

**International
Institute of
Social Studies**

Ezra

**Lived experiences of childfree Bangladeshi women:
Constructions and negotiations**

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Bangladesh)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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December 2024

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Acknowledgement

I extend my sincere gratitude to all my participants.

These women have diverse lives, dreams, tragedies, aspirations and strengths. They save people's lives at the operating table in the hospital. They rescue animals and raise them because they are animal lovers. They love to travel and love to stay at home. Some of them are obsessed with home decor, while so many are planning their next solo trip to a foreign land. Some capture photographs while some indulge in arts and crafts. Some of them are journalists, translators or teachers. Some are published authors of poetry, novels, thrillers and horror stories. They are diligent at work, caring for their loved ones and vocal about their own and others' rights. They are award-winning journalists, freelance contributors, data analysts, and entrepreneurs. But they also love to sleep, to enjoy slow days, to play their ukuleles, flutes or guitars. Some of them prefer to stay physically fit; some just love to eat. While some are bright and cheerful, others are good at hiding tears; few do not even hesitate to be honestly depressed. Their stories are unique, some even seemingly eccentric, but they are strong individuals. Strong enough to stand against the imposed roles; thoughtful enough to question the norms that are promoted as essential and powerful enough to live the compassionate life they make for themselves.

No single story can capture who they are, nor can it narrate the lives they live. Hence, I am indebted to all of them for allowing me to hear and learn from their unique experiences.

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List of Acronyms

ART	Assisted Reproductive Technology
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BD	Bangladesh
CEDAW	The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
IVF	In Vitro Fertilization
LTPM	Long-term and Permanent Method of Family Planning
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
PCOS	Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome
PMS	Premenstrual syndrome
RJ	Reproductive Justice
USA	United States of America

Abstract

In Bangladesh, motherhood is considered as glorified, natural and the most important biological destiny for every woman. In the context of patriarchal social, cultural and legal framework which essentialise blood-bond kinship, a woman's decision of not giving birth to any children and forgoing motherhood is deemed as abnormal, unnatural and deviant. This research explores the lived experiences of childfree Bangladeshi women who consciously and actively chose to opt out of motherhood roles and identity by rejecting procreation. By adopting qualitative methodological approach guided by feminist standpoint, this research analyses the in-depth interviews of sixteen childfree Bangladeshi women who narrated their experiences and challenges of being and staying childfree against the pressure of pronatalist patriarchal discourse. This paper examines various decision-making pathways and motivations for remaining childfree. The experiences of the participants reflect that the reactions to their childfree decision are often negative but they also found limited but supportive spaces among family members, friends, partners or online childfree communities. They employ various techniques of information control and confrontational strategies to respond to the unwanted questions, comments, judgements and stigmatisation. In addition, by planning and envisioning alternative imageries of future, care and kinship, the childfree women of Bangladesh construct their identities and lives beyond the pronatalist and patriarchal rationale of biological ties.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research illustrates the stereotypes and stigmatisation against childfree Bangladeshi women who face exclusion, judgement and disregard for their non-normative reproductive choices. The patriarchal forces of social, cultural and legal frameworks constantly try to undermine their ability of self-determination which can harm their mental and physical wellbeing. The country's existing policies regarding reproductive health and laws regarding family and inheritance of property discriminates the women without children by denying their right to gain reproductive justice and property inheritance. Thus, the childfree Bangladeshi women's lived experiences are influenced by sex-based segregation and gendered realities. Therefore, this research with its focus on the agentic voices of childfree women and their right to control their own reproductive choices relates to the notion of social justice and development studies.

Keywords

Childfree women, lived experiences, feminisms and motherhood, reproductive choice, agency, feminisms and motherhood

Chapter 1

Introduction: Contextualizing Childfree Women in Bangladeshi ‘Mater-normativity’

Nature of the problem: Opting out of reproductive norm

For Bangladeshi women, right after their marriage, perhaps the most frequently asked question is, “When are you giving us the good news?” This good news indicates the most desirable happy ending to a story in Bengali¹ (perhaps also in the Indian Subcontinent) fairytales. Living happily ever after is inconceivable in the Bengali² or Bangladeshi narrative if a married couple does not procreate (Roy, 2018). From *bangsher baati* (lamp of bloodline) to *buro boyosher abolombon* (caregiver for ageing parents), from marital disputes to hormonal diseases – giving birth to a child is advocated as the miracle solution to every problem a female adult may face in the Bangladeshi context. Just like other South Asian societies, Bangladeshi³ women live in a social reality where everyone born with a female body is expected to be a mother and their identities are perceived as naturally maternal. The norm of seeing womanhood and motherhood as inseparable is deeply rooted in the social, cultural and linguistic codes. Women who deviate from this dominant paradigm of ‘mater-normativity’ may experience stigmatisation and exclusion at the risk of losing acceptance within various social contexts (Nandy, 2017, p. 64).

Despite the pressure of conforming to the pronatalist solution of becoming a mother, I challenge the notion of considering childbirth as a simple causal effect or inevitable aftermath of being born as a woman and having a partner in a heterosexual marital union. Just because I have a female body, I do not aspire to be a mother. I believe in the existence of other women of Bangladeshi origin who chose to forgo the option of procreation. This research is influenced by feminist perspectives while it recognizes the positionality of a Bangladeshi feminist female researcher, who views motherhood as a choice. Therefore, I aspired to hear and analyse the multiple stories of childfree women like me who choose to refuse biological reproduction and the role of motherhood in a society that frames women as *maayer jaat* (literally translates into ‘mother’s caste’) which implies that motherhood is the ultimate destiny for every woman born. My queries focus on how Bangladeshi childfree women came to make this decision, the aftermath of choosing non-mothering and how the intimate partners, families – immediate and extended, friends, colleagues and neighbours reacted to this. My interest in learning about the possible stigma and discrimination derives from the desire to explore different ways to cope, resist and negotiate as childfree Bangladeshi women. Additionally, “What will happen to you when you get old?” indicating the concerns about the potential future crisis of getting elderly care, happens to be one of the common concerns of people around us. Therefore, this work also included the future aspirations and plans of childfree women of Bangladeshi origin.

¹ Bengali (or Bangla) language – National language of Bangladesh; spoken by around 270 million people primarily in Bangladesh and in some Indian states including West Bengal (van Schendel, 2022, p. 106).

² The Bengalis – Refer to the people who are native speakers of the Bengali language, who largely reside in the Bengal region in South Asia which is divided into West Bengal, India and Bangladesh (former East Bengal and later East Pakistan which gained independence in 1971 and formed the People’s Republic of Bangladesh) (van Schendel, 2022, pp. 105-106).

³ According to The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (1972), a citizen of Bangladesh is known as Bangladeshi

Research context and background: Pronatalist expectations in overpopulated ‘Motherland’

Throughout recent decades, Bangladesh has advanced significantly in terms of economic and social changes. The women of the country have also achieved progress in education, employment and entrepreneurship but their social reality is still bound by the rules and norms deriving from patriarchy, class-based hierarchy and religious and cultural traditions (Nahar, 2022; Adams, 2015). Bangladeshi society, like most other societies, preaches pronatalist discourse where a woman’s identity is essentially constructed and associated with the inevitable purpose of motherhood. It is one of the social identities uniquely connected to women as a normative and fundamental responsibility in pronatalist social structures (Sultana, 2013, p. 14; Gillespie, 2003, p. 133). The celebration of motherhood is not limited to the Western-influenced discourse of Mother’s Day observed in social media, mass media and lifestyle stores. In the family sphere, the parents and other elderly members want every little Bengali girl to be “*lokkhi meye*” or “*lokkhi mā*”, regardless of the religious background of the family, which essentially signifies the metaphor of Goddess Lakshmi, who is associated with the ideas of purity, wealth and fertility (Sarbadhikary, 2019, p. 10). The fairytales are not only the advocates of procreation, rather they specialize in disseminating the notion of reproducing ‘male heir’ (Roy, 2018, p. 58). Films in Bengal⁴ since their inception, have glorified mothers as selfless and loving while childless protagonists were portrayed as desperate, depressed, lonely, and often abandoned (Madnal, 2011, p. 330).

The construction of motherhood in the social and cultural context of Bangladesh is historically intertwined with its nationalist struggle for independence from colonial power. The motif of *Bangla mā* has been used as a powerful symbol of the motherland by many Bengali authors since the 19th-century British colonial era. Some of the most popular and significant examples of such symbolism can be found in the works by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore and Dwijendralal Roy in the pre-1947 context of the geographical area that is now divided into Bangladesh and West Bengal, India (Chatterjee and Chatterjee, 2015, p. 145). This glorified representation of motherhood associated with Bengali nationalist emotions continued in the Pakistan period, particularly flourishing around the language movement and later during the War of Liberation in 1971. The rhetoric of motherland was so powerful to the patriotic Bengalis that a song written by Tagore was adopted as the national anthem of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, which renders love for Bengal as the mother by repetitively addressing the land as *mā* or ‘Oh mother mine’ (Farooq, n.d.). Consequently, in a land where the *mother tongue* (Bengali) of the majority is the national and official language and the country is regarded as the *motherland*, motherhood is perceived as the glorified ‘ultimate identity’ of women. However, this seemingly glorified depiction contributed to confining Bangladeshi women’s identities to their reproductive and domestic roles (Bagchi, 1990, p. 66).

Motherhood is perceived as so integral to female identity that childlessness is perceived as one of the worst stigmas for women. Infertility is regarded as a curse and in many cases, women’s infertility works as an excuse for the husbands’ or their families’ decision of remarriage, with or without divorce (Khanam, 2016, p. 2). Adoption is not considered a satisfactory replacement for biological motherhood in Bangladeshi societies. Therefore, one can find numerous advertisements, both on the streets and in the media, of various fertility treatments, assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) including in vitro fertilization (IVFs) and even supernatural ways (*taabiz*, *tantraa*, *peer*, etc.) to reach the

⁴ Film as a medium was introduced to Bengali-speaking people at the end of the 19th century when the South Asian region of Bengal (now divided into Bangladesh and West Bengal, India) was ruled by British colonial power, (Huq and Mukherjee, 2020, p. 3; van Schendel, 2022, p. 106).

goal of becoming a mother. Such essentialisation of carrying a child in the womb has created business opportunities for both large and small-scale businesses in medical and non-medical spheres (Parvin, 2016, p. 48). While society preaches to women that motherhood is the only role that makes women respectable, the risks of pregnancy, childbirth and early childhood mortality rates are barely discussed. In 2022, the country's maternal mortality rate was 156 per 100,000 live births, whereas the neonatal mortality rate was 20 deaths per 1000 live births (MPDSR, 2023, p. 10). The stillbirth rate per 1000 total births in Bangladesh was reported to be 20.5 in 2021 (The World Bank, n.d.). Moreover, once a child is born, the beloved motherland does not provide state-funded welfare support for childcare (Hussein, 2017, p. 5). Thus, the care responsibilities in Bangladeshi patriarchal households are expected to be carried out by the women in the typical male breadwinner model. Even if a woman works full-time, she is expected to do that upon ensuring her child-rearing duties and maintaining the housework. Middle-class mothers with paid employment juggle between dual burdens at home and the workplace, which often results in guilt and conflict in their everyday lives (Khan, 2023, p. 64).

Pronatalist social expectations often disregard that motherhood is not a fixed and obvious part of the woman's body and desire; not every female body or every woman's belief system is willing and eligible for childbearing and child-rearing (Nandy, 2017). However, there are women in almost all societies who do not become biological parents, who remain without children or decide to adopt. In this regard, labels such as 'childfree' and 'childless' are often used interchangeably though they hold different meanings. While childlessness refers to circumstances where there is a lack of children due to infertility or sterility, *childfree* (also "*childfree by choice*", *childfreedom*", "*voluntary childlessness*", "*intentional childlessness*", "*otherhood*", "*non-mother*" etc.) refers to the "conscious, free and voluntary" decision to live without children (Nahar, 2022; Morell, 1994; Kelly, 2009; Wojnicz, 2017, p. 2; Salgado and Magalhães, 2024, p. 1). The heterogeneity of the terms to describe the voluntary decision of non-parenting indicates an ongoing debate and unresolved field of enquiry. None of the terms has gained universal acceptance among scholars as every term used in this regard carries a connotation that either fails to capture the essence of the autonomous decision of rejecting procreation or fails to equally respect the decision of mothering (Coates-Davies, 2020, p. 241). I decided to primarily use the term "childfree", though it is not uncriticized. My preference derives from the intention of focusing on the positive side, which Blackstone (2019, p. 54) views as "an affirmative take on a contested identity". Through this research, I attempted to reach out to childfree Bangladeshi women to learn from their lives and lived experiences to understand the constructions and negotiations related to their self-described and perceived childfree identities. I acknowledge that the childless women of the country also suffer from multifaceted stigma, disadvantages, and even violence and they have their own stories of agency and resilience (Nahar, 2022). However, this work does not include women who are involuntarily childless because of infertility. Thus, this study exclusively focuses on women's conscious and voluntary decision of not having children, which is termed by some authors as "childfreedom" (Moore, 2014, p. 159; Thornley, 2022, p.1).

