

The Childfree Choice and Female Labor Market Participation: Evidence from Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between childfree status and women's labor force participation in Indonesia, using data from the March 2023 Susenas. The childfree group—defined as women who have never given birth, are not pregnant, and use contraception—comprises only 917 women (0.07% of the sample), primarily urban, educated, and of working age. Using binary logistic regression, the analysis reveals that childfree women are more likely to participate in the labor market, especially those who have never married. Although the association is only marginally significant, the trend suggests that fertility preferences may influence economic behavior. Despite the small sample, these findings provide early evidence of shifting norms among Indonesian women and emphasize the need for inclusive labor and social policies that acknowledge diverse life choices. The study adds to the limited literature on voluntary childlessness in developing countries and encourages broader discussions on gender, fertility, and employment.

Keywords: Childfree, Labor Force Participation, Fertility Choice

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, women's decision not to have children—commonly referred to as being *childfree*—has become an increasingly prominent social phenomenon, both in developed and developing countries. This term refers to individuals or couples who consciously choose not to have children, not due to medical reasons but as an autonomous lifestyle choice (Gillespie, 2003; Park, 2005). This phenomenon reflects a transformation in family values, gender roles, and labor market dynamics that demand flexibility and opportunities for self-development, particularly for women.

In Indonesia, a country with a strong family value structure and relatively conservative gender roles, the decision to be childfree is still rare and often considered deviant from social norms. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is beginning to emerge among women with higher education, working in the formal sector, and living in urban areas. The rise of urbanization, openness to information, and access to education and employment

have enabled the emergence of a group of women who are beginning to question traditional roles of motherhood and choose alternative life paths.

Previous studies have revealed that childcare responsibilities are a significant barrier for women to fully participate in the labor market (Bloom et al., 2009; Budig & England, 2001). In this context, women without children are often assumed to have more time and energy to pursue their careers and greater flexibility in responding to job opportunities. Findings from developed countries suggest that childfree women tend to have higher incomes, greater career stability, and broader opportunities for promotion (Dykstra & Keizer, 2009; Johnson & Lichter, 2020).

In contrast, women with children often face structural and cultural constraints in maintaining their participation in the labor force. Research by Correll et al. (2018) shows that there is a discriminatory bias against working mothers, which affects their job prospects and earnings. In Indonesia, although female labor force participation has shown an upward trend (BPS, 2024), it remains stagnant at around 56.42%, and gender gaps in employment access and career advancement remain high.

The literature in Indonesia remains very limited in addressing the childfree issue from a labor economics perspective. Most existing studies focus on fertility, maternal health, or family planning. However, few have explicitly examined the relationship between the decision not to have children and women's labor force participation. A study by Dahnia et al. (2023) found that gender norms and social pressures remain strong factors shaping women's choices in the workplace, even though younger generations are beginning to show openness to reproductive alternatives such as being childfree.

To fill this gap in the literature, this study uses data from the 2023 National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) to analyze the socio-economic characteristics of childfree women in Indonesia and evaluate their relationship with labor force participation. Using a quantitative approach based on national data and a narrative that integrates shifting social values, this research aims to answer two key questions: (1) What are the characteristics of childfree women in Indonesia in terms of age, education level, marital status, place of residence, and employment status? and (2) Is there a relationship between the decision not to have children and women's participation in the labor market?

Preliminary findings suggest that childfree women tend to have higher labor force participation rates than women with children. However, since this group still constitutes a tiny proportion (about 0.04%) of the productive-age female population, according to Susenas 2023, this analysis cannot entirely rely on advanced statistical testing such as robustness checks or propensity score matching. Therefore, the approach is more exploratory and descriptive, emphasizing initial interpretations of emerging patterns.

