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VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS AND ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

JARITA DUASA^{1*}, IZYANI ZULKIFLI¹ & ZERA ZURYANA IDRIS¹

¹ Kulliyah of Economics and Management Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia,
Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA.

email: jarita@iium.edu.my; izyani@iium.edu.my; zerazuryana@iium.edu.my

Corresponding Author email: jarita@iium.edu.my

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Abstract

Voluntary childlessness—defined as the deliberate choice by individuals or couples to remain childfree—poses theological, legal, ethical, and socio-cultural questions within Islamic contexts. Despite the growing prevalence of childfree decisions in Muslim societies, scholarly inquiry remains limited, fragmented, and regionally concentrated. This study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) of 45 academic publications, synthesising the discourse through five analytical themes: (1) theological and ethical frameworks, (2) legal and jurisprudential perspectives (fiqh), (3) gender and societal expectations, (4) modernity, individualism, and cultural change, and (5) bioethical and policy implications. Findings indicate that while Islamic theology and jurisprudence traditionally valorize procreation, there is historical precedent and contemporary discourse supporting limited reproductive autonomy, including contraception. However, voluntary, permanent childlessness remains a contested domain, with strong gendered stigma and insufficient fatwa engagement. The review reveals methodological gaps, a dominance of Southeast Asian case studies, and limited engagement with the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* framework—particularly *hifz al-nasl* (preservation of lineage). This paper identifies a critical need for interdisciplinary, comparative, and jurisprudentially diverse research that acknowledges the lived experiences and spiritual reasoning of voluntarily childfree Muslims. Recommendations for future studies include qualitative ethnographies, comparative fiqh analysis, and gender-focused policy inquiry to broaden the Islamic bioethical discourse on reproductive autonomy.

Keywords: Voluntary childlessness, Islamic law, *Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, *Hifz al-nasl*, Muslim societies,



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INTRODUCTION

Childbearing is widely perceived within Islamic traditions as a divine blessing and a key purpose of marriage. The Qur'an and Hadith emphasize procreation as one of the goals of marriage, where children are regarded as a source of joy, continuation of lineage, and fulfilment of communal and religious obligations. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encouraged his followers to marry and have children, saying: "Marry the loving and fertile, for I will boast of your great numbers before the other nations on the Day of Judgment" (Sunan Abu Dawood, Hadith 2050).

From a fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) standpoint, classical scholars generally regarded procreation as a recommended but not mandatory aspect of marriage. While Islam permits contraception under certain conditions, the deliberate decision to remain childless — especially when both partners are healthy and capable of reproduction — is seen as controversial by many Islamic jurists and scholars.

In recent years, however, some Muslim couples, particularly in urban and educated segments, have chosen to remain voluntarily childless due to lifestyle preferences, economic concerns, environmental considerations, or personal beliefs about parenthood. This shift has prompted new discussions among Muslim scholars about how to reconcile individual autonomy and marital rights with religious teachings and communal expectations.

The key themes which can be extracted from the existing literature on this issue could be listed as following:

- i. Theological discourse: Childbearing as a religiously encouraged but not obligatory act (e.g., Kamali, 2008).
- ii. Legal permissibility: Use of contraception and family planning discussed widely (e.g., Omran, 1992; Musallam, 1981), but voluntary childlessness as a deliberate marital choice remains less explored.
- iii. Sociocultural expectations: Muslim societies place strong emphasis on fertility and motherhood as markers of a successful marriage, often leading to stigma against childless couples, particularly women (Inhorn, 2003).
- iv. Gender dimensions: Women bear the brunt of societal judgment for childlessness, even when the decision is mutual or the cause is medical.
- v. Bioethical and Policy Implications: How Islamic bioethics addresses reproductive autonomy as well as fatwas and institutional responses in different countries have issued varied opinions.

Although valuable insights have emerged, the existing body of literature lacks a comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR) that integrates findings across diverse geographic regions, theological interpretations, and sociocultural contexts within the Muslim world. Much of the current research remains localized—especially within Southeast Asia—and primarily relies on qualitative or normative legal approaches rather than adhering to rigorous SLR frameworks. Furthermore, while gendered dimensions of voluntary childlessness are occasionally recognized, thorough examinations from a feminist Islamic lens are still limited.

Accordingly, this study aims to bridge these gaps by employing systematic review methodologies and broadening both the geographic coverage and theoretical scope of analysis. Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is a scientific method that could be used to limit systematic bias by identifying, screening and synthesizing research questions using a particular and systematic methodology (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008) in reviewing the literature. Nevertheless, it ensures quality assessment on all relevant articles to avoid bias (Kraus et al., 2020). Research objectives of the study are as following:

1. To systematically identify, review, and synthesise existing scholarly literature on voluntary childlessness among Muslim couples within the framework of Islamic teachings.
2. To explore the diversity of Islamic scholarly interpretations and jurisprudential positions regarding voluntary childlessness across different regions and schools of thought.
3. To analyse the socio-cultural, economic, psychological, and theological factors influencing Muslim couples' decisions to remain childfree.
4. To examine the gendered experiences and implications of voluntary childlessness in Muslim societies from both classical and contemporary Islamic perspectives.
5. To identify research trends, methodological gaps, and regional disparities in the existing literature on this topic to guide future empirical and theoretical studies.