Relevance and justification: Pressure to procreate in a patriarchal society

While human reproduction still relies on the biological function of the female body, previous literature on childfree or voluntary childlessness indicates that the growing availability of various modern contraception methods has brought changes in the dynamics of reproductive choices for women (Bhambhani, and Inbanathan, 2020). For several decades, women around the world have had options to choose whether or not to be pregnant by using different contraceptive and sterilization methods, though there are significant inequalities regarding the access and awareness of the methods (Richie, 2013; Peterson and Engwall, 2013, p. 383; Kelly, 2009, p. 157). Despite social norms, there were

historical instances of some women who defied marriage or motherhood in diverse cultures of the world. While some of them lived by socially unacceptable identities such as spinsters or sex workers, some had the option of taking positions within religious institutions. They include monastic women of medieval Western Christianity and the nuns of the Catholic Church, who adopted prestigious religious roles instead of living within the institute of marriage and motherhood (McKenna, 2006, p. 193; Pierce, 2024). In the South Asian context, religious practices in some cultures allowed women to live without marriage, male conjugal partners or children to perform religious roles or follow spiritual calls. The female saints of the Bhakti movement and Devadasis of the Indian subcontinent are examples of women who often lived outside the traditional household, defying the good wife-good mother discourse since the medieval era (Jha and Panda, 2023, p. 3026; Oza, 2022). Notably, many Devadasis were entitled to receive dance and music lessons, education and access to income and property. Unlike most women, they existed outside the “normative frameworks of conjugality and sexuality” (Sreenivas, 2011, p. 63; Harishankar and Priyamvadha, 2016, p. 118).

Though I have repetitively phrased Bangladeshi society as a pronatalist one, it needs to be mentioned that not all pregnancies and all mothers are welcomed and accepted. State law, customs and social norms deny the legitimacy of children if they are born out of wedlock. Pregnancy without marriage is considered extremely unwanted, shameful and unacceptable, whereas it is framed as a sin in religious discourse. Bengali society has historically ostracized pregnancy of unmarried or widowed women where this kind of pregnancy either led to abortion, infanticide or abandonment (Guha, 1996, p. 403). Furthermore, these abandoned children are viewed as illegitimate and often get shelter in the orphanages. Ironically, though there are options for childless couples to adopt these children, they rarely get adopted because of their so-called illegitimacy (Nahar, 2022, p. 139). Procreating without marriage is completely unacceptable to the oppressive patriarchal norms of Bangladesh. It is not only regarded as illegal, but it may also lead to the unmarried mother being abandoned by her family. For instance, Wilson (2004) noted that unmarried young girls (10-15 years old), who reportedly became pregnant by the exploitation of their male employers, colleagues, neighbours or relatives went through multiple layers of suffering. These extramarital and generally non-consensual sexual relationships occurred within the context of their economic vulnerability, social class, gender identity and age. The pregnancies led to further humiliation and abandonment, which forced them into abandoning their infants (Wilson, 1999; Wilson, 2004). Such stigma against pregnancy by pre-marital sex is so strong that it has been used as an excuse by the Bangladeshi government to incorporate a special provision in ‘The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017’, which allows the marriage of a minor girl if the parents or guardians give consent. The lawmakers indicated that marriage in this kind of cases can prevent a girl from the shame of giving birth (from consented or unconsented sex) to an illegitimate child (Datta and Hassan, 2022, p. 463). This provision to legalize the marriage of young girls implies that for Bangladeshi policymakers, it was more important to prohibit childbirth through pre-marital sex, than prohibiting child marriage (Begum, 2018).

Women born in every social class of Bangladesh generally grow up within male-dominated families and institutions that are characterized by patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal norms (Halim, 2013). Though the Constitution promises equal treatment to every citizen regardless of gender identity, many of the country’s laws (often derived from colonial and religious legacies) still reinforce women’s subordination. Despite being a state party in CEDAW, the country continues to deprive its female citizens by denying them equal rights to inherit family land and property. They seldom get the chance to practice ownership, decision-making and access to their income. Existing inheritance and family-related laws are primarily religion-based, which prefer gender-based segregation of roles inside and outside of the home (Sourav, 2015). The social and cultural imperatives imposed on women compel them to perform reproductive and caregiving roles in patriarchal families and social setups.

Interestingly, the care responsibilities and legal rights of Bangladeshi mothers are disproportionately distributed by the existing legal framework. According to the Guardians and Wards Act of 1890, mothers are deemed as physical custodians of the children as they are expected to provide care and attention until a certain age of the minors, but the legal guardianship is by default held by the fathers (Monsoor, 1994, p. 153). Until a recent verdict from the court, the country's minors were denied their right to education if they were unable to provide information about their father (Joyee, 2023). This scenario depicts the discrimination towards mothers in terms of parental rights though most of the parental duties are imposed on them.

Observing these inequalities in our patriarchal society, culture and laws compelled me to ask a simple yet non-conformist question. What if Bangladeshi women want to reject the option of embracing motherhood in such an unfavourable and gendered social reality? Though I was unable to find scholarly research on Bangladeshi women's voluntary decision to remain childfree, I came across a large body of research works that explored childfree women's lives around the globe. Studies show, that in many Western and Asian countries including South Korea, China and Japan, more and more women and couples are opting out of parenthood (Brown, 2021; Savage, 2023; Sood, 2024). According to different research publications from the last five decades, the number of women who choose not to procreate has increased in Western societies. Feminists and other theorists have often found various reasons like liberty, individualization, avoiding patriarchal imposition, emancipation, education or career aspirations, and so on associated with women's decision to prefer childfree lifestyle. However, in most cases, these women are perceived as negative, selfish, irresponsible and stigmatised by the individuals and institutions of society (Peterson, 2015; Stahnke, Blackstone and Howard, 2020; Salgado and Magalhães, 2024). The childfree movement has been examined from political and environmentalist viewpoints, and the lived experiences of childfree women have been researched and interpreted from different analytical frameworks in the West (Healey, 2016). Nevertheless, childfreedom as an option for women or couples in the Bangladeshi context is perceived as a strange or unnecessary topic to debate because the culture still adheres to the traditional rules and beliefs where patriarchal pronatalism is deeply rooted. Even the number of childfree women or voluntarily non-parent people in the country is so far unknown, as there is no official body to document them. Given these circumstances, the purpose of this study was to locate childfree Bangladeshi women living in or beyond Bangladesh to understand their lived experiences as citizens of this overpopulated South Asian country in terms of the challenges resulting from social and familial pressures, as well as their motivations behind selecting a childfree social identity. Nevertheless, according to the existing literature from other regions, men and couples without children also face negative reactions from society but women experience more harsh criticisms, pressures and unpleasant reactions (Park 2002; Koropecjy-Cox et al., 2007). Moreover, for women, infertility can result in pity or sympathy but being fertile and not wanting children is seen as abnormal and unnatural. Hence, this research limits its scope to focus solely on childfree women's experiences by acknowledging the need for future researchers to investigate childfree experience of Bangladeshi men and couples.

Research objectives

The central objective of this research is to understand the lived experiences of Bangladeshi women who do not conform to the pronatalist expectations of the family, society and culture. Previous researchers in the discussions on childlessness showed Bangladesh as an anti-natalist state where government agencies and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have been advocating, campaigning and intervening regarding family planning and population control for multiple decades (Nahar, 2012, p. 150). However, family planning promotions and advocacy materials⁵ always

⁵ See *Appendix 2*: A poster of the call center of Directorate General of Family Planning, Bangladesh

encourage married couples to have two (or sometimes one) children. This indicates the intention of reducing the number of children per household, but it is also evident that the state never depicted the option of having an ideal family without any child. Hence, it indirectly reproduces the narrative that procreation is essential and normal, and the idea of mandatory motherhood remains uncontested even with the backdrop of messages that preach about the disadvantages and dangers of overpopulation (Khanam, 2016). Therefore, it is important to hear the stories behind the reproductive choices of childfree Bangladeshi women – the choices they made inside an environment that connects the identity of all women to having an unquestionable urge for motherhood. Through this research, I attempted to explore the decision-making pathways and rationale that led the participants to choose childfreedom. Another objective of this study is to learn about the obstacles and challenges faced by childfree Bangladeshi women in their patriarchal, pronatalist surroundings to identify their coping and negotiation strategies. Considering the country’s cultural and societal norms that imagine all adult women having a homogenous life course characterised by marriage, childbirth and childrearing, this research also aspires to know the future imageries envisioned by those women who defy mandatory motherhood.

Research question

The central question of the research is, “How do Bangladeshi childfree women construct and negotiate their childfree lives facing the challenges around local patriarchal notions of motherhood?”

Sub questions

- What motivates Bangladeshi women to remain childfree?
- How do family members and society respond to childfree Bangladeshi women’s decision to reject motherhood?
- How do childfree Bangladeshi women address the challenges of staying childfree in pronatalist surroundings?
- What are the life goals and aspirations of childfree Bangladeshi women and what do they envision for their future?

Chapter 2

Beyond Motherhood Mandate: Exploring Theories and Literature on Childfree Lives

“...Angel in the House...She was intensely sympathetic...immensely charming...utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily... Had I not killed her she would have killed me” (Woolf, 1931).

To understand the choice of childfreedom, it is necessary to comprehend motherhood and how society constructs the expectations and standards of mothering. Carol Gilligan (2015) in her speech *Revisiting “In a Different Voice”* recalls the women’s movement in the 1970’s where the right to choose what happens to women’s bodies and reproductive choices played a central role. Her account of women’s morality which is relational i.e. ‘a different voice’ resonates with Woolf’s killing of the “Angel in the House”. The perpetual discord between the ‘selfless’ angel that whispers to a woman to mould her into a charming, obedient creature and the agentic voice residing within the woman who is framed as ‘selfish’ by society is still relevant (Gilligan, 2015, p.20). The inception of current research derives from interrogating one such societal expectation around reproduction through the female body and the imposition of the procreative burden on every person born with what is defined as the female sex.

According to Russo (1976), motherhood is no longer biologically inevitable for women with greater options for contraception, but complex social and cultural forces use the ‘motherhood mandate’ to inevitably bind women and motherhood as inseparable (p. 144). The centrality of this mandate is evident in the ways pronatalist patriarchal society controls women’s bodies, works and identities. The value of women is thus determined by their performance of birthing and raising multiple children, preferably sons and whether they can play other roles (through education or occupation) depends largely on the fulfilment of their primary roles as homebound mothers. Furthermore, the obligation of becoming a good mother limits women’s access to education, employment and mobility and creates sex-based segregation and discrimination. However, in a subsequent article, the author argued that by ensuring reproductive freedom and voluntary decision to remain childless, motherhood for women “becomes an option rather than a mandate” (Russo, 1979, p. 12). Therefore, to better understand the complexities of childfree women’s decisions and realities, this research relies on the intricate discussions surrounding motherhood, reproduction, family and care dynamics within feminist scholarships.

Motherhood and Feminisms: Reproductive burden or bliss?

For women, the choice of not having children implies the rejection of the role of motherhood. Therefore, childfree women do not only defy the pronatalist norm or procreation, they also challenge the “normative construction of womanhood” that places motherhood at its center (Rodgers, 2021, p. 24). However, the term motherhood comes with multiple connotations in different feminist discussions. It is not solely signified by biological and sexual reproduction but also influenced by changing notions regarding family, culture, society, religion, economy, politics, race, class, caste, state and policy. Feminist scholars have identified that ‘modern’ expectations around motherhood are tied to the invention of childhood that is imagined with the backdrop of ‘family’ or to be more specific, ‘nuclear family’ based on marriage and blood-related kinship where children are viewed as innocent

and precious creatures in need of constant care of the parents (Hird and Abshoff, 2000, p. 350). Nevertheless, it is not the men as fathers but the women as mothers (also as wives and housekeepers) who are expected by patriarchy to nurture and care for the children in a well-managed household which has been instrumental in sex-based discrimination against women by constructing them as the 'others' (de Beauvoir, 1949/1953, p. 504; Pateman, 1989). Recognition of the difference between biological birthing and the work of mothering has inspired feminists to fight for mothers' rights as well as for dissociating women from essential mothering (Neyer and Bernardi, 2011). Though liberal feminists advocated for equal rights, autonomy, and welfare of working mothers, they were criticised for reducing mothering to something like jobs. Later, critics and psychologists opined on the significance of mothering while contrary to the Western idea of mothering as biologically connected to the women's body, they considered nursing and nurturing of children as a role that should be shared by the community (Elshtain quoted in Tong, 1998, p. 36; Hrdy quoted in Gilligan, 2015, p. 24).

