

## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF INFERTILITY AMONGST MBAISE COUPLES

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### **Abstract**

Infertility has become a cankerworm that destroys the peace of some couples, making them to face maltreatments from individuals and communities ranging from mockery, abuse, rejection, immoral acts, divorce, denial of properties and even death. The purpose of this study is to investigate the trauma, abuse, divorce, and general assault infertile couples passed through in various Mbaise communities and how these problems should be minimized. It aimed at bringing out the general beliefs regarding marriage, infertility and the value of children. It further examined the socio-cultural implications of infertility among Mbaise people. The significance of this study among others should reduce the high rate of divorce in our society. It will also reduce the high rate of sexual transmitted diseases which is mostly responsible for infertility among couples and finally gives infertile couples hope and peace of mind in the society. The researcher adopted conflict theory for this study. The population of the study consisted of 42 infertile couples, drawn from the three local government areas that make up Mbaise community. Data collected from the respondents which hinged on the research questions. The study found out that the majority cause of mockery, divorce, abuse, rejections, loss of property and positions, high level of promiscuous and unprotected sex by couples are caused by the Igbo cultural value of child. It was also found that Mbaise people believed that childless marriage is traditionally recognized as bad luck (Chi ojoo). However, it was also revealed that adoption of child is the safest way to resolve infertility problem and recommendations were suggested.

**Keywords:** infertility, marriage, culture, Igbo

### **Introduction**

Infertility in this context is defined as a problem of not being able to get pregnant after at least two years of marriage. This has become the primary cause of disunity among some families in Africa, Igbo ethnic group especially Mbaise of Imo state which is the focus of this work. This growing problem cuts across all cultures and societies of the world. It has caused great harms to couples facing it. The problem of infertility is rarely recognized by government and those that feel that they have enough children. There is an Igbo proverb which says that “he who carries the dead body of another relative, sees it as a log of wood”. Indeed, couples with children may not know how those without children feels. It is he that wears shoe knows where it is itching him. It is an aberration that the government who never considers the plight of infertile women in Nigeria, nor roll out any plan that would reduce the problem of infertility in couples, rather engaged in programs that regulates number of children couples should have because they were not aware of the predicaments infertile couples pass through in their various communities.

This study therefore, investigates infertility amongst Mbaise couples and its socio-cultural implications. The aim is to bring to the lime light the trauma, abuse and general

assault childless women passed through in various communities and how this problem should be reduced. It also discourse the general beliefs regarding infertility and the value of children in the family. It also examine the socio-cultural and psychological implications of infertile couples among Mbaise families.

### **Review of related literature**

A review of literature would provide the reader with an overview of the theoretical framework, definition and causes of infertility and the sociological implication of infertility among Mbaise people which will be discoursed in these subheadings: Marriage and Igbo cultural significance and the value of children.

### **The theoretical framework**

The researcher adopted conflict theory as a guide to this research. Conflict theory sees society as good or normal when the forces in it are in conflict. This means that they are struggling or competing over the situations in order to generate acceptance. Karl Marx, as the leading theorist in this group states that conflict is an inevitable phenomenon. His reasons is that the nature of society gives room for conflicts. One can see that entrepreneurs are bound to cheat labourers, governments are bound to cheat civil servant and fertile women are also bound to cheat infertile women etc. these situations brought conflict in the society. The theory is useful in explaining how the dominant groups (fertile couples) use their power to exploit the less powerful groups (infertile couples) in society. Key concepts developed in this perspective include: conflict, struggle, inequality, and exploitation.

The inequality among men and women in the society was shown by a female sociologist, Ida Wells-Barnett. She was among the first female sociologist that fought for the rights of women in the society. She won votes for women under the conflict theory, her view of denial of right of women by men. She complained about the unequal opportunities of the two human gender and disfavours women. This divides over who supports women and who supports men. Taking a clue now between husband and wife that are unable to give birth to a child, especially male child among the Igbo people of Mbaise, the blame goes to the wife most of the times as the cause of the infertility.