These objectives will support a rigorous and comprehensive SLR that not only maps existing knowledge but also highlights underexplored areas, especially in relation to jurisprudential diversity, geographic inclusivity, and interdisciplinary analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is a growing body of literature examining voluntary childlessness (often termed "childfree") within Islamic contexts, systematic literature reviews (SLRs) specifically focusing on this topic are scarce. However, several recent studies have employed structured methodologies to explore the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness in Muslim societies, particularly in Southeast Asia. Although no fully formal Systematic Literature Reviews (SLRs) were found, several empirical and conceptual studies employ analytical frameworks grounded in Islamic jurisprudence, sociological inquiry, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law).

Voluntary childlessness—defined as a deliberate choice by couples to forgo having children—has gained increased scholarly attention in Muslim-majority societies in recent years. Within Islamic thought, procreation is generally regarded as one of the essential objectives of marriage, aligned with the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* principle of *hifz al-nasl* (protection of lineage). Traditional Islamic jurisprudence does not obligate childbearing in marriage, but it highly encourages it, reflecting Qur'anic injunctions and prophetic traditions that regard children as both blessings and a means of spiritual and communal continuation.

One of the more structured explorations of this issue can be seen in a study by Mu'in et al. (2023), which investigates voluntary childlessness among Muslim communities in Lampung

and West Java, Indonesia. This ethnographic study applies *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* to understand whether such a lifestyle choice can be reconciled with Islamic teachings. The authors conclude that while economic, mental health, and environmental concerns are primary motivators for the decision to remain childless, these are generally not considered sufficient in Islamic law to override the religious objective of preserving progeny, unless they rise to the level of necessity (*darura*) (Mu'in et al., 2023).

In another empirical legal study, Zuhriah et al. (2023) explore the rising popularity of the childfree lifestyle among urban Indonesian Muslims in the digital era. Drawing on sociological-legal methods and Islamic jurisprudence, the researchers analyze the perspectives of major religious organizations—Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah—alongside feminist and gender activists. While the mainstream religious scholars largely reject the notion of voluntary childlessness as incompatible with Islamic teachings, some nuance is introduced by recognizing psychological and physical health justifications. The study also highlights the role of social media in normalizing lifestyle choices that diverge from traditional expectations, reflecting a shift in the locus of ethical reasoning among younger Muslims (Zuhriah et al., 2023).

A similar perspective is offered by Zubaidah (2023), who undertakes a normative legal analysis of voluntary childlessness using the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* framework of Jasir Auda. Her study examines whether choosing to forgo children compromises the ethical foundations of Islamic marriage. Zubaidah contends that such a choice is not inherently forbidden but must be evaluated based on its implications for the *maslahah* (public interest) and preservation of the five core objectives of *sharī'ah*, especially the protection of lineage. Voluntary childlessness without valid justification, in her view, could be considered a violation of Islamic moral order, particularly when it stems from purely hedonistic or self-centred motives (Zubaidah, 2023).

From a Malaysian context, Samsudi and Busro (2023) explore the tension between liberty and faith in decisions regarding childlessness. Through qualitative interviews and textual analysis, they examine how educated Muslim couples interpret Islamic teachings in light of contemporary realities. The authors argue that personal autonomy, economic constraints, and environmental concerns are increasingly influencing reproductive decisions, even among observant Muslims. However, these rationales often conflict with Islamic doctrinal expectations that link marriage with procreation as a moral imperative. This study underscores the changing perceptions of marriage and family among middle-class Malaysian Muslims, and the struggle to reconcile these with traditional norms (Samsudi and Busro, 2023).

In contrast, Putri and Labib (2024) adopt a more jurisprudential lens in analyzing the concept of childfree marriage through the *manhaj tarjih* (interpretive methodology) of Muhammadiyah, one of Indonesia's largest Islamic movements. Utilizing *bayani* (textual), *burhani* (rational), and *irfani* (experiential) frameworks, their study concludes that voluntary childlessness is not sanctioned within Muhammadiyah's interpretive framework unless justified by legitimate causes such as infertility or health-related concerns. The authors stress that preserving progeny is central to the Islamic conception of family and that personal preferences cannot override collective and divine objectives embedded in the *sharī'ah* (Putri and Labib, 2024).

Despite these insights, the field lacks a formal systematic literature review (SLR) that consolidates research findings across geographic, theological, and sociocultural contexts in the

Muslim world. Most studies remain regionally focused, particularly in Southeast Asia, and often utilize qualitative or normative legal methods rather than rigorous SLR protocols. Additionally, while gendered experiences of voluntary childlessness are acknowledged, in-depth analyses from a feminist Islamic perspective remain underdeveloped. Therefore, the current study attempts to address these gaps by applying SLR methodologies and expanding the geographic and theoretical scope of inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to comprehensively collect, evaluate, and synthesize existing research on the issue of voluntary childlessness in marriage from Islamic perspectives. The SLR method enables a structured, transparent, and replicable process of identifying relevant literature, ensuring that the review is both methodologically rigorous and analytically robust. The review adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure clarity and transparency in the review process.