Through this study, it is expected that contributions to the discourse on gender equality and inclusive labor policies can be expanded. In addition, the findings may serve as a foundation for further studies using more in-depth qualitative or mixed-methods approaches to explore the motivations, social pressures, and long-term implications of choosing to be childfree in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The *childfree* phenomenon, referring to the conscious decision by individuals not to have children, has become an increasingly prominent topic in social and economic studies, particularly in developed countries. This choice is often associated with a desire to focus on career advancement, personal freedom, financial stability, and ideological factors (Gillespie, 2003). Within the framework of rational choice theory, the decision to be childfree can be seen as an optimization of individual preferences within specific social and economic contexts. Meanwhile, role theory explains that women who reject traditional roles as housewives are likelier to choose alternative life paths that align more closely with their professional and personal goals.

Childfree Women and Labor Force Participation

Global studies have shown that childfree women tend to have higher labor force participation rates than women with children (Johnson & Lichter, 2020; Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008). The absence of childcare responsibilities enables women to allocate more time and energy toward their careers, education, and personal development. In a longitudinal study, Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell (2007) observed that childfree women report levels of life satisfaction comparable to those of mothers, provided they receive sufficient social support and work in supportive environments.

Several studies also indicate that childfree women are more likely to come from well-educated and middle-to-upper income groups (Lichter et al., 2016). They typically have access to broader career opportunities and are more aware of how motherhood can impact job mobility and earnings. For example, Gangadharan et al., (1996) used an exogenous shock—twin births—to demonstrate that the presence of children significantly reduces female labor force participation in Australia.

The Influence of Education on the Childfree Decision

Education is one of the key determinants in a woman's decision to remain childfree. Lammers et al. (2011) indicate that highly educated women tend to postpone or even opt out of having children due to their commitment to professional careers and a more individualistic worldview. Education equips women with critical insight to evaluate social norms and provides access to economic and social resources that support non-traditional life choices.

In Indonesia, although social norms still heavily emphasize the role of women as mothers, highly educated women—particularly those living in urban areas and working in the formal sector—are beginning to show a tendency toward choosing a childfree lifestyle. Matysiak & Vignoli (2008) note that this group is more aware of the social and economic challenges of parenting and tends to make reproductive decisions based on rational, long-term considerations.

Social and Economic Factors in the Childfree Decision

Social and economic factors—such as income, cost of living, and economic uncertainty—play a significant role in the decision not to have children. Research by Breen & García-Peñalosa (2005) and Lesthaeghe & Neels (2002) shows that women with greater financial stability are more likely to remain childfree, as they tend to prioritize career and social mobility over motherhood. This condition is increasingly relevant in developing countries, including Indonesia, where economic pressures and limited state support for childcare can serve as disincentives to parenthood.

Nevertheless, academic literature on this topic remains scarce in Indonesia. Most domestic research still focuses on fertility, family planning, and maternal health from a demographic perspective Utomo et al. (2021). Harzif et al., (2022) notes that childfree women in Indonesia continue to face strong social stigma, which often leads to their decisions being underreported or obscured in national household surveys. It presents challenges for empirical analysis of the relationship between childfree status and labor force participation.

Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

Most studies on childfree women originate from developed countries such as the United States, Australia, and Japan, where gender norms and institutional support systems are relatively more established. Hara (2023) and Mandujano-Salazar (2019) show that although fertility rates are declining in East Asia, social expectations for women to become mothers continue to pose significant barriers to their careers. These dynamics have yet to be thoroughly explored in Indonesia using national-level quantitative data.

This research aims to fill that gap by utilizing data from the 2023 National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) to evaluate childfree women's characteristics and economic behaviors in Indonesia. The study also adopts a mixed-methods approach by considering normative and institutional aspects influencing fertility decisions and labor force participation. As such, this study is expected to contribute to academic and policy discussions on gender equality, women's social roles, and the dynamics of labor force participation in Indonesia.

DATA AND METHODS

DATA

This study uses data from the March 2023 edition of the National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) released by the Central Statistics Agency. The data includes socio-demographic information of households from all provinces in Indonesia. The analysis focuses on female respondents aged 25 to 49 without restricting marital status—this includes women who are single, married, or married before (either divorced or widowed). This age range is chosen because it reflects relatively mature and stable life decisions, including decisions about having children and participating in the labor market.