### **What is infertility?**

Infertility is defined by Shahnaz and Ayesha (2016) as the inability to conceive naturally after one year of regular unprotected intercourse. For healthy young couples, the likelihood of getting pregnancy varies. Mascarenhas et al (2012) estimated in 2010 that about 48.5 million couples worldwide were infertile. Most of the time, infertility have some degree of subfertility in which 1 in 7 couples need specialist help to conceive. Subfertility can be either primary or secondary. Primary subfertility is a delay for a couple who have had no previous pregnancies; and, secondary subfertility is a delay for a couple who have conceived previously, although the pregnancy may not have been successful for example, miscarriage, and ectopic pregnancy (Taylor, 2003).

### **Causes of infertility**

Both males and females are equally responsible for the causes of infertility. Kakaria and Bradshaw (2008) assert that Most of the infertile couples have one of these three major causes including a male factor, ovulatory dysfunction, or tubal-peritoneal disease. In female, according to the Center of Disease Control (CDC, 2013), the causes of female infertility can be divided into three broad categories including defective ovulation, defective transport and defective implantation. While courses of infertility in male are divided into the following three main categories which include defective spermatogenesis, defective transport and ineffective delivery. So infertility in couples may be caused by the male or female or both. It is not a female abnormality.

### **Marriage and Igbo Cultural Significance**

Marriage, has become a universal phenomenon in Africa. For the Igbo in particular, marriage is a union between husband and wife. During marriage, the prayer point of families and invited guests for the newly married couple is centered on child bearing. Traditional Igbo man believed that procreation is the basic aim of marriage. Child bearing occupies the central point in Igbo marriage. The first and foremost consideration is the fertility of the couple. Parents long for this and the father of the family always pray for the fertility of his children during his kolanut prayer. The mother begs for it while appeasing her chi (goddess) during annual festival. In other words, if you ask an average Igbo man or woman why he desires to marry, the spontaneous answer will be: "I want to marry in order to beget my own children, to get a family like my parents".

This love for having children is manifested in names Igbo parents give to their children. Let us take a few typical names. One of these is Nwa-bụ-ụwa, a child is all the world to me. This name exposes the Igbo man's sentiment on the worth of child bearing. Other things in life rank second to this desire. Other names include: Nwa-dị-uto, a child brings sweetness of the family; Nwa-bụ-ugwu, having a child makes the couples to raise their shoulder high that they did not live a wayward life; Nwa-ka-si, a child is priceless, most precious; Nwa-ka-akụ or Nwa-kego, a child out-values all money, all wealth; Nwa-dị-agu, a child is desirable, man is literally famished with the hunger for children. This idea is still present in the Igbo society today. A childless marriage is traditionally recognized as 'chi ojọ' (bad luck). On this, Basden in Obi (1970) comments: "A childless marriage is a source of serious disappointment and sooner or later, leads to serious trouble between husband and wife". That is why Igbo have a popular saying that "Nwakaego" (child is valued than wealth). Other names that show that children are important in any marriage include: Ahamefuna, Amaechi, Ozoemena, Obinna, Ikenna, Adaobi, Onwubiko, Onwumere, Ezeobi etc. These names giving to children depict how importance children are in lineage continuity. To support this fact, Udeze and Onyekelu (2015:145) confirm the importance of children in lineage continuity by stating the meaning of the name 'Ahamefuna' (My name will not be lost) serves as a deterrent or counsel that the family's name must always excel. It is given to only male issues who will perpetuate the family". For Igbo people, the purpose for marriage is not just only raising children but raising male children who are thought to be heir, (successor) that will live after him and probably propagate his family's name at his demise. Since female children are regarded as akụ onye ọzọ (somebody else

property). According to Ebigbola (2000), “modernization has not weakened the deep-rooted tradition of having a child as soon as possible after marriage”.