This systematic literature review (SLR) is guided by a set of interrelated research questions that aim to comprehensively map and critically assess the scholarly discourse on voluntary childlessness among Muslim couples. Specifically, the review seeks to identify the dominant themes, perspectives, and interpretations that emerge from the existing literature on voluntary childlessness in Muslim contexts. It further examines how Islamic scholars and religious institutions across different regions and schools of thought conceptualize voluntary childlessness in relation to the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). In addition, the review explores the socio-cultural, economic, psychological, and religious factors highlighted in the literature as influencing decisions to remain childfree among Muslim individuals and couples. Attention is also given to gendered experiences and the contributions of feminist Islamic perspectives in shaping and contesting prevailing narratives on voluntary childlessness. Finally, the SLR analyses methodological approaches and regional patterns in existing studies to identify key limitations and gaps, thereby highlighting areas for future research.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of articles for this review was guided by clearly defined inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and academic rigor. Specifically, the review included studies that explicitly discuss voluntary childlessness or childfree marriage within Muslim contexts or from Islamic perspectives. Eligible publications comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, chapters in edited volumes, and academic theses published between 1969 and 2024. In terms of methodological orientation, the review considered studies employing empirical, conceptual, legal, or theological analyses. To maintain consistency and accessibility in analysis, only publications written in English were included.

The exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the analytical focus and academic quality of the review. Accordingly, studies that primarily addressed infertility or involuntary

childlessness were excluded, as they fall outside the scope of voluntary childlessness. Non-academic sources, including newspaper articles, opinion pieces, and blog posts, were also omitted to maintain scholarly rigor. In addition, studies that did not engage with Islamic perspectives or were not related to Muslim populations or contexts were excluded from the review.

Data Source and Search Strategy

To ensure a focused and high-quality review, this study relied exclusively on the Scopus database as the primary source of academic literature. Scopus was selected because it is one of the largest and most comprehensive abstract and citation databases of peer-reviewed literature, encompassing a wide range of disciplines including Islamic studies, law, social sciences, and gender studies (Elsevier, 2024; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). It is widely recognized for its rigorous indexing criteria, which ensures the inclusion of only high-quality scholarly publications (Burnham, 2006). In comparison to other databases, Scopus offers advanced filtering, citation tracking, and export features that facilitate transparency and reproducibility in systematic literature reviews (Falagas et al., 2008). While databases like Web of Science and Dimensions also index relevant content, Scopus provides broader journal coverage and includes a significant number of non-Western and interdisciplinary journals, making it especially suitable for a topic involving Islamic perspectives and global Muslim contexts (Gavel & Iselid, 2008). Therefore, the use of Scopus alone is considered both methodologically sound and practically efficient for achieving the objectives of this study.

The search strategy used a combination of Boolean operators and relevant keywords, including “voluntary childlessness” and “Islam,” as well as “childfree” and “Islamic law.” However, these yielded fewer than five relevant publications. To enhance coverage, the finalized keywords “family planning” AND “reasons” AND “Islam” were selected, resulting in 62 publications (see Table 1). The subject areas analysed include Business, Management, Economics, Finance, and Arts and Humanities. The final dataset of 62 publications serves as the basis for this bibliometric analysis.

Table 1. Keywords progression (SCOPUS database)

| Keywords | Number of publication (titles) |
|--|--------------------------------|
| “voluntary childlessness” AND “Islam” | 3 titles |
| “childfree” AND “islam” | 2 titles |
| “childfree” AND “Islamic law” | 4 titles |
| “voluntary childlessness” AND “religion” | 107 titles |
| “childfree”, “voluntary childlessness”, “islam, AND “Islamic law” | 18 titles |
| “childfree”, “voluntary childlessness”, “islam, “Islamic law”, AND “maqasid shariah” | 18 titles |
| “family planning” AND “Islam” | 62 titles |

“family planning” AND “reasons” AND 62 titles
“Islam”

The study selection followed a three-phase process:

Identification

Initial search results were conducted manually. The identification phase is a process that searches for synonyms, related terms and various terms related to the main keyword in this study. In addition, whenever appropriate, the combination of keywords was performed in the databases. The reliance on Scopus as the main database is due to its status as a full indexing database that contains more than 70 million records and covers multidiscipline journals, and it has strength in terms of quality control, full text search, maximum search string length, advanced search string and reproducibility of search results at different locations (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020; Martin-Martin et al., 2018).

Searching for articles based on databases was carried out within 3 months (December 2024, January and February 2025). The full search string is shown in Table 1. Out of all the searches based on the database, this study found 62 relevant documents.

Screening

Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. All 62 identified records/documents at the identification stage had undergone manual check on the availability of full document. Out of 62 documents, only 49 documents were available in full form. The rest were only abstracts. The selection process was documented using the PRISMA flow diagram (as displayed in Figure 1), which outlines the number of studies identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and included.

The 49 full documents were then gone through the screening process. The process was done manually and the criteria for selecting articles developed based on the research questions formulated earlier (Kitchenham and Charters, 2007). The criterion of selection is important for ensuring that the selected articles are related to the study (Alsolami and Embi, 2018). The process minimizes the number of related articles and Table 2 displays the criterion chosen in this study.

