

Childlessness: perceptions, acceptability and the gender dimension

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Childlessness has major psychological and social implications for the couple and especially for women in a setting where fertility is highly valued. Childlessness is caused by infertility, which has been increasing as a result of rise in STI infections and earlier age at sexual initiation (Richards, 2002). Repeated pregnancy loss, stillbirth and infant/child death may also result in a life without children (Van Balen, 2000). The latter group of affected people however usually receives more sympathy and tolerance than those who do not have children because of infertility. The perception of people regarding childlessness especially in a woman is often derogatory and judgmental. Regardless of the cause, social and gender norms often blame the woman for childlessness. As a result, a childless woman suffers personal grief, frustration, social stigma, ostracism and serious economic deprivation as a result of it (McQuillan et al, 2003; Unisa, 1999; Pearce, 1999). Childless women may also suffer from physical violence, threats from husbands and family, rejection, abandonment and divorce. On the other hand, male infertility is often not acknowledged (Okonofua, 2002). Therefore, men without children may be less traumatized. However in some cases where male infertility is known in the society, childless men may suffer from different forms of trauma and stigma. Childlessness for men is emasculating. Men without children may be regarded as not man enough or not regarded as fully adult as having children can mark adulthood status (Richards, 2002). In some cultures, they have lesser status in the community than their peers with children and their views may not be considered or they may not be allowed to contribute to societal discussion (Upton, 2001).

In Nigeria, a high premium is traditionally placed on having children (Feyisetan and Bankole, 2002; Makinwa Adebusoye, Edewor, Odimegwu, Pearce, 1999). Voluntary childlessness is rare with less than one percent of men and women stating zero as their ideal number of children (NDHS, 2008; 2003; 1999; 1990). The Nigeria Demographic and Health Surveys also reported that up to five percent of women aged 15-49 years lack the capacity to conceive (infecund). In a setting such as Nigeria, where cultural norms and values encourage reproduction and celebrate parenthood, childlessness becomes a potentially stigmatizing status, which can adversely affect

the identities and interpersonal relationships of married people (Larsen, 1996; Gage-Brandon, 1992). Although, there have been a lot of changes in the last couple of decades in the living arrangement of families (due to social mobility and migration, which has led to growth in single-family housing units), fertility issues especially childlessness is not allowed to be kept private between couples. The status of someone without a child in any Nigerian community is better imagined!

Infertility has received little attention from researchers, policy makers and programmers in developing countries as current programs are focused on population control. Where policy or programme attention is given, it is basically on the medical and clinical aspect (Van Balen 2000) but not backed by social or psychological support. Most of the clinical methods for dealing with infertility may also be too expensive to be afforded by the poor in the developing world. Programmes also ignore the gendered dimension of childlessness. Apart from policies and programmes assisting childless people to achieve their reproductive intentions, there is also the need to understand the meanings attached to childlessness and how childless people are perceived in the communities that they live. This could help in designing appropriate policies and programmes to offer support to childless couples traumatized by societal interpretation of their childlessness.

This paper explores people's perceptions of infertility with a particular focus on three themes: (1) perceptions over intentional and unintentional childlessness, (2) perceptions on when childlessness is acceptable and when it is not and (3) gender implications of childlessness. These are achieved by focusing on the narratives of childless individuals and their communities. The paper recommends that in addition to counseling services, and promoting gender equity, designing appropriate policies and programs to assisting childless people to achieve their reproductive intentions need to be prioritized.

The paper is derived from a study on socio-cultural determinants of desired number of children and its achievement, which was conducted between April and July 2006 in Nigeria. It makes use of information collected from 24 focus group discussion (FGD) sessions to explore the

perception of childlessness and its implication on childless individuals and couples. The participants were drawn from the Northern, South Eastern and South Western geographical zones of Nigeria. These three zones were selected because they depict the three main ethnic tribes in the country. The FGD sessions were conducted at both rural and urban areas and the participants were men aged 35 to 59 years and women aged 35 to 49 years. The participants were further stratified by level of education. In total, there were 8 sessions in each of the three zones.

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