Among the Igbo, Mbaise people inclusive, culture made it that it is the man who asks a woman for her hand in marriage. The man therefore makes efforts to satisfy the family of the bride many times as the custom requires and finally pays for the bride price of his wife. He brings her home into his house and family and bears all her responsibilities as the head of the family. This procedure of marriage makes the husband and his family powerful even to determine what his family accepts or rejects and the woman is seen as a weaker sex, a second in command who only acts when the husband is no more. That does not mean that a woman should be a slave in the hands of her husband. Anyanwu (2014:34) agrees with this proposition, when she says that:

In family, women are characterized as lower human being for most of their lives, falling under the guardianship, first of their father and then their husbands. They are seen as incapable of taking decisions on their own. Women are being subdued, degraded and underrated by men folk, who still hold on the notion that women are the weaker sex.

The cause of man being powerful in the matters concerning family and the woman as his subordinate subjected woman to be blamed when the issue of infertility arises in the family. For the Igbo woman to avoid being blame, she does many things and goes to many places to search for the solution to her problem of infertility. Deribe et al (2007), Hollos and Larsen (2008) in Aseffa (2011:15) agree with this assertion when they said “It is the woman who is mostly blamed for the reproductive failure and suffers the negative consequences of being childless”. Dyer et al (2002) in Aseffa (2011:15 and 16) further enumerates some of the negative consequences suffered by women with infertility problem which include disrespect and social exclusion, name calling, mocking, evil eye and accusation, denial of means of livelihood (especially access to land), marital instability, stigma, abuse and violence in some instances. In the same vain, Tolulope (2009:208) says that “the consequences of childlessness are more profound in women as compared to men”. It is generally believed that men cannot be infertile so far he can sustain an erection.

### **The Value of Children**

Children are the highest asset of an Igbo man. He values children more than any other thing on this earth. In Igbo land, especially Mbaise community believes that as someone begets them, they must beget another for the lineage to continue. They do not only see children as those that will take care of them at old age, but also become those to answer their names and inherit their property. Children as the highest asset in the Igbo society make couples especially amongst Mbaise people to go to any length to have one. When the child is not forth coming as expected, the couple may face many challenges from each other, family members, friends and society at large. Dyer (2007) identifies six major values of children such as: marital stability, social security, domestic support, gender identity and parenthood, lineage continuity, religious beliefs, and emotional values.

In Mbaise community, couples graduate from womanhood and manhood to motherhood and fatherhood when they were able to produce children that would

answer their name. Having own child is the only way to achieve full parenthood. To support this fact, Obi (1970), says:

The position of a wife in her husband's family remains shaky and unpredictable until she begets a child. She becomes really secure after the birth of a male child. At this stage she is especially welcome as a responsible wife in her husband's extended family and Umunna. In fact, the birth of the child gives her the title of wife, before this time, she may be said to be a wife only in anticipation

In conclusion, among the Igbo people of Mbaise, see children as having multi-dimensional values which have been cherished by them. This may have diverse negative effect on infertile couples within Mbaise society.

### Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, three research questions are to be tested.

1. Is the predicaments of infertile couples induced by value in child bearing?
2. Is there any infertility psychological effect on couples?
3. Is the increase in polygamy, concubinage, divorce and STDs / HIV Aids contributed by infertility?

### Methodology

Mbaise comprises three Local Governments Areas namely, Abor Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise and Ezinihitte Mbaise all in Imo State, Nigeria. Mbaise covers land area of about 404 km<sup>2</sup> and spans an area of about 160 square miles with a population of more than one million (Ekennia, 2013). The population of Mbaise as at 2006 was estimated to be 611,204 people. A total of 42 respondents were selected using stratified sampling from the three local government areas. 25 respondents were gotten from two hospitals in the area (one general hospital and one private hospital) and 17 respondents were also randomly selected from different families in Mbaise. In all 42 respondents were selected, 10 males and 32 females. For data collection, a specially designed questionnaire that hinged to the earlier stated research question were used. Oral interview was also used. The sample was a representation of infertile couples sorting for medical treatment, those divorced, widowers and those that remarried. The answers given will be used for the analysis.