Figure 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram

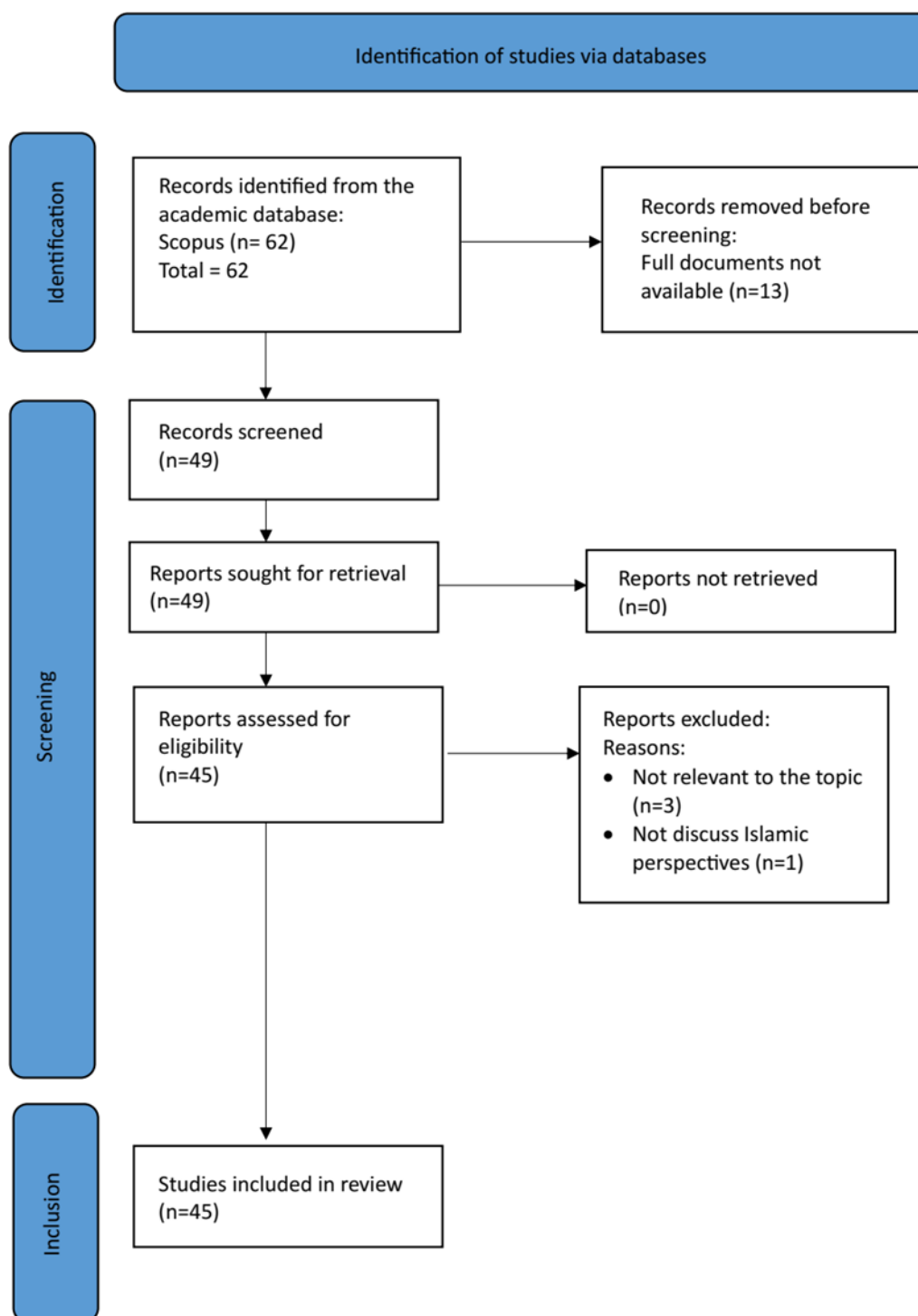


Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criterion

| Criterion | Inclusion | Exclusion |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| Type of documents/literature | Research article (full text) Conference full paper Chapter in book | Article review, book review, review and short notice, abstracts of symposium or conference, report, letter to editor, book, monograph. |

| | | |
|--------------|---|--------------------|
| Language | English | Other than English |
| Timeline | Between 1969 to 2024 | < 1969 |
| Subject area | Social Science, Business, Management, Economics, Finance, and Arts and Humanities. | |

The focus of the study is on the literature which are in form of research article, full paper of conferences and chapter in book. The inclusion of conference paper and chapter of book is to expand the searching output since the Islamic perspective studies in the form of research article are very limited. Other forms of literature were excluded. The timeline of publication is from 1969 to 2024. The duration selection is expected to produce an adequate number of articles for the SLR analysis in line with the concept of study's maturity by Kraus et al. (2020). Thirteen (13) documents were identified to be excluded based of the outlined criterion using manual searching method (which is not full text). Overall, 49 articles were identified for the next eligibility phase.

Eligibility and Inclusion

The eligibility phase is a process where the researcher examines the article's relevancy to the needs of the study by examining the title, abstract, findings and discussions. Full texts of potentially relevant articles were reviewed in detail. Studies meeting the criteria were included in the final review. Four (4) articles were excluded because they did not fulfil the study's needs or irrelevant to the topic in study. Overall, 45 articles were selected for the next process, quality assessment.

Data Extraction and Analysis

A structured data extraction form was developed to systematically capture relevant information from each selected study. This included details on the author(s), year of publication, and country or region of focus. The form also recorded the theoretical or jurisprudential frameworks employed, such as maqāsid al-sharī'ah, fiqh, or feminist Islamic ethics, along with the methodologies and data sources used in the studies. In addition, key findings and conclusions were extracted, with particular attention given to regional contexts and gender-related considerations.