The unit of analysis consists of women within this age group who have no biological children, are not currently pregnant, and are using family planning methods, classified as childfree. From the 1,080,165 observation, 917 women meet these criteria.

This study uses several variables classified into three main groups: dependent, independent, and control variables. The dependent variable is women's participation in the labor market, which is coded as binary, with a value of 1 for individuals who are employed and 0 for those who are not working.

The independent variable in this study is childfree status, defined as the status of an individual with no biological children. This variable is also coded dichotomously, with a value of 1 for women who have never given birth to a live child (childfree) and 0 for those who have given birth to a live child. Women classified as childfree are those who have never been pregnant, have been or are currently using contraception, and have never given birth to a live child.

Several control variables are included in the analysis to ensure the internal validity of the model and reduce the potential for estimation bias. First, the age variable is restricted to the middle productive age group. Second, marital status is categorized into three groups: never married, married, and divorced (whether divorced or widowed). Third, educational level is grouped into three stages: primary, secondary, and higher education. Fourth, the respondent's residence is controlled through a dummy variable indicating the geographical location, with a value of 1 for individuals residing in Java and 0 for those living outside Java. Lastly, the employment type is categorized as formal or informal sector employment.

This classification of variables allows for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between childfree status and women's labor force participation while considering relevant demographic and geographical factors.

METHODS

Due to the small number of childfree women in the sample (approximately 0.07% of the total), causal approaches such as Propensity Score Matching (PSM) are not employed, as the estimates would not be stable or valid. Therefore, the main approach used in this study is binary logistic regression to estimate the probability of labor force participation based on childfree status, while controlling for the influence of other demographic variables.

The model that is estimated can generally be written as follows:

$$P(Y = 1|X) = \frac{e^{\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Childfree}_i + \beta_2}}{1 + e^{\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Childfree}_i + \beta_2}}$$

Where $Y = 1$ if the woman is employed, and X_i includes age, education, marital status, and place of residence (Java or outside Java).

In addition to regression analysis, descriptive analysis is also conducted to map the social characteristics of childfree women in Indonesia. However, it is important to note that this approach is exploratory and only demonstrates associative relationships, not strong causal inferences. The potential for unobserved heterogeneity remains a primary limitation of this study.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH RESULT

In this section, the writer will present the descriptive statistics, which may include the distribution of key demographic variables (age, education, marital status, place of residence) for the childfree women in your sample, alongside comparisons to the broader female population. The writer could also discuss trends and patterns observed in the data, such as the percentage of women in each category (e.g., education level, employment status), and how these relate to the decision to be childfree.

Table 1. Summary statistics of sample

Variable	Observasi	Mean	S.D	Min.	Max.
Women labor participation	1,080,165	.5447483	.4991928	0	1
Childfree	1,080,165	.0007453	.0272892	0	1
Women Age					
20-24	1,080,165	.1507547	.3578098	0	1
25-29	1,080,165	.1421209	.3491742	0	1
30-34	1,080,165	.1659367	.372024	0	1
35-39	1,080,165	.1879907	.3907049	0	1
40-44	1,080,165	.1925641	.3943137	0	1
45-49	1,080,165	.1606329	.3671921	0	1
Marital status					
Married	1,080,165	.1547995	.3617136	0	1
Unmarried	1,080,165	.8452005	.3617136	0	1
Educational Attainment					
Primary	1,041,460	.2656021	.4416535	0	1
Secondary	1,041,460	.5333177	.4988889	0	1
Tertiary	1,041,460	.2010802	.4008081	0	1
Employment sector					
Formal	599,098	.4094161	.491356	0	1
Informal	599,098	.5905839	.491356	0	1
Region					
Jawa	1,080,165	.2749173	.4464728	0	1
Outside Jawa	1,080,165	.7250827	.4464728	0	1

Source: Authors' calculation of Susenas 2023

Based on the descriptive statistics of 1,080,165 observations of women in the productive age group from the 2023 National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas), 54.47% of women are employed, indicating a significant level of participation in the national labor market. Meanwhile, the proportion of childfree women is very small, at around 0.07%, suggesting that the childfree phenomenon remains a relatively rare occurrence in the general female population of Indonesia.