There are opposing and contrasting notions regarding motherhood and its impact on women's lives. A significant strand of feminist thoughts identified motherhood and mothering as a patriarchal burden on women. They argue that the acts of childrearing or mothering are not natural for women because, except for lactation, any person regardless of gender can take care of a child (Chodorow, 1978, p. 17). Therefore, Nancy Chodorow (1978) places mothering as a site which prominently demonstrates the capitalistic sex-based division of labour. Similarly, Adrienne Rich (1986) views motherhood as a patriarchal institution that glorifies the women's (as mothers) role as the sole caregiver which conceals the fact that it reduces women's identities to be confined in a single destiny. Though widely discussed, the similar stance of second-wave feminists on motherhood has been criticized later for having "anti-maternal bias" (Bueskens, 2021, p. 14). On such account, bell hooks (1984) highlighted the race and class bias of white feminist writers. She argued that contrary to their logic, black women would not have identified motherhood as the major obstacle to women's liberation. She portrayed the possibility of white middle-class women and black women workers having opposing worldviews regarding care work and wage work. On one hand, the first group were confined at home with their given roles of mothering, caregiving and household management, and for them, the right to work outside of the home to earn their living seemed crucial. On the other hand, black women were continually working outside to earn low wages for long hours which prevented them from fulfilling the longing to spend time with their loved ones at home. Both groups, she wrote, were alienated; one from the outer world of wage-earning, another from the environment of care (hooks, 1984, p. 133-135).

Many radical feminists viewed biological reproduction as the core of women's subordination. For instance, Shulamith Firestone is well known for her interpretation of motherhood (i.e. natural reproduction) in *The Dialectic of Sex* where she modified the Marxist framework to mark the "sex class" as the original source of oppression and discrimination instead of economic class. Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's writings, she identified the biological differences or reproductive burdens to the female body for which women are bound to bear and rear children as the root cause of suffering for the oppressed sex class. According to her, matriarchy or worshipping of women could never bring equality or freedom to women as they are perpetually bound to their role in natural reproduction (Firestone, 1984, pp. 73-74). Therefore, Firestone stated that the communist revolution does not hold the power to eradicate the class struggles between the sexes. She was rather optimistic that only through technological reproduction, which will take place without biological bindings can create a society where women will attain the power to actualise their freedom. Nevertheless, she was criticised for advocating technological dependency for procreation as the critics feared further inequality and danger caused by that referring to the exploitative nature of and infertility treatment industry (Rich, quoted in Tong, 1998, pp. 72-77). With ART and related technologies, rather than increasing women's control

over their bodies, the male-dominated medical system has been reinventing female bodies as the site of mechanised reproduction (Shiva, 1999; Nisha, 2021, p. 143). Although these discussions are ongoing with various layers and intricacies, exploring them in greater detail is beyond the scope of current research.

It is evident that while some feminist authors identified motherhood as the ultimate burden, some feminists, particularly the African and black American feminist authors recognise motherhood as the source of empowerment. Yet, there is no single uncontested notion of embracing or forgoing motherhood. After 10 years of writing *Of Women Born*, Rich (1986) wrote how reproductive issues such as abortion or sterilisation carry different connotations in different periods of history but also each period signifies contrasting realities for women of various classes, races or ethnicities within a particular policy regime. She also argued that women do not possess higher moral credibility by birthing children than the ones who do not have their own children (Rich, 1986, p. xxiv). Furthermore, in Black feminist literature, emphasis has not been limited to the practices of mothering through biological ties. They also discussed the valuable contribution of “othermothers” – the mothering responsibilities of the community besides the “bloodmothers” (Collins, 2005, p. 154; Hallstein, 2010, p. 21; Chaney, 2021, p. 129). Collins (2005) highlighted that this bloodmother/othermother dimension rejects the rigid notion of children as private property which is inclusive towards nonparents (e.g. childfree women) in the shared realm of care.

Reproductive autonomy and reproductive justice

Different feminist theories and debates on motherhood portray the significance of women’s choice to autonomously decide whether to reproduce in the context of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies which is useful in analyzing the motivations of Bangladeshi women’s childfree choice. However, it is also important to consider that the ability to make such choices does not come from a void as reproductive rights and freedom are influenced by broader socioeconomic, political and policy environments. For instance, Meyers (2001) suggests that agentic skills are the conditions that allow socially and relationally situated individuals to pick either conventional or unconventional paths. Her theory of self-determination is configured by a set of skills which flourishes or shrinks depending on different social environments (Meyers, 2001, 741). The extent to which a woman can exercise autonomy in reproductive decision-making is therefore likely to be impacted, at least in part, by coercive patriarchal norms. When pronatalist discourse shows motherhood as the only path, which she termed as “matrigyno-idolatry”, women’s autonomy faces a risk of being compromised because alternative pathways of non-motherhood are not even shown as an option for most women (Meyers, 2001, p. 758). While the author endorses that women have many reasons to have children, she also raises the issues of economic challenges, health threats, individual interests and goals along with environmental concerns for which women can deny having children. She emphasises the importance of both choices being equally accepted, appreciated and supported so that the women can make fully autonomous decisions of embracing or forgoing motherhood. Therefore, autonomous women or agentic voices in her account, are not stagnant but evolving subjects (Meyers, 2001).

To elucidate the connections among autonomy, personal choice, human rights and social justice regarding reproduction for women as a non-monolithic category, this research also relies on the concept of reproductive justice. The reproductive justice (RJ) framework was introduced by black feminist activists in 1994, moving beyond the pro-life/pro-choice binary by combining social justice issues with reproductive rights to address the struggles of marginalized people (Ross, 2017a; Ross and Solinger, 2017). As one of 12 black women who conceived this intersectional approach, Ross (2017b) argued that whether a woman or an individual can make and implement the choices and decisions about their body and life depends on suitable conditions built by their society and government.

Therefore, RJ focuses on reproductive autonomy and gender freedom to ensure “the right *not* to have children by using safe birth control, abortion, or abstinence; the right to *have* children under the conditions we choose; and the right to *parent* the children we have in safe and healthy environments” (Ross, 2017b, p. 171; original emphasis). It does not promote any single narrative, nor does it endorse a narrow definition of “choice” regarding reproductive issues (Ross and Solinger, 2017; Morison, 2022). RJ is not limited to abortion rights and sterilisation abuse discussion. Rather it embraces a radical approach against oppressive eugenics, neo-liberal economy, white supremacy, colonial expansion and violence targeted towards poor, gender non-conforming, non-white immigrants, and mentally and physically disabled people (Ross, 2017a; Price, 2010). The theory is influenced by feminist standpoint, critical race and critical feminist theory which acknowledges that everyone can be susceptible to reproductive oppression yet, the intensity varies with the intersection of identities (Ross, 2017b; Ross and Solinger, 2017; Schollaert, 2022, p. 132).

Changing labour, family and care landscapes

Feminist political economy can be relevant in the discussion of childfreedom in a patriarchal and capitalist world. Capitalist patriarchy and its “housewifisation” with both sexual and international division of labour as Maria Mies explains has been shaping the image of “*good mother*”, “*good wife*” and “*good life*” primarily in Western and later in Third World countries (p. 120). Though in neoliberal globalised reality, some women have the benefit of economic privilege, the broader picture of women’s condition is still characterised by patriarchal morals where women provide most of the unpaid and cheapest labour (Mies, 2007, p. 273).

Society and the state in general still expect women to carry a disproportionate share of care responsibilities often without any economic return but with the logic of morality while the men get the larger share of economic benefits. When women enter the domain of wage earning, Folbre (2014) argues that they find more economic reward and flexibility than their house but at the same time, they bear the ‘care penalty’ and ‘motherhood penalty’, which make them less desirable and less paid employees. Moreover, neo-liberal economy makes the upbringing of children more costly and even in dual-income families, women do most of the care work, thus endure a dual burden (Hochschild, 1989; Parker and Wang, 2013). Therefore, considering the opportunity cost, some women (often highly educated ones) with “economic, political and cultural bargaining power” reduce, postpone or forgo childbirth. The number of single or never-married women is also increasing (Folbre, 2014, p. 13). By questioning the mainstream discourse of family, feminists have expanded the horizon of defining and understanding family. They have recognized diverse modes of “doing family” and challenged gender, sexual, and biological/nonbiological binaries (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Oswald, Blume and Marks, 2005). Furthermore, Donna Haraway’s (2016, p.103) call to “Make kin, not babies” suggests that feminist rethinking of family, intimacy and care extends beyond biological and human ties. Building kinship with animals, plants and other beings is therefore crucial for coexisting on our planet (Haraway, 2016).

Childfree lives and choices: Contextualization through childfree literature

For several decades, literature on childfreedom or voluntary childlessness has highlighted the increasing number of individuals, particularly women without children and falling birth rates in developed nations (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Avison and Furnham, 2015; Chrastil, 2020). In contrast, academic and public discussions regarding childfree women have emerged as a comparatively recent phenomenon in South Asia, predominantly studied among its urban population (Nandy, 2013; Bhambhani and Inbanathan, 2018, p. 156; Tithila, 2021, Akhtar, 2023; Shamim, 2024, Babu, 2024).

Notably, a significant strand of interdisciplinary childfree studies has analysed women's choice to reject motherhood imperative through qualitative interviews and ethnographies by engaging with feminist theories and political discourse (Hird and Abshoff, 2000; Park 2005; Kelly, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2019; Peterson and Engwall, 2013). Feminists' and abortion activists' fight for women's reproductive freedom and rights, organized movement against coercive pronatalism to fight population growth⁶ and activism for defending the rights of non-parents⁷ – all coinciding in the 1970s, influenced academic enquiries regarding voluntary childlessness across different branches of social studies, psychology and biology in consecutive decades (Healey, 2016; Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Veevers, 1975; Houseknecht, 1987).

Shapiro (2014, p. 2) identified some dominant inquiries within childfree research literature including the type of people choosing to be childfree, reasons behind the choice, consequences of the choice, stigmatisation of childfree individuals' lifestyle and management of stigma. Moreover, Blackstone and Stewart (2012, p. 723) found that this area of research is highly focused on women's decisions. While there are ongoing debates about the influence of demographic and personality traits on reproductive choice, some studies suggest that childfree women are more likely to have higher educational attainment, hold comparatively well-paid positions, reside in cities and identify as non-religious (Veevers, 1979, p. 10; Pew Research Center, 2024, p. 35). Researchers categorised childfree women according to timing and degree of agency involved in their decision-making process. Thus, some studies divided the participants into 'early articulators' vs. 'postponers' and 'transitional women' categories, while others showed differences between 'active, certain' and 'passive, ambivalent' choices (Houseknecht, 1979; Gillespie, 1999; Settle and Brumley, 2014).

Various rationales of women's childfree decisions have been revealed in a substantial body of research. These include motivation for freedom, maintaining and developing relationships, aversion towards pregnancy, absence of maternal urge, lack of suitable partner, greater mobility, relief from motherhood roles, women's employment in paid labour, focus on career, economic advantage, concerns regarding parental capacity, crisis of climate and overpopulation, partner's disinterest in children etc. (Houseknecht, 1987; Gillespie, 1999; Park, 2005; Kelly, 2009; Graham et al., 2013; Peterson and Engwall, 2013; Peterson, 2015). Gillespie (2003) largely divided the reasons into attractions or pull towards childfree life and refusal or push away from motherhood.

Studies found that childfree women face more stigma and negative reactions than childfree men while for women, not wanting children is more denounced than not having them (Park 2002; Chancey and Dumais, 2009; Koropecykj-Cox et al., 2007). A major portion of the studies regarding the consequences of childfree choice, negative experiences and stigma management drew upon Goffman's (1963) famous work on the "management of spoiled identity" (Park 2002; Richie, 2013; Babu, 2024). These studies identified various strategies such as controlling information through passing or substitution of identities besides the effort to reinstate self-image at home, workplace, in cyberspace or with strangers (Verniers, 2020; Hintz and Brown, 2019).