The data were then subjected to thematic synthesis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the literature.

FINDINGS

This study examined 45 selected articles on the topic of voluntary childlessness from Islamic perspectives which has been discussed in a relatively limited but growing body of academic literature. The main discussions in past studies generally revolve around the religious, ethical,

sociocultural, and legal implications of the decision to remain child-free in the context of Islamic teachings and societies. Below are the key themes commonly explored:

1. Theological and Ethical Frameworks

Islamic theology traditionally places a high value on procreation, framing it as part of God's divine plan and a responsibility of marriage. However, several studies reviewed offer a more nuanced ethical interpretation of reproductive choices within Islam, including the decision not to have children.

Musallam (1981) provides a foundational text explaining why Islam permitted birth control, drawing on classical jurisprudential support for coitus interruptus (*azl*) and broader contraceptive use. He argues that Islamic ethics centre on compassion and pragmatic considerations—such as maternal health, economic capacity, and child-spacing—rather than rigid pro-natalism. Similarly, Obermeyer (1994) discusses how reproductive choice in Iran and Tunisia is not solely dictated by theology but deeply intertwined with ethical reasoning influenced by political and gender contexts. This positions voluntary childlessness within a broader framework of ethical deliberation rather than as outright deviance.

In Atallahjan et al. (2019), interviews in Pakistan reveal that many view family planning as sinful, associating it with distrust in divine provision. Yet, this belief often stems from cultural norms rather than direct theological evidence. Likewise, Yusuf (2014) highlights that while Ghanaian Muslim youth are aware of contraception, religiously inspired moral anxiety—fear of undermining family values or disrupting God's will—impacts their behaviour, despite Islamic scholars' clarifications that contraception may be ethically justifiable.

These studies collectively suggest that while Islamic theology encourages fertility, ethical reasoning in Islam accommodates diverse reproductive decisions when grounded in responsible intent and context-sensitive justifications.

2. Legal and Jurisprudential Perspectives (*Fiqh*)

Islamic jurisprudence has historically allowed reversible forms of contraception under specific conditions, but permanent childlessness, especially through sterilization, remains a contentious issue.

Keefe (2006) presents a rich ethnographic case from Northern Tanzania where Muslim women engage in permanent contraception despite religious ambiguity. Sterilization is generally deemed impermissible in Islamic law unless medically necessary, but women often reinterpret religious teachings to suit personal and familial well-being. This aligns with Philliber & Philliber (1985), who observe varied religious reactions to sterilization, showing that Muslims, among other faith groups, do undergo sterilization, often influenced by partner dynamics or misinformation.

Mehryar et al. (2007) explore reproductive health within Iran's theocratic legal system, where Shia jurists pragmatically support family planning despite earlier resistance. Iran's family planning program—encouraging spacing and limiting children—was legally sanctioned through religious consensus, demonstrating jurisprudential flexibility. Similarly, Musallam (1981) reinforces that Islamic law has always allowed contraception, so long as it does not lead

to permanent sterilization without cause. Meanwhile, Underwood (2000) examines Jordanian religious leaders' opinions, showing that most view family planning as Islamic, although they vary on which methods are permissible. This jurisprudential support, however, rarely extends to elective permanent childlessness, indicating a jurisprudential barrier to the voluntary child-free lifestyle.

These findings show that while Islamic law supports limited reproductive autonomy, voluntary childlessness—particularly permanent—is only acceptable under exceptional circumstances e.g., medical necessity, and lacks wide juristic endorsement.

3. Gender and Societal Expectations

In Islamic societies, motherhood is often framed as an essential component of womanhood. Thus, voluntary childlessness challenges entrenched gender norms, drawing societal scrutiny and resistance.

Hoodfar (1994) and Afary (2009) analyse the Iranian context, where state-promoted population policies have shifted over time from pronatalism post-revolution to aggressive family planning in the 1990s. These policies redefined women's reproductive roles: encouraging childbirth during war and discouraging it during economic strain. Despite these shifts, women's autonomy remained constrained, as policy never truly aimed at empowering women's choice including the choice to remain childless. In Bop (2006), the case of Senegal illustrates how Islamic interpretations are employed to suppress women's sexual and reproductive autonomy. The belief that sexual rights and child-free lifestyles are "Western" and un-Islamic underscores the deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Similarly, Rana et al. (2022) find that early marriage in Cirebon, Indonesia, is sustained not only by economics but also by religious validation of female fertility as societal duty.

Waheed et al. (2020) also show that in rural Pakistan, women are often disempowered from making contraceptive decisions independently. Husbands and male religious figures dominate the discourse, leaving women vulnerable to stigma if they express disinterest in childbearing. These patterns illustrate how gender expectations—especially in Islamic-majority societies—construct motherhood as a social obligation, thereby making voluntary childlessness an act of both religious and cultural resistance.