The data collected from the questionnaire, the scores or number of response to each questionnaire are set in tables. The response is presented in percentages as could be seen in the tables below.

### Results and Discussions

Table 1: Respondent distribution by sex

| Gender     | Male   | Female |
|------------|--------|--------|
| Frequency  | 10     | 32     |
| Percentage | 23.81% | 76.20% |

Distribution of respondent by sex.

Female constituted majority of the respondents. Table 1 shows that 10 (23.81%) were male while 32 (76.20%) were females. This may be due to the fact that women are more likely to report and sort for ways to solve their infertility problem than men.

Table 2: Age distribution of respondents

| Age range (Years) | Male      |             | Female    |             |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
|                   | Frequency | Percentage  | Frequency | Percentage  |
| Below 20          | 0         | 0%          | 0         | 0%          |
| 21 – 30           | 1         | 10.0%       | 10        | 31.25%      |
| 31 – 40           | 4         | 40.0%       | 14        | 43.75%      |
| 41 – 50           | 3         | 30.0%       | 6         | 18.75%      |
| Above 60          | 2         | 20.0%       | 2         | 6.25%       |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>10</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>32</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Table two revealed that the majority of the female and male respondents were between 21 – 40 years of age where reproduction is at its pick.

Table 3: Respondents marital status.

| Marital Status        | Male      |             | Female    |             |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
|                       | Frequency | Percentage  | Frequency | Percentage  |
| Married               | 3         | 30%         | 14        | 43.75%      |
| Divorced              | 1         | 10%         | 7         | 21.88%      |
| Widower/widowed       | 2         | 20%         | 4         | 12.50%      |
| Concubine/sex partner | 0         | 0%          | 2         | 6.25%       |
| Polygamist            | 4         | 40%         | 5         | 15.62%      |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>10</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>32</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Table three revealed that the majority of male and female that are married and polygamist were 70% male and 59.38% female, while 10% male and 21.88% female were divorced and 20% male 12.50% were widowers and widowed. This table also entails that there is high percentage of male as polygamists with about 40% and female divorced with 21.88% and 6.25% of female have sex partners.

Table 4: Value of children to respondents.

| Response            | Male      |             | Female    |             |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
|                     | Frequency | Percentage  | Frequency | Percentage  |
| Undesirable         | 0         | 0%          | 0         | 0%          |
| Desirable           | 0         | 0%          | 4         | 12.50%      |
| Extremely desirable | 10        | 100%        | 28        | 87.50%      |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>10</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>32</b> | <b>100%</b> |

This table shows the oral interview where the respondents were asked how important and desirable children were to their marriage. Their response as you can see from the table showed that both male (100%) and female (87.50%) reported that children were extremely desirable, while only 12.50% of female indicated that children were desirable. However, none of the respondents reported that children were undesirable. This table agrees with the proposition on the review of related literature that Igbo value children.

Table 5: Distribution of respondent’s perception on the predicaments infertile couples passed through if it is induced by value of child bearing.

| S/N | Question for Respondents   | Response |        | Response |        | Total |      |
|-----|--|----------|--------|----------|--------|-------|------|
|     |  | Yes      | %      | No       | %      | Resp. | %    |
| 1.  | The major focus of marriage is to have children?                                 | 28       | 66.67% | 14       | 33.33% | 42    | 100% |
| 2.  | Infertile couple has no child to continue the family lineage?                    | 34       | 80.95% | 8        | 19.05% | 42    | 100% |
| 3.  | Are you mocked because of your problem of infertility?                           | 41       | 97.62% | 1        | 2.38%  | 42    | 100% |
| 4.  | Infertile couple has no child to care for them at old age?                       | 34       | 80.95% | 8        | 19.05% | 42    | 100% |
| 5.  | Infertile couple has no child to inherit their property and position?            | 34       | 80.95% | 8        | 19.05% | 42    | 100% |
| 6.  | Do you think that adoption of a child is a way of resolving infertility problem? | 40       | 95.24% | 2        | 4.76%  | 42    | 100% |