In addition to largely Western literature, my current research has been significantly influenced by Riessman (2000), Nahar and van der Geest (2014) and Nandy's (2017) work in Indian and Bangladeshi contexts. These studies shed light on the inadequacy of many Western assumptions regarding choice, agency and stigma management to analyse the everyday resistance of women without children in South

⁶ Zero Population Growth (ZPG): organization for promoting population control and environmental activism (Healey, 2016, p. 132)

⁷ National Organization for Non-Parents (NON): pioneering organization of childfree activists, notable for identifying "non-parenthood as legitimate social identity" (Healey, 2016, p. 134)

Asian society's deeply rooted pronatalism entwined with patriarchal subjugation – or 'maternormativity' (Riessman, 2000; Nandy, 2017). Furthermore, though Nahar's (2022) focus on childless Bangladeshi women excluded the cases of childfree by choice, her insights were instrumental in understanding the social, cultural and legal backgrounds that support and accommodate the devaluation of all non-mothers (Nahar, 2022). Additionally, elaboration of 'agency', 'resilience' and 'resistance' regarding Bangladeshi childless women's confrontational strategies helped me in identifying and analyzing the responses of my participants against pronatalist advocates (Nahar and van der Geest, 2014).

Chapter 3

Crafting the Childfree Narrative: Methodological Journey

This research adopted a qualitative methodological approach from a feminist perspective. Unlike the positivist rationale, I attempted to explore the interpretative paradigm of Bangladeshi childfree women's "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988). Guided by the feminist standpoint, I designed my research by acknowledging the childfree women as the *knowers* in the context. Despite being citizens of the same country, every woman grows up with distinct experiences, perceptions, thoughts and circumstances. Thus, contrary to the erroneous assumptions, the lived experiences of childfree women are "multifaceted, socially situated and unique" (Coates-Davies, 2020, p. 242). Therefore, instead of collecting and analysing empirical statistical data, I chose to pursue a "strong objectivity" through learning the lived experiences and multiple stories of childfree Bangladeshi women (Harding, 1987, p. 7; Harding, 1992, p. 458).

Collecting stories: Conversing with childfree Bangladeshi women

As my research enquiry is informed by the importance of women's autonomy and agentic voice (Meyers, 2001, p. 742), I decided to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews to hear the stories of childfree women from themselves, in their own narratives. These In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to collect the stories using online platforms (15 Zoom meetings and 1 via WhatsApp call) to capture the subjective response regarding the childfree women's views, opinions and perceptions. The current topic is complex in nature and involves extended narrations about their life decisions. Hence, in-person interviews would have been ideal but as I was residing in The Hague as an international student, I decided to conduct the interviews online (Roulston, 2010; Hennik *et al.*, 2020). Though online interviewing comes with its benefits and challenges, especially since the COVID-19 outbreak, remote interviews are being widely used by feminist researchers (O'Quinn *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, the mobility of Bangladeshi women has been increasing over the past few decades, therefore, some of my participants were visiting or residing in other countries for business, jobs and studies during the interviewing process. Altogether, online interviewing helped me overcome the geographical barrier of in-person interviewing.

The interviews were carried out upon the reception of signed informed consent forms and the discussions prioritised the convenience of the interviewees. As the interviewer, I used the same questionnaire guidelines for all, but the length of the interviews varied between 70 to 140 minutes as I let the conversations flow based on the interviewee's unique narrating style without major interruption. In most cases, the language of conversation was Bangla with occasional use of English expressions while two participants preferred speaking in English. All the interviews were recorded digitally on my personal computer or mobile device which were transcribed later with pseudonyms. The transcription and coding were done manually to analyse the narratives of childfree women.

Locating the participants

The sampling of this study was purposive and because the number of childfree people in the country is unknown but assumably very small and scattered, I resorted to snowballing (Roulston, 2010). To recruit the interviewees, I had to ensure that they would have access to the internet and devices to join online meetings. Therefore, my search for the participants also took place in different online forums and social media. Initially, I communicated the research topic and asked for willing participants to my personal network (e.g. my friends and colleagues from news media, academia and the development sector) and the Facebook group titled "Childfree Bangladesh". I have been a member of this private Facebook group since February 2024. Created on July 11, 2019, this group has grown to 241 members.

While I got several responses in the group post, 3 of them ended up participating in the study. On the other hand, 4 of the participants came from my personal and professional network. They were either friends or colleagues of the people I knew. Eventually, to expand my search, I decided to write a public post on Facebook (the most used social media by Bangladeshis) and contacted the Bangladeshi journalists and content creators who wrote and spoke about their childfree lives (Hosain, 2023). These attempts enabled me to connect to more childfree Bangladeshi women. Therefore, this research includes the lived realities of 16 participants who were born and brought up in different regions of Bangladesh.

Participants profile

The mean age at first marriage for women in Bangladesh is 18.1 and 19.6 in rural and urban areas respectively; while the Bureau of Statistics caps the age for data regarding pregnancy at 60 (BBS, 2023, p. xxxvii and 178). Therefore, to investigate the life choices of women to forgo motherhood, I formed a plan to collect stories that focuses on women aged between 25-60 years. Through the selection of this age group, I intended to ensure that the participants had reached a certain level of maturity and experience that would allow them to make informed decisions regarding reproductive choices. By August 2024, I interviewed 16 women from different professional and educational backgrounds. The youngest of them was 25 years old, a BSc fourth-year student while the oldest participant celebrated her 49th birthday this year. The mean age is 34.9. Among them, 7 were aged between 25-35 years, 8 were between 36-45 and only a single interviewee was from the next age range.

During the period of interview, of all the women participating in the study, 11 were residents of Bangladesh, while the remaining 5 were dispersed across Germany, Canada and the United States of America (USA). One participant, a PhD student was in the process of relocating to the USA for studies. The participants self-identified as belonging to the middle to upper-middle-class segment in the Bangladeshi socioeconomic context. The participants comprised four professionals from the development sector, three medical doctors and three writers or journalists. Notably, two of the participants were pursuing doctoral studies. Additionally, the participant pool included an architect, a documentary maker, a data analyst and an undergraduate student. Except for one college student, all of them completed tertiary education.

Given the context of the criminalization of homosexuality in Bangladesh under the Criminal Penal Code (Section 377A), I was not able to reach anyone belonging to non-normative sexual identities (Karim, 2012, p. 67). The participants of the study were primarily heterosexual. It is important to acknowledge that this may have influenced the diversity of perspectives (or lack thereof) in the represented population. The childfree participants demonstrated a diverse range of relationship statuses. The major categories are single (4), in a relationship (4), divorced (3) and married (4). However, these categories do not imply similarities in lived realities. For example, a single woman expressed that she never had any romantic relationship while the rest said otherwise. The women who were in a relationship were either having a long-distance relationship or living with their partner. The married women's experience varied depending on whether they lived with their in-laws or not. Furthermore, single and divorced categories comprised both sexually active and non-active women.

As mentioned before, advocates of pronatalism in Bangladeshi society often draw examples from religious perspectives. Therefore, to examine the impact of religious beliefs on the decision to opt out of motherhood, the interviewees were questioned about their religious views. It was revealed that there was a swiping majority in terms of participants' religion at birth. Except for one participant born into a Hindu family, all participants were born and raised in Muslim families that varied in terms of religious practices, from conservative to moderate and liberal. However, there are more nuanced dimensions in personal belief and practice of religion because regardless of their parents' religion, 4

of the participants self-identified as agnostic, one as atheist and 3 as non-practicing Muslims. Moreover, among the 8 participants who mentioned Islam as their religion, one mentioned her association with Sufi Tarika.

Table 4: List of participants

Sl No	Pseudonym	Age	Profession	Relationship status	Current Location
1	Kabita	25	Final-year BSc student	Married	Dhamrai, a town in Dhaka district, BD
2	Maya	27	Freelance journalist and writer	In a relationship (live-in)	Jhigatala, Dhaka, BD
3	Ira	28	Communication staff, Development organisation	Single	Dhanmondi, Dhaka
4	Chaitali	30	Data analyst	Married	Connecticut, USA
5	Nishat	33	Former development professional, PhD student	In a relationship (long distance)	Dhaka, BD, awaiting relocation to the U.S.
6	Banhi	33	Resident doctor	Single	Bernau bei, Germany
7	Aurora	34	Doctor, BCS Health Cadre	Married	Mohammadpur, Dhaka, BD
8	Bela	36	Academician (Assistant Professor, English Literature)	Single	Lalmatia, Dhaka, BD
9	Nodi	36	Former journalist and PhD student	In a relationship	Boston, USA
10	Tuli	36	University faculty member, English language (former journalist)	Single	Uttara, Dhaka, BD
11	Preeti	36	Documentary maker and graphics designer	In a relationship (long distance)	Dhaka, BD
12	Tandra	38	Senior Program Officer Communications at a UN organization.	Divorced	Mohammadpur, Dhaka, BD
13	Nilanjana	38	Writer and entrepreneur (former lifestyle journalist)	Divorced	Kalabagan, Dhaka, BD
14	Kheya	39	Healthcare professional	Married	New York, USA
15	Rodela	40	Architect, currently unemployed and part-time student	Divorced	Canada
16	Nayla	49	Development professional	Divorced	Lalmatia, Dhaka, BD

Positionality

“We can’t separate lives from the accounts given of them; the articulation of our experience is part of our experience.” (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, p. 573)

My journey with the current research started from my own experience of being a childfree woman of Bangladesh who grew up in a patriarchal social setup. My marriage at the age of 32 brought extensive pressure and expectations from family members, relatives and co-workers, with a typical reminder of the ‘biological clock’, to conceive a child. As I never wanted to be a mother, to avoid dissent and hurtful situations, I found myself reducing the length of conversations with many of them and feeling uncomfortable. Soon, I was perceived as a socially deviant person. It was during my studies at the International Institute of Social Studies, that I realized that my feelings and experience as a childfree woman have the potential to be analyzed in the context of feminist social research. As a result, I started to think about the other childfree Bangladeshi women and my attempt to listen to their stories in their voices began. On that note, it is evident that this study was not conducted from the lens of an objective observer.

I started my research journey with the assumption that in a predominantly Muslim population of Bangladesh, women who can avoid, escape or deny the patriarchal and pronatalist expectations of motherhood probably come with a certain extent of educational exposure, and privileged background. Yet, I acknowledge that women of diverse backgrounds and social classes may opt out of biological determinism around motherhood, but I could not reach them due to my limited time and capacity. In my quest to hear the lived experiences of Bangladeshi childfree women, my positionality as a childfree, feminist, agnostic, married woman from a Bangladeshi middle-class Muslim family residing in Dhaka allowed me to be a researcher with an insider with emic perspective in relation to many of my interviewees.

However, as a student at a European university in the Hague, The Netherlands, my physical absence in the interviewing process may have caused some distance from the respondents because the topic is still a sensitive one and not many women find it comfortable to share their experience through online interviews. Furthermore, interviewing women from various age groups, with different relationship statuses (unmarried, divorced, women with live-in partners etc.), diverse religious beliefs, economic backgrounds and family structures posed the risk of uncomfortable turn in conversations. During some of the interviews, several moments of apprehension arose from different positions and identities held by me and my participants. In these cases, my position was more like an outsider. Therefore, it was crucial for me to constantly reflect on the possible limitations and consider the dynamic and multiple layers of identities held by both me and my participants while designing the research to build a working relationship among us. Throughout the interviews, I came across many similarities as well as dissimilarities in our respective childfree journeys but in the process of collecting, interpreting and analyzing the narratives, I attempted to be a self-questioning, reflexive articulator by prioritizing the voices and experiences of my participants (Lugones and Spelman, 1983; Soedirgo and Glas, 2020).

Ethical considerations

As mentioned before, this research explored the lived experiences of childfree women where much of the data was related to age, relationships, reproductive decisions and other personal information. These data were essential parts of the stories narrated by the interviewees. Thus, protecting their

privacy held a crucial position in my ethical considerations. I developed an informed consent form based on the template from the website of Erasmus University Rotterdam. This document informed each participant about the safe storage and usage of the data. Every interviewee was assigned a pseudonym at the beginning of the transcription process to ensure that the research paper would not reveal their identity. Similarly, the file names of the recordings are also coded with numbers. All relevant data has been anonymized and stored on my personal computer and portable hard drive. Storing in the EUR OneDrive or personal cloud drives has been carefully avoided.

The consent form was sent to each interviewee through an e-mail to give them enough time to carefully read the form and sign it before commencing to interviews. Upon receiving the signed consent form, the interviewees were sent the link for a Zoom meeting. At the beginning of each interview, I asked my participants if they had any other queries regarding privacy issues. Furthermore, I elaborated on the points of how they may stop the interview at any point in the data collection process and ask me to delete their information even after the session is completed. The women who participated in the study by sharing their life stories with me are agentic individuals who value their privacy and exercise autonomy over their personal information. Their conscious choice and voluntary decision to share their experiences indicate that the ethical concerns have been mitigated by transparency, openness and clear communication regarding the research purpose and potential data use.

