



Rethinking Fatherlessness: Gender, Parental Role Inequality, and Its Impacts on Children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the absence of fathers, both physically and psychologically, and its impact on child development within the cultural and gender context in Indonesia. This study employs a literature review method by analyzing relevant articles that discuss father absence in Indonesian families. The analysis results show that father absence is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses behavioral, affective, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions. While physical absence of the father can often be mitigated by substitute roles such as close relatives or social figures, psychological father absence is more detrimental as it leads to identity disturbance, emotional insecurity, and difficulties in relational development for children. In conclusion, psychological father absence has a more profound and lasting impact than physical absence. The implications of this study emphasize the need for family counseling approaches that recognize the importance of psychological father involvement in supporting child development and addressing structural gender inequalities in family roles.

Kata Kunci

Ketiadaan Ayah;
Ketiadaan ayah secara
psikologis;
Konseling keluarga

Abstrak

Tujuan studi ini adalah untuk menganalisis ketidakhadiran ayah, baik secara fisik maupun psikologis, serta dampaknya terhadap perkembangan anak dalam konteks budaya dan gender di Indonesia. Studi ini menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur dengan menganalisis artikel-artikel relevan yang membahas ketidakhadiran ayah dalam keluarga Indonesia. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa ketidakhadiran ayah adalah fenomena multidimensional yang meliputi dimensi perilaku, afektif, kognitif, dan spiritual. Ketidakhadiran fisik ayah seringkali dapat diatasi oleh peran pengganti seperti kerabat dekat atau figur sosial, namun ketidakhadiran ayah secara psikologis lebih berbahaya karena menimbulkan gangguan identitas, ketidakamanan emosional, dan kesulitan dalam perkembangan relasional anak. Kesimpulannya, ketidakhadiran ayah secara psikologis memiliki dampak yang lebih dalam dan berkepanjangan dibandingkan ketidakhadiran fisik. Implikasi studi ini menekankan perlunya pendekatan konseling keluarga yang mengakui pentingnya keterlibatan psikologis ayah dalam mendukung perkembangan anak dan mengatasi ketidaksetaraan gender struktural dalam peran keluarga.

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INTRODUCTION

Fatherlessness has traditionally been understood as the physical absence of a father due to divorce, death, or abandonment. However, contemporary gender and family studies highlight that absence is not only a matter of physical non-presence. Many fathers remain in the household yet fail to perform the emotional, psychological, and developmental roles essential for a child's growth (Selvira, 2024). This condition, where fathers are present but not engaged, constitutes a form of functional fatherlessness, in which the paternal role is lost even though the father figure remains within the family structure (Adriana, 2024). Rethinking fatherlessness as paternal disengagement shifts the discussion from legal status to the absence of parental functions, emphasizing the importance of balancing feminine and masculine caregiving roles in child development (Utama, 2024). This reconceptualization raises a critical question that guides this review: to what extent is psychological fatherlessness, when fathers are emotionally absent but physically present, more detrimental to children's development than physical father absence?

In healthy family systems, fathers contribute far more than just economic provision. They are expected to participate in emotional bonding, co-parenting, discipline, social skill development, and identity formation. When these roles are not fulfilled, children experience role deprivation, losing access to the developmental contributions typically provided by a father figure. Literature on "new fatherhood" suggests a growing expectation for fathers to become active, nurturing co-parents (McGill, 2014; Doherty et al., 1998; Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Holmes et al., 2020; Bataille & Hyland, 2022). However, patriarchal norms and traditional constructions of masculinity often restrict men's involvement to symbolic or peripheral parenting. As a result, fathers may become emotionally distant, authoritarian, or disengaged even when physically present.

This situation produces parental role inequality (e.g., Breton et al., 2025; Pinho et al., 2025), disproportionately burdening mothers with nearly the entire spectrum of caregiving responsibilities. Mothers are commonly expected to provide emotional regulation, academic guidance, household management, and psychological support, often without adequate assistance from the father (Aryani & Lindawati, 2025). The accumulation of these responsibilities can lead to emotional exhaustion, stress, and diminished well-being, ultimately affecting the quality of mother-child relationships (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Calarco et al., 2021). Thus, fatherlessness, when viewed through the lens of role dysfunction, is fundamentally a gendered issue rooted in unequal domestic labor and socially constructed expectations of parental roles.