The sample comprises women from various age groups, with a relatively even distribution. Approximately 15.1% of the respondents are aged 20 to 24, representing women in the early phase of adulthood. A slightly smaller proportion (14.2%) is in the 25 to 29 age range, while the share increases moderately among those aged 30 to 34. The highest representation is found among women aged 35 to 44, indicating a concentration in the mature working-age population. Meanwhile, the proportion slightly declines among women aged 45 to 49. This composition suggests that most of the sample falls within the economically productive and reproductive age span, which is relevant for examining labor force participation and childbearing decisions.

In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents have completed secondary education, accounting for 53.3%. They are followed by those with lower education at 26.5% and those with higher education at 20.1%. This finding indicates that more than half of the women in the sample have completed education at the high school level or equivalent.

Regarding employment sectors, out of 599,098 observations with information on employment formality, 59% of respondents work in the informal sector, while 40.9% work in the formal sector. This shows the informal sector's dominance as the primary source of livelihood for women, which has implications for labor protection, income stability, and social security.

Regarding regional distribution, 27.5% of respondents are from Java Island, while the remaining 72.5% are outside Java. This composition aligns with the national demographic structure, where Java Island remains the center of population density and primary economic activity. It also opens the opportunity for analysis of regional differences in female labor characteristics and fertility.

Table 2. Logit Regression Results on Women's Labor Force Participation

VARIABLES	Women's Labor force participation	
	Coefficient	Std. err.
childfree	1.118*	0.580
Women Aged		
25-29	0.172***	0.048
30-34	0.191***	0.047
35-39	0.280***	0.047
40-44	0.413***	0.047
45-49	0.334***	0.048
Marital status		

married	1.306***	0.051
Educational Attainment		
Secondary	-0.183***	0.024
Tertiary	0.217***	0.035
Job Category		
Informal	-0.113***	0.023
Region		
jawa	0.049**	0.022
Constant	3.703***	0.050
Observations	573,473	

Source: Authors' calculation of Susenas 2023

The logistic regression results indicate that *childfree* status is positively and significantly associated with women's labor force participation. Women without children are more likely to engage in the labor market, as reflected by a positive coefficient of 1.118, which is statistically significant at the 10 percent level. The decision not to have children may facilitate women's involvement in economic activities, potentially due to the absence of childcare responsibilities that might otherwise limit their labor participation. This finding aligns with the study by Koropecj-Cox & Pendell (2007), which noted that childfree women are more likely to engage in professional activities as they do not have childcare responsibilities that limit their time and mobility.

Age also significantly affects women's labor participation. Compared to the reference group of women aged 20–24, those aged 25 to 49 consistently exhibit a higher likelihood of participating in the labor force. The most substantial effect is observed in the 40–44 age group, with a coefficient of 0.413. This pattern suggests that older women, who typically have more work experience and may have passed the early stages of childrearing, are more actively engaged in the labor market. This finding can be explained by the consideration that women in these age groups are likely to be more financially stable and have more professional experience, which supports the rational choice theory proposed by Gillespie (2003).

Marital status is also positively associated with labor force participation. Married women are likelier to work than their unmarried counterparts, as indicated by a highly significant coefficient of 1.306. It may reflect increased household economic needs after marriage or support from a spouse in engaging in economic activities. This finding aligns with the results of Lichter et al. (2016), which show that women who are more educated and have a freer marital status (i.e., never married) are more likely to work and focus on their careers, in contrast to women who bear childrearing responsibilities or are constrained by traditional roles in the household.