Limitations of the study

At the time of preparing the research design and data collection plans, I anticipated some challenges and limitations that may arise in the research process including my physical absence in the interviewing process and the risk of not finding a satisfactory number of participants. What I could not anticipate was the drastic and devastating change in the political landscape of Bangladesh that evolved from the killing of hundreds during the students' protests to the downfall of the government in July-August 2024 (Rashid, 2024). Hence, I found myself completely unprepared to navigate the ways towards participant recruitment, data collection and analysing interviews at a point in national history when its citizens were going through a collective trauma. The political turmoil has significantly impacted the communication with the participants. The events were recurrently referred to by the participants and without this context, the interviews might have taken a different direction.

Due to the characteristics of the recruitment process of this research which relied on snowballing and limited personal and social networks, it was challenging to reach childfree women of diverse locations, religions, ethnicities, and socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The underrepresentation of various identities reduced the scope of exploring childfreedom in Bangladesh. Additionally, the absence of discussion regarding the intersection of sexuality and childfreedom represents a significant limitation of this study. Future research endeavours should include participants from diverse sexual identities and orientations from diverse populations to analyse the childfreedom from a more intricate lens. Furthermore, writing this research paper in English, as a foreign language, frequently alienated me from my ability to naturally articulate my thoughts. As a result, this paper lacks the linguistic subtlety required to accurately communicate the complex narratives of my participants, some of which, to some extent, were lost in translation.

Chapter 4

Becoming childfree: Stories behind the unconventional choice

Opting out of procreation is indeed a non-normative choice in the pervasively pronatalist context of Bangladesh. Even in developed countries, women who do not want children are perceived as deviant (Veivers, 1979, p. 5). Hence, it is plausible to assume that the decisions of remaining childfree are shaped by individual life stories situated in the broader societal context. Therefore, in this chapter, I present the motivations and unique decision-making pathways from the narratives of 16 childfree Bangladeshi women. It unfolds how the different motivations were influenced by their socially situated worldviews, experiences and priorities. Several participants from their young age had a firm stance on the choice of forgoing motherhood while others developed the choice in a comparatively older age, based on how lived realities unfolded before them. This contrast of active and early deciders with transitional or drifted postponers signifies the heterogeneity of childfree women's individual life stories and choices (Houseknecht, 1979; Gillespie, 1999; Settle and Brumley, 2014).

Participants mentioned various factors such as lack of safety and security, risk of disease or disability and environmental concerns as reasons to be childfree which stemmed from the question of whether it is wise to bring children into the world (Houseknecht, 1987). *Table 2* presents an overview of the reasons behind childfree choice stated by the participants. Furthermore, childfree decisions were made in the context of being brought up in a patriarchal social setup and its 'mater-normativity' where the participants observed how the expected duties of motherhood are disproportionately burdensome for women (Nandy, 2017, p. 66). Instead of dealing with these anticipated burdens, some participants prioritised their own comfort, freedom, growth and mobility, which motivated them to choose a life without children.

Table 5: List of the reasons behind childfree choice

Rationale and Relationships Beyond Biology	Aspirations and priorities	Fears and concerns regarding childbearing and childrearing	Personal and gendered experiences
No urge for motherhood	Comfort and personal space	Identifying the world as essentially cruel	Seeing children suffer for adults' decisions
Denying the concept of the biological clock	Peaceful life	Perceiving life as the source of perpetual suffering	Seeing irresponsible parents, unplanned parenthood
Every child is worth loving	Enough time to rest	Risks of congenital anomalies and other diseases	Highly demanding jobs with severe work pressure
Extending love across species	Independence	Unsafe spaces for children: Accidents and disasters	Struggles with physical conditions such as PCOS, high BP or diabetes
Adoption and other forms of care	Personal ambition and career	Economic uncertainty	Being rebellious to patriarchal oppressive norms
Treating one's own work as their children	Investing time and resources for self-growth	Fear induced by political instability, clash and war	Seeing dear ones going through the pain and discomfort of pregnancy and childbirth
Pet-parenting	Learning new skills Adventures such as hiking, mountaineering and solo trips	Generational trauma Horrorifying news of child molestation, rape, killing, animal cruelty	Living with anxiety and depression Women's solo burden of childcare Mothers get no holiday Insights from philosophy, literature and feminist readings

***“I never felt the urge”*: Debunking the myth of maternal instinct**

Contrary to the common belief that every woman is born with the built-in maternal instinct by their biological design, several participants expressed that they never envisioned themselves as mothers or parents. The conversations about biological clocks made them realize that they do not feel the urge to be defined by the reproductive ability of their bodies. Such internal childfree logic of having a body without a biological urge for procreation has been coined as “the silent body” by Peterson and Engwall (2013, p. 379).

My 27-years-old participant Maya found it difficult to remember when exactly she decided to be childfree because she never even hypothetically thought of being a mother. She spent her early childhood with her mother in a remote village where her mother was posted as a family planning officer. She recalls that her mother often took her to work and that is how she got to know about birth control, contraceptives and various methods of family planning. While she expressed that those early exposures might play a role in viewing childbirth as an optional thing, she added more context to her early childfree decision:

“If there is one word to express what I want in life, it’s ‘comfort’. I interact with only those people who give me comfort, I stay in places that I find comfortable. I make my own comfortable bubble, and I live inside it. The idea of having a child just doesn’t fit into my idea of comfort. I never found the so-called maternal instinct in my persona. Even as a little girl, while playing with dolls, I viewed the dolls as my siblings, unlike other kids who pretended to be the mothers of their dolls.”

Maya’s perceived relationship with her dolls is not uncommon within childfree literature and Mollen (2006, p. 273) interpreted it as “early resistance to prescribed gender roles”. Looking back at her childhood days, another participant Chaitali (30) similarly expressed that her imagination of an ideal life never included motherhood. She reflected:

“I come from a loving, happy family and as a child, I preferred staying alone in my own space. I used to say that I’ll never marry and never have kids. Well, as time went by, I felt the need for a partner. Luckily, I got one and married him. But kids? Never! The lifetime commitment to raising a child never appeals to me. I’m also not comfortable with the idea of pregnancy. I don’t want to go through that process.”

Early deciders, namely Ira (28) and Tuli (36) expressed similar aversion towards pain in the pregnancy and childbirth process as a primary reason for childfreedom which Veevers (1979, p. 15) identified as “pregnancy perils”. Previous researchers including Nandy (2017, p. 145) also found fear of pregnancy and labour in some childfree participants. My interviewee Ira gets panicked even by small cuts or injections, therefore, the thought of carrying a baby for months and then experiencing the intense pain of childbirth seemed very frightening to her. In the past, Ira saw her sister’s enthusiasm about having a child and how she happily let go of her full-time job to take the best care of the child. However, despite witnessing her sister’s passion for motherhood, Ira did not overcome her fright about pain and surgical procedure, hence, never developed any inclination towards the role, nor the desire to have a child.

***“Why would I bring someone to this cruel world?”*: Unselfish fears and concerns**

Childfree women are often stereotyped as ‘selfish’ (Kelly, 2009, p. 167; Veevers, 1979). However, my encounters with Bangladeshi women showed that childfree decision is often connected to empathy towards others, which creates fears and concerns about the unsafe condition of the world. Climate and population concerns were found in several Western childfree studies while anxieties regarding

social and political instability, conflict, war, hunger, higher crime rates and gender inequalities were mentioned in regions with higher risks, such as Iran (May, 1995; Park, 2005, p. 395; Mollen, 2006; Rahbari, 2021, p. 37). Additionally, uncertainties regarding children's congenital disorders and exposing a child to the risk of physical or sexual abuse and violence were recurring themes in most of the interviewees' narratives.

Concerns deriving from child mortality and potential health risks of children have emerged in the interview as a push factor for choosing childfreedom (Gillespie, 2003). These concerns were prevalent among the interviewees who witnessed such cases in their families, among peers or in a professional context. For instance, Kheya (39) described her traumatic childhood experience of being raised in an unstable and unpleasant household. Societal pressure of son preference led her parents to have eight children while her mother endured miscarriage, stillbirth and postpartum depression which ultimately affected her parents' relationship. Additionally, one of the children was born with Down syndrome. Hence, Kheya's childfree decision was shaped by the fear of congenital anomalies rooted in her family history and the desire to safeguard her marital relationship. On the other hand, Aurora (34), a pediatric surgeon cited her experience of treating patients with congenital anomalies and observing their anguished parents as a major factor in her decision to opt out of motherhood. She said:

"The sector I work in deals with congenital anomalies. Every day I see the sufferings of not only the children but also of their parents. Nobody can control in advance whether their child will be born with it. So, I'm constantly terrified that I won't be able to accept if it happens in my case. I can't think of accepting the risk of lifelong suffering for something (motherhood) that I don't even have any urge for."

Even women with maternal urges may decide to forgo their desire to have children upon experiencing political and social instability and the absence of social justice in the world (Rahbari, 2021; Houseknecht, 1987). During the interviews, the participants had fresh memories of witnessing the July massacre in Bangladesh. Given the failure of politicians and law enforcers to protect citizens from such horror, childfree interviewees suggested that such an unsafe country is not suitable for raising children. Moreover, several participants cited numerous news of kidnappings, rapes, acid attacks, sexual harassment, domestic violence and murders, arguing that it is unrealistic to assume that parents can shield their children from all harm. Nilanjana (38) and Nodi (36) shared similar memories from the early 2000s when they encountered countless news of eve-teasing and violence against women. It heightened their awareness of the dangers faced by a child born as a female in a patriarchal world. Additionally, Nilanjana's experiences as an animal rescuer revealed the extent of human cruelty towards animals, including incidents of sexual assault, which deeply affected her. Thus, her decision to remain childfree derives from a desire to minimize potential harm as she said: *"I don't want to give birth to a monster or a victim."*

"I won't conform to good mother/superwoman stereotype": Gendered experiences of growing up as a Bangladeshi woman

Childfree women's reproductive decisions are influenced by societal implications of motherhood in the Bangladeshi patriarchal context. Participants noted that there are different expectations for homemaker mothers and mothers employed in paid labour (Parker and Wang, 2013). Mirroring 'housewifisation' of Mies (2007), homemaker mothers are expected to ensure that all household chores are done well, meals are prepared perfectly, and every family member is content to qualify as 'good mothers' and 'good wives'. On the other hand, working mothers have the challenge of balancing their work responsibilities with prioritizing their children and ensuring job security as it was identified by Hochschild (1989) as the 'second sift'. For instance, Rodela (40), who considers herself the luckiest daughter for having two renowned physicians with progressive thoughts as her parents, observed her

mother investing superhuman energy at work and home, which was not the case for her father. Similarly, Aurora recalled that her father started to help her high-ranked government officer mother in the kitchen only after returning home with a European doctoral degree. Still, she finds it easier to endure three days of duty at her operation theatre than the pressure of housework her mother had to take in a single day of the Eid festival. Therefore, rejecting the socially imposed ‘mother’s responsibility’ has been mentioned by many of the participants (Houseknecht, 1987, p. 377).

Interestingly, most of my interviewees asserted that if they were men, they probably would have wanted children or at least rejecting parenthood would not affect them with such intense backlashes. This indicates that regardless of their position, age, profession or economic class, mothers are expected to perform overwhelming responsibilities (Chodorow, 1978). They noted the absence of formal paternity leave in most jobs as an example of the state’s stance on mothering vs. fathering (Kim *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). Ira’s narrative highlights such stark contrast in gendered parenthood roles and how it influenced her reproductive decision:

“My mother is quite old and often suffers from acute health conditions; all three of her kids are adults and now she has a grandkid. Even at this stage, she feels responsible for every meal for the whole family. She never takes a break from mothering. She doesn’t have a holiday. I can’t imagine myself under such pressure. On the other hand, if I were a man, coming home to my kid for some moments of cuddling would’ve been sufficient to feel I’ve been a good father. Easy-peasy!”

Participants from rural or small-town backgrounds have seen women around them living under stronger patriarchal chains and boundaries. They were taught to sacrifice their personhood to the altar of motherhood but chose childfreedom as a form of their resistance to patriarchal imperatives (Mollen, 2006, p. 273.) Nishat (33), raised in the conservative Islamic society of Hathazari, Chittagong, attributed her childfreedom to both her personal experience of witnessing her sister’s pain in the Labour Room as a teen and her socio-political understanding of gendered realities. She stated:

“So, in Hathazari, I had never heard the names of elderly married women. They were always addressed as A’s mother or B’s wife...always addressed in relational terms. I would say that reflected how women’s identities are being in negation. I thought, why the role of motherhood will be imposed upon me? Just because I have a womb which might be fertile? No! I won’t be associated with those conventional things. I love my identity as a woman, but I don’t need to prove my womanhood by giving birth.”