For children, the loss of paternal function has varied gender-specific consequences. Boys often struggle with emotional regulation, masculine identity formation, and behavioral control (Kucukkaragoz, 2025; Hadebe & Adanlawo, 2024; Mott et al., 1997), while girls face heightened risks related to self-esteem, attachment insecurity, and interpersonal vulnerability (Jin, 2024; Ramatsetse & Ross, 2022; Farooqi & Khan, 2021; Jilain et al., 2022). Studies consistently show that children experiencing functional fatherlessness are more susceptible to anxiety, depression, aggression, social withdrawal, and academic difficulties (Kucukkaragoz, 2025; Kane & Garber, 2004). These outcomes underscore that fatherlessness is not merely a personal or familial issue, but a structural one shaped by gender norms, expectations of masculinity, and unequal caregiving practices.

By explicitly comparing the developmental consequences of psychological and physical fatherlessness, this article aims to clarify how different forms of father absence shape children's emotional, social, and identity development. Through a review of recent literature in Indonesia, the article examines how fatherlessness is perceived in a specific cultural context. This approach aims to provide a conceptual foundation for more equitable, gender-aware family counseling interventions across cultural and gendered contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literature review to reexamine fatherlessness from a gender-sensitive perspective, focusing on the multiple dimensions through which father absence is expressed, such as physical separation and diminished or dysfunctional paternal roles. Given the complexities of fatherlessness, this study aimed to explore not only the direct absence of fathers but also how emotional, relational, and psychological disengagement affects children's development. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, a systematic search was conducted across scholarly sources using keywords related to fatherlessness, specifically in the Indonesian context. By applying inclusion criteria that emphasized conceptual, psychological, gendered, and cultural discussions of fatherhood, and excluding studies that primarily dealt with legal, medical, or non-parenting aspects, the study selected 15 relevant articles that provided a diverse yet focused look at the phenomenon of fatherlessness. This methodological approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of father absence beyond mere physical absence.

In analyzing the selected articles, thematic synthesis was employed to identify recurring patterns and concepts in how fatherlessness is defined and its impact on children's emotional and psychological well-being. The analysis delved into how these themes contribute to understanding the societal and familial implications of father absence, particularly in Indonesian families. Furthermore, the study examined how these themes inform family counseling practices and gender-responsive parenting interventions. The findings of this review highlight the urgent need for approaches that not only address the physical absence of fathers but also tackle the psychological disengagement of fathers in family dynamics. It is emphasized that effective interventions must be responsive to the gendered dimensions of fatherhood, promoting more active and supportive paternal roles that align with the evolving needs of children in diverse cultural settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The literature from Indonesia shows that fatherlessness is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses both physical and psychological absence. Physical fatherlessness appears in situations such as death, divorce, long-term migration, or separation that removes the father from daily family life. Psychological fatherlessness, however, occurs even when fathers remain physically present but do not engage in emotional, cognitive, or relational aspects of parenting. This form of disengagement is characterized by a lack of warmth, limited communication, absence in decision-making, and minimal involvement in children's developmental processes (Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Anesti & Abdullah, 2024; Ashari, 2018; Wahab et al., 2024).

Scholars further describe fatherlessness through behavioral, affective, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions (Hidayati & Sugiarto, 2025). These dimensions reveal that paternal influence extends far beyond discipline or economic support, involving the formation of emotional attachment, moral guidance, cognitive stimulation, and the modeling of social behavior. A distinction is often made between "absolute fatherlessness," where no paternal figure is present, and "relative fatherlessness," where fathers reside in the home but do not fulfill paternal roles (Ashari, 2018). The latter is closely tied to gender norms that confine men to economic functions while disengaging them from nurturing responsibilities.

