative by framing that the child in question is a child born from one’s own womb.

Some of the comments against childfree with aggressive expressions used judgmental sentences like: “*Pretend to be childfree, just say you’re infertile!*” This sentence implies the meaning that children who are ‘considered’ in the framework of the anti-childfree narrative are only children who were born from their own womb. Likewise, with passive-aggressive and patronizing expressions, almost no one judges childfree by stating the choice to adopt a child instead of being childfree. This shows a paradox in the mindset of the anti-childfree people in Indonesia; that they prioritize having children, but only children who were born from their own womb. The paradox in this frame of mind makes them, whether consciously or not, place childless people as inferior objects that they judge.

The contestation of childfree discourse in Indonesia, especially what occurs on the social media channel Instagram as the arena, shows that there are three focuses of the debate between the pro and anti-childfree narratives. First, the religious perspective in viewing childfree. Both sides of the narrative try to present their perspective on how religion, especially Islam, views the issue of childfree. However, different interpretations mean that the debate does not reach a common ground. Anti-childfree people even accuse the pro-childfree of adhering to a heretical religious interpretation.

Second, motivation to have children. Anti-childfree narrative assumes that the motivation for having children is not something that needs to be questioned further; when you grow up and get married, it is natural to have children. This is related to the cultural perspective that exists in Indonesia. However, the pro-childfree narrative assumes that the motivation for having children needs to be thought about further, not just taken for granted as a ‘habit’ or ‘general view’.

Third, women’s (and their partners’) agency in choosing not to have children. The anti-childfree narrative assumes that pro-childfree people are selfish, stupid, and not thinking broadly (in the context of the wider benefit of society) and long (in the context of the future in old age). On the other hand, the pro-childfree narrative assumes that the choice to have children or not is an individual’s right; and society has no right to judge them for the choices they consciously make.

Conclusion

Discourse contestation that revolves around the childfree's three focuses of debate above arises because of the difficulty of the Indonesian people in accepting understandings that are 'foreign' to them; for them, upholding old ways or things that are familiar to them is more important than respecting personal decisions. At this level, they tend to use a collective perspective, assuming that one 'foreign' view can be dangerous for the whole of society, applies to all, and destroys the social order that they know so well. So, they tend not to respect individual views. This internalization process is not without cause; because patriarchal and capitalist understandings are deeply rooted in Indonesian society, so it has become a culture that does not provide space for progressive change.

The contestation of childfree discourse on Instagram actually failed to address the essential/core problem about children in Indonesia, because it tends to focus on the discourse battle between 'having children vs not having children'. In fact, the issues that should be considered are the issue of child welfare in Indonesia, as well as issues regarding the mental and financial readiness of prospective parents when deciding to have children. However, one thing that is essential through this discourse battle is that Indonesian society in general is not ready to accept differences of opinion, argue healthily and rationally, and respect other people's life choices. Just because some people choose the different way than the custom, the majority of the people think that they have the rights to judge and persecute them; and this kind of thinking is dangerous and could evoke the intolerance action in society.

In the end, this research unveils the core problem of childfree discourse contestation. While the existing research regarding childfree still tends to be unequal in its judgment of childfree as a human life choice, this research makes effort to give other perspectives through the discussion of childfree discourse contestation in Instagram. In the future, further and deeper research in regards to this matter could be developed. Particularly, research that is able to give voice towards pro-childfree people who tend to be a minority and silences in Indonesian society. Moreover, future research can also address the essential/core problem about child welfare and mental-financial readiness of prospective parents when deciding to have children in Indonesia.

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