4. Modernity, Individualism, and Cultural Change

Modernization processes—urbanization, education, increased media access—are reshaping attitudes toward reproduction, including the acceptability of remaining childless. Faour (1989) and El-Mehairy (1984) demonstrate how education among Arab youth and medical professionals leads to greater acceptance of contraception. Women, particularly educated ones, are more inclined to delay or limit childbearing, sometimes indefinitely. Chamrathirong et al. (1986) and Karim (2018) reinforce that urbanization and socioeconomic development in Muslim countries correlate with reduced fertility preferences, despite persistent cultural pronatalism.

Afary (2009) also identifies how modern media and education altered Iranian women's expectations from marriage and motherhood. As life expectancy and literacy rates rose, fewer

women conformed to earlier norms that equated marriage with procreation. Similarly, DelVecchio Good (1980) shows how biomedical discourses introduced new understandings of fertility and contraception in Iran, sometimes clashing with folk-Islamic beliefs but increasingly gaining traction.

Jones (2006) offers a demographic perspective, revealing steep fertility declines in several Muslim countries, indicating silent shifts toward smaller family ideals—even if not outright voluntary childlessness.

Together, these findings suggest that while religious and societal norms still valorise procreation, modern life in Muslim societies is incrementally allowing for alternate choices, including voluntary non-parenthood, especially among urban, educated, or economically independent individuals.

5. Bioethical and Policy Implications

Voluntary childlessness intersects with complex bioethical questions in Islamic societies, especially regarding reproductive autonomy, informed consent, and healthcare access. Mehryar et al. (2007) highlight how Iran's theocratic system fosters tension between religious mandates and ethical concerns over access to services, especially for unmarried individuals or those who seek permanent contraception. Though the state allows family planning, it simultaneously restricts access to certain groups, raising concerns of discrimination and coercion. Renne (1996) brings attention to bioethical dilemmas in Nigeria, where local resistance to family planning stems from political distrust and fear of Western agendas. This reflects how religious and cultural values intertwine with political anxieties, complicating policy efforts to support reproductive autonomy.

Bop (2006) identifies policy failures in Senegal, particularly in implementing international human rights standards on women's fertility rights. The persistent framing of women's reproductive roles through Islamic lenses has deprived them of legal protection for alternative choices like voluntary childlessness.

In Philliber & Philliber (1985), sterilization studies suggest that individuals who undergo permanent contraception without full consent or understanding often suffer from regret and health issues, stressing the ethical importance of informed decision-making in family planning programs.

Thus, policies aiming to promote reproductive health in Muslim contexts must consider the ethical implications of restricting or coercing reproductive choices. Voluntary childlessness, while theologically debatable, remains a legitimate ethical stance deserving respectful consideration in policy planning.

Voluntary Childlessness Considering the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*

The existing literature offers valuable, albeit indirect, insights into how Islamic scholars, schools of thought, and *fatwa* institutions interpret voluntary childlessness, especially when examined through the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, with reference to *ḥifẓ al-nasl* (preservation of lineage). Although few studies explicitly frame their discussions in *maqāṣid* terms, works such as Musallam (1981) and Mehryar et al. (2007) demonstrate that many

classical and contemporary jurists have supported contraception based on harm prevention (*dar' al-mafāsīd*) and welfare (*maṣlahah*). This suggests that *ḥifẓ al-nasl* has not always been narrowly interpreted as an obligation to reproduce, but rather as a means of safeguarding the integrity, viability, and health of familial and social structures.

Jurisprudential diversity also reflects a spectrum of flexibility: *Shi'ite* scholars in Iran, as described by Mehryar et al. (2007), endorsed state-led family planning programs, showing how *ḥifẓ al-nasl* could be interpreted as a societal goal rather than an individual reproductive imperative. Similarly, studies like Keefe (2006), Underwood (2000), and Afary (2009) underline how legal and religious authorities adapt rulings considering contemporary contexts, often using public welfare (*maṣlahah*) as justification—a key *maqāṣid* principle.

However, a notable gap exists in the explicit treatment of voluntary, permanent childlessness by *fatwa* institutions and Islamic scholars. Most literature, such as Philliber & Philliber (1985) and Yusuf (2014), focuses on contraception or temporary birth limitation, with permanent non-reproduction largely unaddressed or viewed with suspicion. This silence may reflect an underlying discomfort or lack of consensus within the legal and ethical discourse, especially given the weight Islamic tradition places on family and progeny. Nevertheless, the principle of *ḥifẓ al-nasl* need not be interpreted as requiring biological reproduction in all cases. It may be re-envisioned to mean the protection of social and moral lineage, or the integrity of family systems in a broader sense, particularly in modern societies where diverse family models and personal autonomy are increasingly relevant.

Thus, while the current body of literature reveals a juridical and cultural inclination toward pro-natalism, it also opens the door for more expansive interpretations of *ḥifẓ al-nasl*—ones that align voluntary childlessness with other higher objectives of Islamic law, such as preservation of intellect (*ḥifẓ al-'aql*), dignity (*ḥifẓ al-'ird*), and welfare (*maṣlahah*). Future scholarship is therefore needed to fill this gap by explicitly exploring how voluntary childlessness can be ethically and jurisprudentially reconciled with the objectives of *sharī'ah*.

Factors Influencing Decisions to Remain Childfree in Muslim Contexts

The reviewed literature further identifies a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, psychological, and religious factors that influence decisions to remain childfree or to limit childbearing within Muslim contexts, although explicit discussions of voluntary childlessness remain limited.