“I want to be myself, without constraints”: Prioritizing freedom, independence and personal goals

Though none of my interviewees said that they hate children or that motherhood destroys all the opportunities for women’s growth, they stated that it would be more difficult to pursue their goals if they were burdened with motherhood duties. Consistent with childfree literature from other countries, my study participants highlighted that childfree life gave them more time to focus on themselves and enabled them to explore more options in the professional, educational and relational spheres (Bhambhani and Inbanathan, 2018; Peterson, 2015).

Multiple participants identified themselves as ‘rebellious’ for their inclinations towards adventurous, challenging and unconventional life goals. Nodi (36), a PhD student and former award-winning journalist earned two master’s degrees in criminology and journalism from Bangladesh and the USA while she worked for famous newspapers at home and abroad. Despite seeing the example of her sister excelling as an accomplished professor with two children, Nodi felt that motherhood would have been a burden to achieve the life she wanted (Folbre, 2014). Several participants including Preeti (36), Tuli (36) and Banhi (33) opined that choosing childfreedom brought them greater mobility and scope to fulfil their aspirations for higher studies abroad. Banhi expressed that she takes her responsibilities very seriously and if she were to become a mother, she would take great care of the

child. However, she chose not to commit to such a demanding role as she intends to invest her time and resources in herself, to achieve her goal of becoming a competent doctor and seeing the world.

Prioritizing one's own mental and physical well-being emerged as a key factor influencing childfree women's reproductive choice. Witnessing the damaging effect of adults' poorly conceived decisions on children, these women concluded that no one should become a parent unless they are fully willing and committed to planned parenthood. Tandra (38), who never felt maternal instinct, once considered having a child to help her ex-husband recover from depression. However, after being diagnosed with diabetes, she decided to opt out of parenthood. This decision was also related to her agency to value her work over pronatalist pressure:

I've been a workaholic throughout my life. When my career was progressing upward, my in-laws always reminded me that I needed a child, though I never felt that way. I realised it was being used as a weapon to stop my career progress. I really didn't want any more baggage as my marriage was also on the rocks. I was convinced that I didn't want to bring a child into this marriage and ruin its life.

In parallel, some participants highlighted that, due to the absence of institutionalisation once a woman becomes a mother, all her schedules revolve around the child. Seeing her female colleagues' guilt and tension during hospital duties and medical conferences, Aurora chose freedom from such worries (Gillespie, 1999). Moreover, participants mentioned that childfreedom supports them in having leisure and rest. Bela (36), a single university teacher who was living with the grief of her father's sudden demise, long-term depression, anxiety and hypertension has been told frequently that marriage and children will solve her problems. She argued: *"I don't want to reproduce to use my baby as a healing tool or health insurance."* Childfreedom gave Bela more time to rest, read, contemplate, watch films and make countless crafts and toys for her baby niece – everything she deemed important for achieving improved mental and physical well-being.

"Love can be found beyond genetic ties": Making kin in an overpopulated planet

During the interview through video call, Nilanjana, a writer and entrepreneur, was telling how after surviving years of abuse from two ex-husbands, she finally learned to love herself. Her phone was swaying and slipping from her grip since her cats were playing and jumping on her lap. She gleefully flipped her camera to show her large apartment which she rented to take care of 48 cats she rescued. Like Nilanjana, many of my respondents were very close to their pets which conformed with Donna Haraway's proposition: "Make kin, not babies" (Haraway, 2016, p. 103). My encounter with Bangladeshi childfree women showed that their interpretation of kinship was not limited to biological bonds as they extended love and care for both human and non-human species of the earth.

Concerns over environmental degradation and overpopulation as reasons to opt out of parenthood were categorised by Park (2005, p. 394) under value-rational action. Similarly, my interviewees considered their decision to opt out of reproduction as a selfless act that could help the planet by reducing consumption and limiting carbon footprint. With this rationale, immigrant couple Kheya and her husband chose childfreedom and veganism as part of their climate awareness. They still had to buy meat for their rescued dog with a feeling of guilt, but they were happy to think that this was at least minimal compared to the amount of average carbon emission from each child born and raised in developed countries like the USA (Helm, Kemper and White, 2021).

I came across several participants who stated that their understanding of religion and spirituality helped them embrace childfreedom. This was evident in Rodela's view on relationships: *"I don't differentiate between human and other lives. We're all connected and caring for every soul is valuable to me."* Similarly,

Nayla (49), a follower of Sufism, believes in the existence of the almighty inside everything that exists. She noted, “*If you give love to any being, it will respond and reciprocate.*” Nayla observed that her orchids were withering away when she was going through immense agony after her divorce, but as she was healing, so did the orchids. She added that her small act of putting water and food on the balcony gets reciprocated when she has the joy of being visited by a vibrant assemblage of birds every morning. Such interpretations underscore the women’s agency to deconstruct orthodox views on love and relationships, creating scope for women to accommodate their agentic choices within the framework of religiosity (Sharify-Funk, 2020).

Therefore, childfree Bangladeshi women’s choices and decisions to forgo procreation were not made in isolation or bubble of dissociation because the decision-making processes were shaped by their lived experiences within the country’s gendered social realities (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012). Likewise, their rejection of motherhood did not result from the rejection of womanhood or feminine self. It rather derived from prudent reflection on their interpretations of their own bodies, life and career goals, socio-political ideologies, environmental awareness and in a large part, from the agency to deny patriarchy’s essentialist imposition of mothering or “mater-normativity” (Gillespie, 2003; Park, 2005; Shapiro, 2014; Nandy, 2017, p. 66; Lisle, 2022). With the same agency and wisdom, many participants expressed their fondness towards children and emphasised the importance of a sensible care environment but defied the necessity of birthing and claiming ownership of children to love them (Gotlib, 2022). A few participants, who were not early deciders, even mentioned having fleeting thoughts about what a child might look like, but they also stressed that those feelings were temporary and not powerful enough to affect their choice of childfreedom (Gotlib, 2022, p.196). Furthermore, childfree Bangladeshi women highlighted that their refusal of procreation did not prohibit them from creation. Hence, they aspire to create and foster deeper connections with themselves, their kin, their work and nature.

Chapter 5

Childfree present and future: Challenges, resistance and aspirations

Childfreedom in Bangladesh remained an almost unexplored domain in research but the literature from other regions found its association with deviance, stigma and negative stereotypes particularly for women, while it brings multiple challenges in terms of acceptance in familial, social and professional spheres (Park, 2002; Kelly, 2009; Babu, 2024). This chapter portrays the challenges and resilience of childfree Bangladeshi women living in pronatalist social surroundings. This research illustrates that the responses they received from others varied among the spectrum of absolute acceptance, ambivalence and complete rejection. Consequently, the participants adopted multifaceted coping approaches ranging from disclosing, hiding and avoiding the topic of reproductive decisions.

Concerns pertaining to the future of childfree individuals, such as inheritance of property, fear of loneliness and absence of caregivers in their old age, have been a central argument of pronatalist rhetoric. However, the insights shared by the childfree interviewees reveal how they deconstructed the traditional patriarchal norm of kinship and caregiving which underscores their agency to envision alternative versions of fulfilling futures. The negative reactions received by the participants from families, relatives, peers, or even strangers resemble pronatalist questions and advice towards childfree individuals across societies which are popularly termed as ‘*Bingo*’ by online childfree communities (Hird and Abshoff, 2000; Hintz and Brown, 2019). *Table 3* presents a list of such reactions received by my participants, which contains anger, disregard or scepticism about childfreedom (Gillespie, 2000; Chaney, 2021).

Table 6: List of pronatalist statements and questions towards childfree women

Bangladeshi Bingos: Pronatalist advice and questions	
Anger and shaming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This is absurd! You are abnormal! ▪ You don't want children! How is that possible? ▪ You're going to die alone. ▪ Allah will punish you. ▪ Why are you being so selfish? ▪ Why did you marry if you don't want children? ▪ If you don't have a child, your husband will leave you ▪ You are so stubborn and <i>bejadob</i> (rude, ill-bred).
Effort to convince	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You need someone to carry your bloodline. ▪ Who will take care of you in your old age? ▪ Who will inherit your property? ▪ Don't you want to hear a little one calling you <i>Ma</i>? ▪ Why are you depriving your husband of the joy of fatherhood? ▪ Your parents and in-laws deserve to be grandparents. ▪ When are we becoming uncles/aunts/grandparents? ▪ Have at least one. We are not asking for more! ▪ Don't worry, you just give birth! We will take care of the baby. ▪ You are so motherly; how come you don't want to be a mother?
Disregard and scepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You will change your decision when you grow older. ▪ If you get accidentally pregnant, you will be left with no other choice but to have the child. ▪ You will eventually feel lonely. ▪ Oh! No kids! How do you pass your time then? ▪ What's the meaning of your life? ▪ What legacy are you leaving behind?

Communicating childfreedom: Navigating through pronatalist pressures

Bangladeshi families are generally close-knit, and parents tend to influence adult individuals' life decisions where marriage and childbirth are considered two major milestones that everyone is expected to reach. Like other South Asian societies, Bangladeshi pronatalist logic presupposes the mandate of heterosexual marriage preferably with shared religion and class identities, therefore the pressure to have children poses differently based on the marital status of women from different age groups (Nahar, 2022; Riessman, 2000). Current findings indicate that women in their 20s faced less pressure from family members because of the perception that they would eventually get married and have kids. On the other hand, most married women in their 30s found themselves under intense scrutiny by family members and relatives regarding their reproductive state while most unmarried participants in this age group experienced pressure for marriage to fulfil the prerequisite of having children.

Disclosure of women's childfree choices to the families was reported to be dependent on the dynamics of their family structures and relationships. Participants who had supportive and liberal parents and siblings were more comfortable in sharing their decision to remain without children. Four unmarried participants, Banhi (33), Nishat (33), Maya (27) and Preeti (36) expressed that their family members were aware of their choice, and they accepted it without significant questioning. Banhi stated that her sister does not like children and her mother accepted her choice. Therefore, her family also viewed her childfree decision positively. Similarly, Preeti, a graphic designer-turned-documentary maker stated:

“People who are close to me saw the complex responsibilities my sister and I had to deal with after my father's demise and the unconventional career choices I made. I guess, at this point, my childfree decision brought no surprise to them.”

An overwhelming majority of my childfree participants faced some degree of negative experiences regarding their childfree state. They were uncomfortable sharing the decision to remain childfree with their parents because of the anticipation that they would never be accepted. Besides, some women faced stigma in the form of resentment, disbelief or devaluation after informing their families about the childfree choice (Mollen, 2006). For instance, Rodela was perceived as abnormal, crazy and deviant for not getting pregnant after years of marriage. She recounted the moments of humiliation when relatives of her ex-husband used to arrange family meetings to convince her to get pregnant. Her parents also denied her decision of not having children by linking it to their religious logic: *“Allah will punish you”*. Nilanjana, Tandra, and Nayla – three more participants who are currently divorced, recalled similar accounts from their former marriages of receiving rude and direct or subtle and indirect suggestions from in-laws to force them to have children. Currently married participants too noted that they either hide their decisions from their parents and in-laws or try to avoid conflict by changing the topic or escaping the conversation (Riessman, 2000, p. 128). Among all, only two participants reported having unorthodox mothers-in-law who never intervened in their reproductive choices.

Negotiating childfreedom in intimate space: For or against the partner's will?

In Bangladesh, romantic relationships and sexual intimacy get social acceptance only through heteronormative marital unions, where the women or the wives are expected to bear children to perpetuate their husbands' family lineage. According to the country's patriarchal and religion-based family laws, inheritance of property depends on “blood-bond kinship” (Nahar and van der Geest,

2014, p. 396). As a result, having children, especially sons, is crucial not only for fulfilling parental affection but also for securing an individual's inheritance rights (Nahar, 2022, p. 25). Consequently, women's decision to remain childfree can significantly affect the process of finding, forming and maintaining their intimate relationships in a society where procreation is an inseparable part of marriage and family norms (Peterson, 2018, p. 237; Bhambhani and Inbanathan, 2020).

In this regard, Nishat reflected: *"When you're deciding not to give birth...that decreases your chance to get a like-minded partner. So, upon deciding to remain childfree, I thought I was cutting two biggest things from my life."* Thus, the early articulators, often find themselves at a crossroads because of the limited number of men in the society who wants to remain childfree (Peterson, 2018, p. 248). Likewise, Ira's frustration portrays how pronatalist assumptions often jeopardize single childfree women's attempt to form a relationship: *"It's silly, that people who want children never need to declare that. But I need to put a disclaimer and explain about my childfreedom...Which most men find wired!"* Though reproductive choice might seem like an inappropriate topic for a first date, Nodi and other participants emphasized that being transparent about it from the beginning helps to avoid potential future conflicts. Additionally, indicating *childfree/not interested in kids* on dating apps can broaden the chance of finding like-minded individuals (Gregory, 2024). This was the case of Chaitali who met her husband through *Bumble* before commencing their childfree marriage.