The psychosocial impacts of fatherlessness are broad and consistently reported. Children affected by fatherlessness often experience difficulties with identity, self-concept, emotional regulation, and resilience (Sengkey et al., 2025; Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Ashari, 2018; Sarfika et al., 2023; Fadhila et al., 2025; Majid & Abdullah, 2024). Many are at increased risk of anxiety, depression, and behavioral challenges, and may struggle to form secure attachments or navigate social relationships (Suarna et al., 2025; Afriliani et al., 2025). Academic performance may also decline, especially when maternal stress or

economic instability exacerbates the situation (Lubis et al., 2024; Miswala & Yusriah, 2025; Faraswati & Fitria, 2025; Zuliani et al., 2024).

Across cultures, various terms such as father absence, father loss, father hunger, and orphaned before time illustrate different interpretations of paternal disengagement (Ashari, 2018; Fajriyanti et al., 2024; Anesti et al., 2024). Collectivist societies often rely on extended kin, such as uncles and grandfathers, as well as community leaders, to compensate for diminished biological father involvement (Green et al., 2019; Ratele et al., 2012; Green, 2018). This pattern demonstrates that the paternal role is not restricted to biology but is culturally distributed. Religious perspectives further enrich this understanding. Islamic teachings emphasize the father's spiritual and moral duties, suggesting that fatherlessness includes the absence of ethical guidance and spiritual leadership (Hidayati & Sugiarto, 2025; Azizah et al., 2025; Walkaromah & Khomairoh, 2025; Hamimah et al., 2024; Wahab et al., 2024). These insights reinforce the notion that fatherlessness must be understood within a broader cultural, social, and religious context, rather than a singular, universal definition.

Discussion

Both psychological and physical absence negatively affect children, yet psychological fatherlessness is often more damaging because it creates ambiguous loss: the father is there, but not "present". Psychological absence is more difficult to detect yet often more damaging, while physical absence is more visible and therefore more likely to be compensated by social support. In some cases of divorce, for example, a father who can fulfill his duties as a father can fulfill the psychological needs of the child, and this is much better for child development (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Bastaitis et al., 2012; Sandler et al., 2018; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Psychological fatherlessness is especially prevalent in patriarchal cultures where fatherhood is narrowly equated with financial provision. Studies in Indonesia confirm that patriarchal parenting paradigms often position fathers solely as breadwinners; while nurturing and emotional closeness are considered the sole responsibility of mothers. This leads many children to experience psychological fatherlessness despite the physical presence of fathers (Ashari, 2018; Nasution et al., 2023; Mentari, 2024; Nindhita & Pringgadani, 2023).

The implications for family counseling are therefore substantial. Because fatherlessness is shaped by structural gender norms and culturally embedded expectations, counseling should move beyond symptom reduction to address relational patterns and domestic labor inequalities (Jannati & Hamandia, 2024). This supports the encouragement of research-based interventions in the practice (Sylvia & Hadiana, 2023; Sylvia et al., 2024). Interventions must help fathers recognize their emotional and developmental responsibilities, support mothers without reinforcing gendered burdens, and guide children in processing feelings of insecurity or abandonment. Counseling should also activate extended kin or community mentors as protective figures and incorporate culturally and spiritually grounded values, such as the Islamic emphasis on moral and spiritual fathering, to ensure relevance for diverse families. Overall, effective counseling must be relational, gender-aware, and culturally situated, emphasizing the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions of paternal involvement while supporting more equitable and nurturing family systems.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that fatherlessness is a multidimensional and gendered phenomenon that extends far beyond the physical absence of a father. The literature reveals that paternal disengagement, even when fathers are physically present, can generate developmental experiences similar to or even more profound than those caused by physical separation. Fatherlessness thus needs to be redefined as the loss of functional paternal roles, encompassing emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual aspects, shaped by the broader gendered structures that influence parental responsibilities. This reframing highlights the need to move beyond simplistic interpretations that focus solely on family structure, instead emphasizing the quality and balance of parental involvement.

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