Socio-cultural norms, especially those surrounding gender roles, exert strong pressure on women to fulfil traditional expectations of motherhood. As highlighted by Bop (2006), Rana et al. (2022), and Waheed et al. (2020), women who deviate from the expected reproductive path face social disapproval, with motherhood often regarded as central to a woman's identity and social value. These cultural norms are reinforced by patriarchal interpretations of religion, where childbearing is perceived as a divine obligation. However, the literature also reveals that modernization, increased access to education, and exposure to global media have begun to shift these expectations. Studies by Afary (2009), Faour (1989), and Karim (2018) show that educated and urbanized Muslim populations are increasingly open to smaller families, delayed parenthood, or the choice to remain childfree.

Economically, many couples in lower- and middle-income Muslim societies face financial uncertainty, unemployment, or rising living costs, making large families less desirable or feasible. Economic reasoning is frequently cited as a justification for contraceptive use, as demonstrated in the work of Musallam (1981), Chamrathirong et al. (1986), and DeVecchio Good (1980). Psychologically, although not always foregrounded in the literature, there is an emerging awareness of personal well-being, mental health, and life satisfaction as motivators for controlling or forgoing reproduction. Keefe (2006) and Philliber & Philliber (1985) suggest that individual decision-making, marital satisfaction, and autonomy are key components in reproductive choices—factors often overlooked in more traditional, communal settings. On the religious front, beliefs play both permissive and restrictive roles. While scholars like Musallam (1981) and Underwood (2000) demonstrate that Islamic teachings allow contraception under certain conditions, others such as Atallahjan et al. (2019) and Yusuf (2014) document prevailing attitudes that view limiting childbirth as morally questionable or sinful, often shaped more by cultural interpretations than by doctrinal evidence.

Thus, while few Muslims may explicitly declare themselves voluntarily childfree, the literature reveals that a confluence of religious re-interpretations, socio-economic realities, gender roles, and emerging individualistic values are increasingly influencing reproductive decisions in Muslim societies.

Gendered Experiences and Implications of Voluntary Childlessness

The reviewed literature also provides substantial evidence that gender dynamics are central to shaping both the discourse and lived experiences of voluntary childlessness in Muslim-majority and minority contexts. Across the studies, it is evident that women disproportionately bear the social and moral burden of reproductive expectations, with motherhood often regarded not merely as a choice but as a religious, cultural, and marital duty. This gendered framing of reproduction is reinforced by patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts, community norms, and institutional structures that define womanhood through the lens of fertility. As documented by Bop (2006), Hoodfar (1994), and Afary (2009), women who challenge these norms—by limiting fertility or contemplating a child-free life—risk social exclusion, moral judgment, and even legal restrictions in some settings. These pressures are further amplified in rural and conservative communities, such as those described in Waheed et al. (2020), where male decision-making dominates reproductive choices, and women have limited agency to negotiate childbearing within marriage.

At the same time, the literature also shows that women are not merely passive recipients of these norms. Studies like Keefe (2006) and Rana et al. (2022) illustrate how women pragmatically navigate religious rules and cultural expectations to achieve their reproductive goals, including through sterilization or delayed motherhood. In contrast, men are generally portrayed in the literature as key gatekeepers of reproductive decision-making but less subjected to stigma when opting for smaller families or expressing disinterest in parenting. This asymmetry reinforces a gendered double standard, where men's reproductive choices are normalized or overlooked, while women's choices—especially to remain childfree—are scrutinized.

Furthermore, the discourse around voluntary childlessness is often framed through a male-centric lens within religious institutions, where male scholars and leaders define acceptable reproductive behaviour without adequately incorporating women lived realities. The work of Underwood (2000) and Philliber & Philliber (1985) also shows that religious authorities may approve of family planning in theory, but social implementation often excludes or marginalizes women's voices. In Muslim minority contexts, such as among migrants in Western societies (e.g., Sargent & Cordell, 2003), gender dynamics become even more layered, as Muslim women must navigate both traditional community expectations and secular, liberal norms around reproductive autonomy.

Overall, the literature reveals that gender dynamics deeply influence the framing, negotiation, and experience of voluntary childlessness. Women's reproductive choices are shaped not only by religious interpretations but also by structural inequalities, marital hierarchies, and cultural narratives that define fertility as central to female identity, thereby making voluntary childlessness a socially fraught, gendered phenomenon in many Muslim contexts.

Research Trends, Methodological Gaps, and Regional Disparities

The systematic review of 45 articles reveals several key research trends, methodological gaps, and regional disparities in the study of voluntary childlessness within Muslim contexts, which provide a valuable foundation for guiding future empirical and theoretical work.

Research trends in the literature show a dominant focus on family planning and contraceptive use rather than on voluntary childlessness per se. Most studies (e.g., Musallam, 1981; Mehryar et al., 2007; Underwood, 2000) explore fertility limitation within marriage, often motivated by health, economic, or demographic considerations, with very few addressing the deliberate choice to remain childfree. Furthermore, the literature frequently centres on the permissibility of contraception within Islamic law and the influence of religious interpretations on reproductive behaviour, as seen in studies by Ataullahjan et al. (2019), Yusuf (2014), and Afary (2009). While some studies indirectly touch upon individual autonomy or social resistance to procreation, they rarely frame these within the discourse of voluntary childlessness, revealing a conceptual and thematic gap.