VeEVERS (1979) and GILLESPIE (2003) observed couples choosing childfreedom to increase meaningful attention towards each other and their relationships highlighted more equality-based sex roles. Current findings also located such harmonious relationships among the participants who had partners believing in the same choice and shared life goals. This was evident in three types of instances: (i) two early articulators found each other, (ii) two partners, both postponers, combinedly decided to be childfree, and (iii) a childfree individual convinced the partner to embrace childfreedom. In most cases, the women I interviewed were the key deciders. However, Kabita (25), the youngest and only participant from a non-urban background was influenced by her husband, an early articulator, to choose childfreedom (Graham et al, 2013, p. 77). It is also notable that despite living in a comparatively traditional setup, as a childfree married couple, they received more acceptance compared to other urban participants. Kabita acknowledged that her husband's family and peers had long been aware of his childfree decision. This implies that relationship dimension and social acceptance of childfree couples may vary based on the early articulator's gender identity (Koropeckyj-Cox, Romano and Moras, 2007).

Conversely, Aurora, an independent early articulator, found herself in a complex conjugal crossroads wherein her childfree decision conflicted with her husband's desire to be a father of her child. She described that their negotiation efforts did not yield a consensus. Hence, the topic of children often produces agonising silence until their conversation shifts to another matter. Bhambhani and Inbanathan (2020) also identified a similar dilemma in unilateral deciders which involves analysing the opportunity cost between living with a loving partner and fulfilling own reproductive goal. Therefore, having a partner who believes, respects and aspires to similar reproductive choices is of utmost importance for childfree women who want to build and sustain healthy intimate relationships (Peterson, 2018, p. 254).

Workplace experiences of childfree women

All participants of this study except the bachelor student had attained tertiary education with significant professional exposure across various sectors in Bangladesh, which aligns with previous studies from the Western contexts indicating a positive correlation between childfree status and competence in education and career (VeEVERS, 1979, p. 12; Bachu, 1999; Gillespie, 2000, p. 227; Park, 2002, p. 29; Verniers, 2020, p. 109). Nevertheless, both traditional (academia, medical etc.) and

seemingly progressive workplaces (press, development sector etc.) have been identified as a location of judgement and stigmatisation for Bangladeshi childfree women. Questions like “*What does your husband do?*”, “*How many children do you have?*”, “*Do you want me to connect you to a fertility specialist?*” depending on the perceived age of a woman in initial encounters with colleagues underpins the region’s cultural characteristics, which allows intervention and interest from even strangers and acquaintances about an individual’s personal life. Therefore, unlike the West, there is no clear barrier between Bangladeshi private and public space when it comes to the possibility of receiving judgment for women’s childfreedom (Riessman, 2000).

Current research shows that in some cases, women’s professional success or higher position in an organization prevented their co-workers from subordinate positions to talk about their childfree state. Still, most of the participants faced questions about children and marriage from people working in both higher and lower positions than them. The unsolicited advice and intrusive questions for unmarried participants like Bela, Tuli, Nodi and Nishat highlighted the pressure for marriage. Whereas married women were told about the importance of motherhood which the colleagues framed as essential for religious, marital and societal integrity, as well as for safeguarding women’s mental stability. Divorced childfree women, on the other hand, faced not only the label of ‘bad woman’ but also the risk of harassment and abuse by male colleagues. Moreover, both divorced and unmarried participants frequently received marriage proposals and reported being solicited by married male colleagues who perceived them as available for casual relationships.

Five decades ago, Movius (1976, p. 61) projected that the advantages of childfreedom can facilitate equal footing in the professional sphere which can pave the way towards women’s ‘ultimate liberation’. Yet, today’s Bangladeshi childfree women professionals find themselves in difficult situations within organizational setup. The negative stereotyping regarding them relates to the tendency to view them as gender deviants who pose a risk to the patriarchal society’s moral values (Verniers, 2020). The stigmatisation of childfree women also reflects how workplaces expect the employees to conform to the societal standards of traditional, heterosexual, married families with children (Rick and Meisenbach, 2017, p. 217).

To fight the stigma in the workplace, some participants like Tandra and Nishat adopted direct and confrontational communication styles. Tandra, currently working for a UN organization who acquired exemplary career exposure in the development sector argued that institutional policies on harassment and gender sensitivity often seem inadequate to prevent backlashes towards non-conformist women because the patriarchal standards are deeply rooted in the majority of employees’ cultural beliefs. Therefore, she uttered: “*I wear the label of a ‘bad girl’ like a crown. I don’t care anymore about their gossip and whining because I am accountable to my work, not to the co-workers’ moral expectations about good women.*” In contrast, Tuli, Ira and some other participants chose avoidance, limited communication within the workplace and active disengagement with colleagues in social media. Likewise, Maya and Chaitali preferred to work from home, which ensured minimum exposure beyond work-related mandatory conversations and reduced the possibility of being judged for their relationships and reproductive choices.

Stigma vs. childfree agency: Resistance and resilience strategies

It has been observed that stigmatisation of childfree choice can take place in a multitude of locations. Thus, the ways in which childfree women establish their agency to manoeuvre the negative situations are also diverse (Park, 2002). As I previously discussed, the participants faced anger, and denial and consistently heard from parents, relatives, peers and co-workers that they would eventually regret their decision. The participants took various strategies to cope with or resist these reactions. To the persons or circles who were open to value their reasoning, the participants attempted to explain the causes

behind childfreedom, including the challenges of mothering roles. These illustrate their efforts to justify their decision (Park, 2002, p. 35). However, over time, some of them adopted the strategies of selective engagement and limited conversation with those who were rigid and unable to comprehend the reasons for not having children, which are examples of what Goffman (1963) referred to as information control (Park, 2002).

In the cases of elderly neighbours or strangers, some participants posed as infertile by statements such as “*God didn’t bless me with a child*” or “*Not everyone gets lucky like you*”; which previous researchers termed as the strategy of identity substitution (Park, 2002). Whereas in “passing” responses e.g., “*yes*” or “*hmm*” while maintaining a straight face, or, smiling and nodding followed by “*We’ll think about it*”, the motive was to avoid conflict and argument (Bimha and Chadwick, 2016, p. 454; Park, 2002, p. 32). On the other hand, confrontational strategies like “*I witnessed an old woman, abandoned by her children, who starved to death on the street*”, “*I don’t need kids ‘cause I can afford health insurance*”, “*Are you sure that your child will not abandon you?*”, “*You can feel lonely in an empty nest after decades of sacrifice for children*” etc. were examples of resistance in an attempt to redefine their childfree identities against pronatalist promotions (Park, 2002).

The power dimension between the childfree participant and the environment where she is communicating is also significant for understanding the aspect of resilience and resistance (Riessman, 2000). For example, some participants highlighted the doctor-patient dynamics, particularly while seeking treatment for irregular periods, PCOS, PMS and other gynaecological complaints wherein the doctors immediately assumed them as patients who came to cure infertility and started to advise on that line (Saad, 2024). Tuli, a single 36-years-old participant had encountered persistent difficulties with the clinical approach of Bangladeshi gynaecologists for more than two decades:

“This has been happening since I was 13. It was dreadful to hear the doctor advising my mother, ‘marry her off quickly! She needs to have children before it’s too late’. It was so repulsive...I mean, I’m a child, I’m suffering from pain, why aren’t you treating me for my problem? Why stressing about fertility instead of addressing my present condition as a girl? They didn’t even explain that I was suffering from PCOS for so long.”

Such inadequate explanation about diagnosis and recurring pattern of overemphasising fertility concerns by suggesting that marriage and childbirth will cure everything can be translated as the manifestation of pronatalist bias in the reproductive health sector’s gendered and institutionalised power which may result in discrimination for childfree women (Shapiro, 2014; Hintz and Brown, 2019; Salgado and Magalhães, 2024, p. 7). Consequently, this may restrict women’s autonomy to exercise their reproductive rights of *not* having children (Ross, 2017b). For instance, multiple interviewees thought about sterilisation by tubal ligation but were hesitant to pursue the procedure in anticipation of being judged and denied by the doctors. Their doubt was entirely reasonable. According to the existing policy of Bangladesh government, women without children are not eligible to avail any long-term and permanent method (LTPM) of birth control because to avail the service, a woman must “be married (not single, divorced or widowed)”, with at least two living children (USAID, 2007, p. 14).

To fill the information gap regarding their non-conformist choices, access to the internet and social media was vital for several of my participants. Morison et al. (2015) found that in online childfree communities, childfree people use the notion of choice to justify their non-normative position. By pointing to the shortcomings and flaws of parents, the childfree users tend to “counterpositioning” themselves which signifies the strategy of attacking the attackers (Morison et al., 2015, p. 11). Similarly, some of my participants also actively sought support through social media, where they connected to Bangladeshi and international communities of childfree people. One of them co-founded a childfree social media group for Bangladeshi people. These participants used the platforms to reach out to other

childfree individuals to share and learn about each other’s experiences, which allowed them to feel a sense of solidarity. Writing and reading about the justifications against pronatalist pressure was a part of their everyday resistance. However, other participants, especially those who have childfree friends in real life reported less or no engagement with online childfree communities (Salgado and Magalhães, 2024).

Hence, to what extent and how a woman would practise agentic skills to consider childfreedom as a choice and practise resistance against pervasive “matrigyno-idolatry” or “mater-normativity” depends on her access to resources, education, personality traits, sexuality, social position, economic independence, religiosity, support from like-minded people, philosophical stance and many other intersections of identities (Meyers, 2001, p. 768; Nandy, 2017, p. 273; Houseknecht, 1987; Avison and Furnham, 2015).

Childfree future: Constructing alternative imageries of care, kin and fulfilment

Women who forgo motherhood are widely viewed as incomplete and persistently reminded of time and sequential life stages, especially in comparison to parents who pursue a set of new milestones in terms of their children's lifecycle (Morison et al., 2016; Stahnke, Blackstone and Howard, 2020; Warrington, 2023). Therefore, as a part of constructing their childfree identities, my participants illustrated the “temporally oriented” pictures of their life goals and interpretation of life fulfilment (Fisher, 2022, p. 25). *Table 4* presents a brief overview of the interviewees’ narratives on future aspirations and plans.

Table 4: *Alternative imageries of childfree future*

Childfree women’s vision of the future	
Dreams and aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To settle abroad ▪ A life full of adventures ▪ Excel in career ▪ Continuation of learning (music, instruments, pursuing higher education) ▪ To have a home to indulge the passion for home decor ▪ Earning enough money to fulfil mother’s dreams ▪ To reach the Summit of Mount Kilimanjaro ▪ Writing and publishing stories, novels and poetry ▪ Being able to bring financial strength to the existing family ▪ Large international viewership for my documentaries ▪ Travel around the world ▪ Staying fit and growing as a strong person ▪ Saving enough money to afford paid care in old age
Leaving a legacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ My work is my legacy. ▪ The words I write, the printed letters and the pages of my books are the legacy I’m leaving. ▪ I don’t believe in leaving legacy by genetic propagation. ▪ I know I will die and what happens after that is not my concern. ▪ Due to patriarchy, passing on the family name and legacy is my brother’s headache. ▪ I’m just a simple person with no great wealth or wisdom. I don’t worry about leaving a legacy.
Inheritance of property	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family: Siblings, nieces and nephews ▪ Endow education fund for female students ▪ A friend in need who can have the opportunity to build a better life ▪ Donating for scholarships and research funds ▪ Fund for animal shelter ▪ Fund to build a senior living community ▪ Establishing a library ▪ Economic contribution to the betterment of indigenous women in CHT ▪ Donating to Purnia Sharif (a site of Sufi Shrines)

Through the voices of childfree women of Bangladesh, it was evident that they emphasised the importance of strategically planning their career goals as well as life after retirement. Their awareness of the socio-economic structures and the old age care dimension of the country led them to focus on savings so that they could afford quality geriatric care and comfortable living after retirement. Additionally, contrasting to the mainstream notion of the heteronormative nuclear family consisting of married couples and biological children, most participants focused on the love and responsibilities towards the families they already belong to (Morison et al., 2016, p. 6). For instance, Ira's primary concern was to ensure financial resources to support her mother's healthcare, mental wellbeing and travel aspirations. Whereas Nodi's vision of her future house included one room specifically designed to foster her niece's particular requirements. Siblings and their children were frequently mentioned by the participants while discussing the reciprocity of support and care. Several participants also indicated that their close friends would continue to be a vital part of their future lives (Mollen, 2006). Their approaches to redefining care paradigms mirrored Nandy's (2017, p. 142) study on Indian childfree women.