The effect of educational attainment is mixed. Women with secondary education are less likely to work than those with only primary education (coefficient: -0.183), while those with tertiary education show a higher probability of labor force participation

(coefficient: 0.217). These findings suggest that higher education levels enhance women's access to and opportunities in the labor market. This finding aligns with research by Silles (2016), which found that women with higher education are more likely to choose a childfree lifestyle and focus on their careers due to their awareness of childrearing's social and economic challenges.

Regarding job categories, women working in the informal sector are less likely to be included in the labor force than those in formal employment, as indicated by a negative coefficient of -0.113. It may suggest that informal work is often unregistered or unstable, thus contributing less consistently to formal labor force statistics. It supports the findings of Gangadharan et al. (1996), who showed that women with children are more likely to work in the informal sector compared to the formal sector.

Finally, geographic location also plays a role. Women residing in Java are slightly more likely to participate in the labor market than those outside Java, with a small but significant coefficient of 0.049. It may reflect the concentration of economic activity and employment opportunities in Java. The model is based on 573,473 observations and reveals meaningful associations between various demographic and socioeconomic factors and women's decisions to participate in the labor force in Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses offer important insights into the relationship between childfree status and women's labor force participation in Indonesia. Although the proportion of childfree women in the sample is relatively small (approximately 0.07%), their presence shows a statistically significant association with a higher likelihood of labor market engagement.

This result supports the argument that opting to remain childfree can be a rational strategy for women seeking to prioritize professional careers and economic independence, particularly within a socio-institutional context where formal childcare support remains limited. As Gillespie (2003) proposed under the rational choice theory, the decision to remain childfree may reflect a calculated assessment of the costs and benefits of motherhood, where women choose to allocate their time, energy, and financial resources toward employment and self-development rather than domestic responsibilities.

Age and marital status also emerge as significant predictors of labor force participation. Women in older age cohorts and those married display higher labor market involvement. This pattern may reflect increased household financial responsibilities or the evolving roles of married women in dual-income households. Furthermore, it may suggest that older women, who typically possess more work experience and possibly greater autonomy, are more economically active.

Educational attainment shows a nuanced relationship. Women with secondary education are found to be less likely to participate in the labor market than those with only primary education. In contrast, tertiary education is positively associated with labor force engagement. This non-linear pattern may point to the segmentation of the Indonesian labor market, where secondary education may not be sufficient to access desirable or stable

employment opportunities, thus discouraging participation. In contrast, more educated women likely have better access to formal and skilled employment, motivating sustained labor force involvement. It is consistent with Silles (2016), who suggest that highly educated women are more inclined to adopt a child-free lifestyle to pursue long-term career goals.

The negative association between informal sector employment and labor force participation underscores structural limitations in labor market inclusion. Informal work—often characterized by low pay, lack of contracts, and job insecurity—may not be fully captured in official labor statistics, thereby underestimating women's economic engagement. This finding highlights the need for labor policy reforms that address the vulnerabilities of informal employment, particularly among women.

Finally, the modest yet statistically significant effect of residing in Java points to regional disparities in economic opportunity. Java, being the country's economic hub, offers more diverse and accessible job opportunities for women, thereby facilitating greater labor market participation compared to other regions.

Overall, the findings affirm the importance of considering gender, demographic factors, and structural socioeconomic conditions when analyzing women's labor market behavior in Indonesia. The study also signals a nascent, yet meaningful, emergence of the childfree phenomenon within the national context. This trend warrants further interdisciplinary exploration involving cultural norms, societal expectations, and policy environments that shape women's life choices.

ROBUSTNESS CHECK

In this study, the probit regression model was used as a form of robustness check against the main findings from the logit model concerning the impact of the childfree decision on women's participation in the labor market.