In terms of methodological gaps, most of the studies reviewed rely on quantitative data (e.g., demographic surveys, fertility statistics, or prevalence rates of contraceptive use), with limited use of qualitative methods that capture subjective experiences, particularly from those who have consciously chosen a childfree life. Exceptions, such as Keefe (2006) and Bop (2006), use ethnographic or in-depth interview approaches, offering richer insight into gendered and cultural dynamics. There is also a lack of longitudinal research to explore how attitudes toward childbearing and voluntary childlessness evolve over time, as well as minimal engagement with Islamic jurisprudential texts in a comparative or theoretical manner. Few studies systematically apply Islamic ethical frameworks like *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, despite their relevance to reproductive debates.

Regional disparities are also evident. A significant proportion of the literature focuses on countries like Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and Bangladesh, while others—such as Sub-Saharan African, Southeast Asian, or Gulf states—are underrepresented. Moreover, the lived

experiences of Muslims in minority settings (e.g., in Western countries or in multicultural secular contexts) are sparsely addressed, despite their unique navigations of both Islamic and secular norms. Additionally, the perspectives of various Islamic sects and schools of thought, including Sunni, Shia, Ibadi, and reformist movements, are rarely differentiated, masking doctrinal diversity that could have implications for understanding voluntary childlessness.

Collectively, these patterns highlight the need for future studies to broaden the geographic, methodological, and conceptual scope of research. There is a pressing need for empirical work that directly investigates the lived experiences and motivations of voluntarily childfree Muslims, particularly through qualitative and interdisciplinary methods. Future studies should also engage more systematically with Islamic legal and ethical discourses to explore how traditional concepts are being reinterpreted considering changing societal norms. This will not only fill current gaps but also provide a more comprehensive understanding of reproductive autonomy and diversity in the Muslim world.

Future Research

To enhance the scholarly understanding of voluntary childlessness from Islamic perspectives, future studies should be designed with the following directions:

Deep Ethnographic and Qualitative Exploration

Future research should conduct in-depth ethnographic and qualitative studies among Muslim individuals or couples who have consciously chosen not to have children. This approach will help uncover personal motivations, spiritual reasoning, and social negotiations involved in such a decision. Studies should seek to capture voices from a range of Muslim-majority and minority communities, including urban and rural populations, across different cultural and sectarian contexts (e.g., Sunni, Shia).

Comparative Jurisprudential Analysis

A detailed comparison of Islamic legal opinions (*fatwas*) across the four Sunni *madhahib* (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali) and Shia schools could clarify how *fiqh* treats long-term contraception and voluntary childlessness. Future researchers should analyse classical texts alongside contemporary *fatwas* and legal debates to highlight divergences and evolving interpretations.

Inclusion of Male and Religious Leader Perspectives

While much current research focuses on women's experiences, more attention is needed on the views of Muslim men and religious scholars. How do men perceive childlessness in marriage? How do imams, clerics, or ulama address this issue in sermons or counselling? Exploring these views will reveal the scope for religious reform and community education.

Longitudinal and Intergenerational Studies

Researchers should consider longitudinal designs to assess how attitudes toward childlessness evolve over time within Muslim communities. Additionally, intergenerational studies could explore how younger Muslims' views on family and reproduction diverge from older generations in response to globalization, education, and digital media.

Intersectionality: Class, Gender, and Migration

Future research should examine how voluntary childlessness is shaped by intersecting identities—such as class, gender, education, and migration. For instance, how do working-class Muslim migrants in Western countries negotiate Islamic values with host-country norms around reproductive autonomy?

Policy-Oriented and Public Health Research

Policy analysis should investigate how national health policies in Muslim-majority countries accommodate (or fail to accommodate) voluntary childlessness. Future studies could assess healthcare access, legal protections, and social services for voluntarily child-free individuals or couples, and the implications for reproductive justice and equity.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review of 45 articles explores the multifaceted dimensions of voluntary childlessness in Islamic contexts through five interrelated themes. While Islamic theology and jurisprudence often promote procreation, historical and scholarly evidence shows that Islam permits family planning and, in some circumstances, allows for limiting childbirth. The growing forces of modernity, gender empowerment, and public health challenges are increasingly shaping individual reproductive decisions in Muslim societies. Despite these shifts, voluntary childlessness remains culturally stigmatized and legally ambiguous, especially in societies where gender norms are strongly linked to motherhood.

As for policy implications, the findings suggest a critical need to reframe reproductive ethics in Islamic discourse to include voluntary childlessness as a legitimate choice. Public policy must be informed by inclusive interpretations of Islamic teachings that consider modern social realities. Gender-sensitive educational programs, informed religious scholarship, and healthcare access for all—including those who choose not to parent—are essential for achieving reproductive justice.

This review is limited by the availability of empirical data directly addressing voluntary childlessness, as most literature focuses on family planning in general. Cultural diversity within the Muslim world and differences in legal schools may also lead to varied interpretations not fully captured here.

As for future research, further qualitative studies are needed to explore individual motivations and lived experiences of voluntarily child-free Muslims, especially across different regions, sects, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Comparative jurisprudential analysis and

longitudinal studies could also illuminate evolving norms and policy shifts regarding reproductive autonomy in Islamic societies.

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