Another significant finding of this research relates to the potential relocation of Bangladeshi childfree women. Motivated by the perception that people in Western, individualistic society will be non-judgmental or at least indifferent about their personal life choices, a significant proportion of my participants aspired for migration. While some of them are already living in North America and Europe, others have either started applying for higher studies or preparing for skilled migration. Therefore, stigma around childfreedom has been one of the primary push factors for migration while their eligibility for studying and working abroad aligns with the *aspirations-capabilities* framework of de Haas (2014).

Furthermore, the question of legacy – one of the central elements of pronatalist rhetoric seemed irrelevant to some participants. Their philosophy of peaceful, harmonious and minimalist living guided by spirituality generated indifference regarding the notion of posthumous legacy. Nayla, the oldest among the participants regularly contributes to an ashram adjoining the shrine of a Sufi saint. Upon her retirement, she plans to lead a quiet and simple life in that ashram and donate her inheritance to the foundation. On the other hand, writers like Nilanjana and Maya consider their creative writing as their literary legacy. Likewise, Tandra, Nodi and Preeti rejected the essentiality of genetical propagation, rather they believe that their passion and diligence at work in development, journalism and communication sector will be beneficial to the society. This drive for leaving “a lasting legacy of *self*” not in terms of genetic transmission but in the form of cultural transmission through various work and contributions was discussed by Aarssen and Altman (2006, p. 295) to explain decreasing fertility and women's voluntary childlessness in developed nations. The authors drew from Richard Dawkins's (1976) term “meme” which is defined as “a unit of cultural inheritance”, and capable of replicating in human culture (Aarssen and Altman, 2006; Agrillo and Nelini, p. 355). Thereby, parallel to the previous literature, my self-aware and accomplished interviewees were also driven to transmit cultural legacy (work, reputation, medical care, wealth, creative ventures etc.) instead of genetic replication.

Regarding the inheritance of property, the participants shared diverse ideas. Some of them wanted their family members and friends (one response) to inherit their fortune, while others spoke about various modes of charity and donations. Several participants were interested in creating funds for education and research. Nishat's interest was focused on women's education, and she also stressed that she wanted to contribute to the causes of indigenous women in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Besides this, some participants were willing to sponsor animal shelters and communities of elderly citizens. However, one participant mentioned that since she decided not to have children, her parents

may disinherit her from the family property. Aurora smirked: “*Then I’ll have no worries about ‘who’s gonna get my property’, because, I won’t have any!*” Her humorous anecdote revealed the rigid adherence to blood ties within Bangladeshi social and legal structures in the context of property inheritance, which may result in further discrimination against childfree women (Nahar and van der Geest, 2014). Bangladeshi women do not have the rights to equally inherit their parents’ property compared to their brothers as the land and property related laws evolved within religious influence, which ensure that male offsprings get the larger share of property (Sourav, 2015). Therefore, rejecting to reproduce may heighten a childfree woman’s susceptibility to multiple layers of gendered economic coercion.

In general, my participants had clear insights about the lives they have and want to have. Travelling, for instance, was a common passion shared by many participants. The women who were not content in their current professions spoke about their plans to pursue more appropriate career paths. Some of them wanted to dedicate more effort to research and publication, while a few aspired to start organic farming and entrepreneurial journeys. Their present and future fulfilment, however, was not imagined as a solo journey. Most of the participants envisioned their healthy and adventurous future with the companionship and care of romantic partners, parents, siblings, nieces and nephews and other members of the family, friends and comrades in their shared causes. The personal desires to learn new skills, go hiking and mountaineering, devour literature and films or soul searching reflected their aspiration for self-care which were combined with their effort to care for their kin across the species of human, animal and plant, with and without the bond of blood.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the prevalent pronatalism in Bangladeshi patriarchal society, motherhood is glorified as the natural and ultimate destiny for all women. Though the state, literature, media, families and other institutions innocuously portray motherhood as the greatest joy and the most fulfilling experience for women, the narratives tend to hide the struggles and disproportionate burden associated with the role. This research explored the lived experiences of 16 women who rejected such deeply rooted imperatives of Bangladeshi ‘mater-normativity’ and decided to remain childfree. To understand how childfree women construct and negotiate their childfree lives, I analysed their decision-making pathways and motivations for choosing a childfree life. This research also documented the reactions from society and childfree women’s strategies to cope with the challenges while gathering an overview of how they outline their childfree future.

The study found that most of the participants independently decided to opt out of motherhood. Some of them were determined about it from the early age as they never felt any maternal urge or had aversion to the process and pain associated to pregnancy. Gendered experiences of growing up in oppressive patriarchal setup either at home or in broader society impacted many participants’ decisions as they identified the burdensome roles imposed on mothers and wanted to avoid such roles. Some participants who decided to forgo motherhood in a comparatively matured age displayed various reasonings stemming from the lack of safety, weak law and order, concerns about deteriorating environment and socio-political instability. Some participants’ prior experiences regarding children’s vulnerability towards diseases and risk of different forms of sexual abuse also motivated them to not bringing a child to the world that they perceive as cruel and unjust. On the other hand, the aspirations about advancement in career, greater mobility, comfortable living with more leisure and other benefit of a life without children pulled the participants towards the decision to remain childfree. Freedom from the preoccupation of childrearing allowed the participants to invest their time and attention to achieve other personal and professional life goals. Contrary to the findings from some previous literature, my participants’ childfree decision was not impacted by any religious constraints (Bhambhani and Inbanathan, 2018). Rather, the devoted followers found justifications of their childfree decision within the framework of religiosity by diving deeper into the spiritual rationales.

The reaction from society at large was generally negative towards the Bangladeshi women’s childfree decision. Though the reactions were not equally harsh or harmful for everyone, most of the interviewees came across different degrees of anger, disbelief, disregard and doubtful responses from at home, dating or intimate space, workplace and other public spaces. However, the research also located some supportive spaces for Bangladeshi childfree women. Besides a few participants’ positive experience with parents and in-laws, several participants got acceptance and support from their siblings (especially sisters), close friends (often childfree friends) and like-minded romantic partners. Some women also resorted to social media to connect with online childfree communities across the world. Contrasting to these environments of acceptance, the most concerning forms of stigmatisation and judgement were cast by co-workers, in-laws, relatives and in some cases, by the parents of the childfree women. To resist the multidimensional stigmatisation, the participants employed strategies of limited disclosure, avoidance or withdrawal in real life and social media, passing or playing along and confrontation.

The fact that an overwhelming majority of the childfree Bangladeshi women I interviewed aspired for migrating to developed countries underscores the overall negativity in their childfree experiences. Though childfreedom was not the only reason for migration, but it indeed motivated them to find more inclusive and nonjudgemental habitat. This also suggests that the childfree Bangladeshi women

are constantly resisting and negotiating the pronatalist advocates to construct their identities and choices as valid and justified. Their visions about future childfree lives also resonate with this aim. Upon observing and evaluating potential negative consequences and limitations of existing socio-cultural dimensions, they consciously and strategically planned for specific career goals, savings, retirement, healthcare and old age care. This need for careful stepping uncovers the present condition of Bangladeshi care paradigm where citizens do not have the access to social security benefit provided by the state. In absence of state's role in childcare, healthcare and old age care in Bangladesh, women as mothers get forced to carry the majority of care burden. Hence, if the state introduces social welfare policies, both mothers and non-mothers will be benefitted by them (Peterson, 2015). As Meyers (2001) indicated, if state and the society provide positive condition, inclusion and acceptance for both mothers and non-mothers then women will be able to practice agency in more authentic way because in that case the choice of having or not having children will be free from the fear of pronatalist judgement, motherhood penalty at work and uncertainties regarding old age care.

Prior to this study, the choice to remain childfree in Bangladesh was almost unexplored in academic discussions. Therefore, the findings of the present study offer a preliminary understanding of the lived experiences of childfree Bangladeshi women. It lays the groundwork for future scholarly enquiries into diverse childfree populations by employing different qualitative and quantitative methods. As my focus was limited to the lives of 16 Bengali women from middle-class to upper-middle-class backgrounds, my findings are inadequate to explain the challenges and realities of childfree individuals with different gender, sexuality, class and ethnic identities. The inclusion of childfree men and participants from Indigenous communities should be prioritised by future researchers. Furthermore, my findings show that the decision to opt out of parenthood can heavily impact the dimension of intimate relationships. This implication warrants further investigation into the lives of both married and unmarried childfree couples.

Pronatalism and patriarchy moves with varied strategies in different parts of the world. While women in developed nations are encouraged to have more children, in overpopulated Bangladesh, the ideal picture of a happy family portrays two children with the mother and the father (*Appendix 2*). This seemingly simple and innocent image signifies the state's prescription on preferred family size and type. Additionally, government's policy of excluding all women without children (single, married, unmarried and widowed) from the service of LTPM and sterilisation illustrates the marginalisation of childfree women as they do not have the complete control over their bodies and reproductive organs in terms of the right to *not* have children (Ross, 2017b, p. 171; USAID, 2007). Therefore, Firestone (1984) and Movius's (1976) expectation that rejecting the burden of biological reproduction will result in the ultimate liberation of women was not fully accomplished in the context of childfree Bangladeshi women. These women indeed challenged the repressive 'mater-normativity' of Bangladeshi family and society by choosing not to give birth to children, which gave them the freedom and opportunity to focus on other segments of life that are more important, attractive and meaningful to them (Nandy, 2017). Yet, in multiple ways, patriarchal pronatalism of various institutions of the country tried to restrict childfree women's agency to make non-normative reproductive choices. In response, the participants attempted to strengthen their self-determination by creating alternative imageries of future, care and kin that extends beyond biological bond. Therefore, the construction of the identities of childfree Bangladeshi women is an ongoing and evolving process that involves constant negotiations and everyday resistance against the impositions of patriarchal norms.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire guideline

<i>Questionnaire guideline</i>	
Introductory questions: Knowing the person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Would you please tell me about your family background, education and profession? ▪ What was your experience of early years as a woman growing up in Bangladeshi family and society? ▪ How would you describe your income/economic state?
Questions regarding the decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How and when did you decide that you don't want any kids of your own? ▪ Was there any role of gendered experience to motivate you towards this decision? ▪ Would you be able to tell me about how you feel compared to other people who have kids or want to raise kids? ▪ How did you communicate with your family members or partner/spouse/romantic interest about this? ▪ Do any of your family members or co-workers ever force you to change your decision? ▪ <u>Did religion or religious belief have any relationship with your childfree experience?</u>
Questions regarding navigating the journey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has it ever occurred to you that you are hanging in between wanting and not wanting to be a mother/to have kids? If so, please share about your journey to navigate this in-between space. ▪ Did you ever experience any negative or hurtful situation inside or outside the home because of your childfree life? ▪ Has your social life been affected by your decision? ▪ Was there any implication in your professional life? ▪ How do you navigate your romantic life/ intimate space as a childfree woman? ▪ How do you respond to the questions, obstacles or suggestions from people who think that you should have a baby? ▪ What do you do to manage unwanted conversations? ▪ Have you ever felt that being childfree has any implications on your romantic or conjugal life? ▪ Has your social life or professional life been impacted by your decision to remain childfree?
Questions regarding the construction of childfree identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the benefits of not having a child/being childfree? ▪ How would you like to share your ideas and experiences of childfree life with others? ▪ How are you perceived by others as a childfree woman? ▪ Do you or would you seek social support from other childfree people or community? ▪ Have you ever felt that being a childfree woman comes with a different experience than a childfree man? Please share stories from your personal experience. ▪ <u>How do you deal with the questions of family legacy and property inheritance?</u>
Concluding questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do you read or seek information in any other form to learn about childfree experiences of different people around the world? ▪ How do you perceive your childfree life at present and in the future? ▪ Do you think your future or career plans are shaped by your childfree decision? ▪ What is your plan regarding property inheritance? ▪ Would you like to tell me about any other thoughts or incidents? ▪ Would you like reach out later to share any further details?

Appendix 2: Promotional poster of Directorate General of Family Planning, Bangladesh

A poster of the call center of Directorate General of Family Planning, Bangladesh. The name of the call center is *Sukhi Poribar*, which translates into *Happy Family*.



Source: Shukhi Poribar - সুখী পরিবার, Official Facebook page of Information Education, Motivation (IEM) Unit of the Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP)
<https://www.facebook.com/iemdgpbd/>