Table 3. Probit Regression Results on Women's Labor Force Participation

VARIABLES	Women's Labor force participation	
	Coefficient	Std. err.
childfree	0.421**	0.206
Women Aged		
25-29	0.063***	0.019
30-34	0.072***	0.019
35-39	0.108***	0.019
40-44	0.163***	0.019
45-49	0.131***	0.019
Marital status		
married	0.493***	0.019
Educational Attainment		
Secondary	-0.074***	0.010
Tertiary	0.084***	0.014
Job Category		

Informal Region	-0.051***	0.009
jawa	0.020**	0.009
Constant	1.986***	0.020
<hr/>		
Observations	573,473	

Source: Authors' calculation of Susenas 2023

A robustness check was conducted to ensure the robustness of the main estimation results by employing a probit regression model as an alternative to the previously used logit model. The results indicate that the direction and statistical significance of the coefficients in the probit model are mainly consistent with those in the logit model, thereby reinforcing the reliability of the main findings.

Childfree's key independent variable shows a positive and statistically significant association with women's labor force participation. In the probit model, the coefficient is 0.421, while in the logit model, it is 1.118. This consistency suggests that women without children are more likely to participate in the labor market regardless of the model specification, likely due to the absence of childcare responsibilities.

Age categories exhibit a clear and consistent pattern across both models. Compared to the reference group (women aged 20–24), older age groups (25–49) show a significantly higher likelihood of labor force participation. This relationship strengthens with age, as reflected in the increasing coefficients across age categories in both models. It indicates that older women, who may have accumulated more experience and moved past early family-building stages, are more actively engaged in work.

Marital status is also positively and significantly associated with labor force participation. Married women are likelier to work than unmarried women, as shown by substantial and statistically significant coefficients in both models (0.493 in probit; 1.306 in logit). It may reflect greater household economic needs or social support for working after marriage.

Educational attainment shows a consistent pattern across models: women with secondary education are less likely to participate in the labor force than those with only primary education. In contrast, women with tertiary education are more likely to work. It indicates that higher education is crucial in improving women's labor market access and opportunities.

Regarding job category, those in informal employment are significantly less likely to be engaged in the formal labor force, as reflected by the negative coefficients in both models. Meanwhile, regional variation also matters—women residing in Java are slightly more likely to participate in the labor market than those outside Java. However, the effect size is relatively small yet statistically significant.

Overall, the robustness check confirms that the probit model yields consistent findings with the logit model regarding coefficient direction and statistical significance. These results strengthen the credibility of the study's conclusions on the determinants of women's labor force participation in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the childfree status is positively associated with the likelihood of women working in Indonesia. The results from both the probit and logit models consistently indicate that women without children have a higher chance of engaging in work compared to women with children, after controlling for other demographic and socio-economic variables. Although the magnitude of the marginal effects is relatively small, the findings remain statistically significant in the probit model and suggest a link between reproductive preferences and labor force participation decisions. This reinforces the understanding that the decision to remain childfree can provide women with more flexibility in allocating time and energy towards economic activities.

The findings of this study have important implications for the formulation of labor policies in Indonesia, particularly in addressing the dynamics of women's reproductive preferences. The government and stakeholders in the labor sector should consider the development of viable and protected job arrangements. Given that women without children tend to have greater time flexibility, jobs with fair wages, social protection, and clear career advancement opportunities could be a rational choice to support their participation in the labor market.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that the decision to remain childfree is a legitimate life choice that is increasingly common in modern society. Therefore, labor policies should not only target working mothers but also accommodate the needs of women with diverse reproductive statuses. Furthermore, strengthening policies that support flexible work systems, such as remote working, adaptable working hours, and creating inclusive and stigma-free work environments, can enhance the active role of women—whether childfree or not—in the workforce.

Lastly, given the limited empirical studies on the childfree phenomenon in Indonesia, the government and research institutions are encouraged to expand studies on the social and economic implications of reproductive preferences so that future policies can better respond to shifts in societal values and social structures. Considering the social dynamics and changes in family values, labor policies that are more adaptive to the diversity of women's roles are crucial in building an inclusive and gender-just economic system.

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