Table five which hinged on the respondent’s perception on the predicaments infertile couples passed through is induced by the Igbo perception on the value of children. The response from the respondents revealed that their focus of marriage is to have children with about 66.67% high, while 33.33% say that having children is not the major focus of marriage. On the other hand, the importance of a child in lineage continuity, care of couple at old age and the importance of a child in couple’s inheritance is high with 80.95% respectively, while 97.62% of the respondents agreed that they were mocked because of their infertility problems. This shows that the root cause of predicaments passed through by the respondent is induced by how Igbo value children. This agrees with table four of this work that children are extremely desirable to couples marriage. This value of a child may trigger those with children to mock the infertile ones. However, it was also revealed by the respondents that adoption of children would resolve the disparity between fertile and infertile.

Table 6: The distribution of respondent’s perception on psychological effects of infertility.

| S/N | Question for respondents  | Response |        | Response |        | Total |      |
|-----|---|----------|--------|----------|--------|-------|------|
|     |   | Yes      | %      | No       | %      | Resp. | %    |
| 1.  | Does marital discord often develop in your family?                                    | 24       | 57.14% | 18       | 42.86% | 42    | 100% |
| 2.  | Do you experience stigma, sense of loss because of your infertility problem?          | 39       | 92.86% | 3        | 7.14%  | 42    | 100% |
| 3.  | Do you always associate with anxiety, anger, depression and feeling of worthlessness? | 22       | 52.38% | 20       | 47.62% | 42    | 100% |

Table six hinged on the respondent’s perception on the psychological effects of infertility. The response revealed that 57.14% of the respondents said yes, that marital discord often develops in their families, whereas 42.86% said that their infertility does not bring any discord in their families. In the same vain, 52.38% agrees that couples with infertility problem always associated with anxiety, anger, depression and feeling of worthlessness, while 47.62% said that this condition does not bring anxiety, anger or depression to them. In addition, 92.86% of the respondents agrees that couples with infertility problems experience stigma and sense of loss, while 7.14% of the respondents said that couples do not experience stigma and a sense of loss because of their infertility problem. This proved that infertility has a psychological effect on couples.

Table 7: Distribution of respondent’s perception on the increase in polygamy, concubinage, divorce and STDs contributed by infertility.

| S/N | Questions for respondents  | Response |        | Response |        | Total |      |
|-----|--|----------|--------|----------|--------|-------|------|
|     |  | Yes      | %      | No       | %      | Resp  | %    |
| 1.  | Are you divorced or threaten to be divorced because of infertility problem?  | 30       | 71.43% | 12       | 28.57% | 42    | 100% |
| 2.  | Do you engaged in promiscuous and unprotected sex in order to have children? | 25       | 59.52% | 17       | 40.48% | 42    | 100% |
| 3.  | Have you tested positive to STD infections before?                           | 32       | 76.19% | 10       | 23.81% | 42    | 100% |

Table seven hinged on the respondent’s perception on the increase in polygamy, concubinage, divorce and STD / HIV Aids are contributed by being infertile. In this table, 71.43% of the respondents agrees that they are divorced or threaten to be divorced, while 28.57% of the respondents said that they were not divorced or threaten to be divorced. In addition to this finding, about 59.52% of the respondents agreed that they engaged in promiscuous and unprotected sex in order to increase the chances of having a child, while 40.48% said that they do not engage in promiscuous and unprotected sex. In the same table, 76.19% of the respondents proved that they have tested positive to STD infections before, whereas 23.81% said that they have not tested positive to STD infections before. To support this fact, Orji et al (2002:61) conducted a quantitative study on the impact of infertility on marital life in Ile-Ife Nigeria, which include 236 women. The study found out that 38.9% of the respondents had divorced and remarried because of infertility.

**The socio-cultural implications among Mbaise families**

According to the data collected, infertility seems to be a multidimensional socio-cultural problem which affects couples especially in the developing countries like Nigeria and Igbo people of Mbaise as example. The data collected from the respondents indicates that infertile couples are mocked, divorced, abused, denied rites because of the Igbo socio-cultural perception on the value of children

It was also discovered that infertility induces polygamy. Couples who are infertile may agree to marry another wife that will give birth to children if the problem is from the woman, or marry a woman who is already pregnant or had given birth to children in her father’s house if the problem is from the man or for them to be sure that they have children. This creates another bigger problem of polygamous family, survival of the fittest set in, in which the stronger may subdue the weaker one. This may cause enmity, hatred and rancor among brothers and sisters.

Another socio-cultural implication found in this study is the high level of promiscuous and unprotected sex among infertile couples as shown in table seven with 59.52%. It is observed that the root cause is traced back to the socio-cultural belief on the value of a child by Igbo people of Mbaise. Opportunity to be promiscuous set is when one suspect another of being infertile. This paved way for unprotected sex in order to increase the chances of having children. The unprotected sex increase the chances of contacting sexually transmitted diseases (STD) which prevent chances of getting pregnant or being able to pregnant woman. Promiscuous and unprotected sex increase



the chances of contracting HIV / Aids which causes death. Favot et al (1997:417) found out that “HIV prevalence was considerably higher among infertile women compared to child-bearing women since infertile women had more marital dissolutions, life time sexual partners and STD’s than fertile women

### **Recommendations**

It is the opinion of this work that the following suggestions duly followed:

1. Government should establish centers for infertility control in all the zones of the Federation. These centers would treat, sensitize and give drugs to infertile couples in a subsidized rate.
2. Gynecologists should be evenly distributed among the general hospitals especially in the rural area. This will enable infertile couples to be guided appropriately.
3. Government, through the help of National Orientation Agency (NOA), should organize campaigns that would convince Igbo populace that children are God’s gift not man made, and furnish them with the right information that would change their negative attitude towards a childless women and corrects their cultural misconceptions on the Igbo value of a child annually in every community.
4. Couples are advised not to divorce their spouse, rather adopt children because divorce does not solve the problem of infertility.
5. National infertility day should be created and observed yearly and use the avenue to enlighten the public to correct the immoral behavior on infertile couples.

### **Conclusion**

Mentally alert, career enjoyment, happy family, peaceful community depends on the positive psychological feeling of the family. Infertility has become a cankerworm that destroys the peace of some couples which makes them to face maltreatment from individuals and communities ranging from mockery, abuse, rejection, immoral acts, and divorce, denial of properties and positions, and even death.

This study has found out that:

- The belief and view of Igbo people of Mbaise on infertility is as someone begets them, they should beget another especially the male child for the lineage to continue. That a childless marriage is traditionally recognized as bad luck (Chi ojoo). To solidify this belief, Basden in Obi (1970) comments: "A childless marriage is a source of serious disappointment and sooner or later, leads to serious trouble between husband and wife".
- The infertility among couples may be caused by the malfunction of reproductive organs of either the male or the female or both, only women should not be blamed for the cause of childlessness among Mbaise couples.
- The maltreatment or injustice infertile couples passed through among the Igbo people of Mbaise is caused by their value of child especially the male child for lineage continuity. In addition, Tolulope (2009: 208) asserts that “having a child is clearly more important than loyalty to one’s spouse, which is evidenced by the common practice of divorce because of childlessness”

- However, this study also found out that adoption of a child is the safest way of restoring back the peace of the family and wipe away the mockery, abuse, rejection, divorce, immoral behavior and untimely death created by infertility.

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