

Cultural Meaning of Childbearing among Women of a Rural Community in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Childbearing generally refers to the normal but complex physiological process that occurs in the lives of mature female species through which offspring are reproduced. This process seems to attract additional meanings in various cultures and these could be of clinical importance. This study aimed to explore the meaning of childbearing among women in a rural community in Nigeria. Phenomenology design was used and data were generated through in-depth personal interviews of twenty-seven childbearing-aged and menopausal women in a rural community in southern Nigeria. Subsequent to thematic data analysis, meanings attached to childbearing emerged which included the following themes: attainment of full womanhood; fulfilment of religious obligation; same sex children means partial fulfilment of parental joy; childbearing strengthens marital relationship; motivation for maternal reward; means of provision of future parental security; inevitable sacrifice as well as childlessness is an unacceptable phenomenon. Conclusion is that although childbearing is a generic physiological process to produce offspring, it connotes other meanings derived from the cultural background of the woman. The findings of this study are of clinical relevance as they provide a clue to provision of culture-sensitive and standard care to women of childbearing age throughout the reproductive cycle.*

Keywords: childbearing meaning, sub-Saharan Africa, culture/cultural competence, mothering, gender issues, womanhood attainment, son preference, childlessness

1. Introduction

Physiologically, reproduction indicates maturity of the specie. Additionally, in the human race the phenomenon of having offspring appears to connote other meanings socially and culturally. Immense value is put by all human societies on having children. Cultural and social values explain the reasons for having children, number of children, importance of sons and daughters as well as the meaning of having children (van Rooij, 2014).

A phenomenological study which investigated the cultural and spiritual meanings of childbirth revealed that the primary importance of childbearing included the following: obedience to religious laws and that the bittersweet paradox of childbirth is accompanied with a sense of empowerment. The study also showed that religious beliefs help women to define the meaning of childbirth as well as provide coping mechanisms for the intensity of giving birth (Mboho, Furber, & Waterman, 2013).

In a strongly pronatal culture, fertility is highly valued and childlessness is not acceptable, thus, where unfortunately the woman is childless, it has been found to be associated with major psychological and social implications (Latifat & Netsayi, 2014). Nigeria is mostly pronatal and so childbearing is held dearly by most married couples in (Latifat & Netsayi, 2014). This is highly expected in several other cultures, therefore, in a typical African society, a childless woman or wife is stigmatised as a failure to womanhood and suffers recognisable marginalisation (Van Balen & Bos, 2009). Besides, childbearing is thought to strengthen marital relationship, thus, securing the right of the woman as a bona fide member of the family because she is contributing offspring that will perpetuate the family name (Latifat & Netsayi, 2014). Consequently, in some cultures each time a woman bears a child, it attracts special gifts like sets of clothes with hand bags, shoes and headgears from the husband. Some women have interpreted this gesture to be incentives

to bear more children as well as mark of appreciation from the husband (Mboho, et al., 2013).

Childlessness is a devastating experience which has also been observed to be associated with higher rates of depression and loneliness for some people (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). Childbearing, therefore, is a remarkable event in the life of every woman and in some cultures it is celebrated because it is viewed as a happy event. The joy of the birth of a child goes beyond the mother and father to members of the extended family, friends and neighbours. The reason being that each new birth increases the population of the family and this implies increased strength for the community (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2016). It is further claimed that the increase in family size through childbirth in small communities and ethnic groups makes the people feel safer and stronger (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2016). Having children is said to increase respect for the woman, give her identity and guarantee her place in the family, thus averting psychosocial problems which could ensue as a consequence of childlessness (Van Balen & Bos, 2009).

Cultural beliefs and values in the environment of the woman has been found to shape the meaning of childbirth (Mboho, et al., 2013). Childbearing has different meanings in various cultures. In some cultures which include some parts of Nigeria, following childbirth other issues may arise such as sex of the baby. The male child is preferred to female because he is thought to maintain the family name and inherit properties from the father; while the girl would be married out to another family that would gain from her procreative functions (Inyang-Etoh & Ekanem, 2016). These cultural values and beliefs in the context of this study are thought to influence the meaning of childbearing.

Although several literatures explicitly discuss the strong influence of culture and social factors on shaping of meaning of childbearing, it appears that the meaning so

developed foreshadows intricate experiences of parenthood. For example, parenthood is involved with a unique mix of experiences of stress and rewards (Umberson, et al., 2010). It is further explained that when children are young, the cost of parental wellbeing outweighs the benefits of having children as expressed in the stress involved in nurturing the children. However, adult children have more rewarding effects on parental wellbeing as they might become providers for the parents.

A study on adolescent mothers in the Dominican Republic revealed that high value is placed on motherhood and that having children proved to be a stabilizing force for young women (Edin & Kefalas, 2005a).

To the best of our knowledge, no study in this setting has documented what meaning women attach to childbearing which is a very important common occurrence and function in their lives. Therefore, this study explores the cultural meaning of childbearing among women in a rural community in Cross River State, Nigeria.

2. Aim

To explore the meaning of childbearing among women in a rural community in Nigeria.

3. Methods

Setting

The setting is a small, vibrant commercial community comprising of Efiks as the major ethnic group and co-residing here are Ibibio, Annang Ibo and Ijaw immigrants who have lived here for a few generations doing business. These various ethnic groups over time do share some common cultural similarities which include their perspectives about childbearing. It has a population of about 2,500 people. Administratively, a Senior Chief sees to the day-to-day running of the community assisted by other Chiefs. As a consequence of the International Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, a position was created for a Women Leader who coordinates the public activities of women of the community. She reports to the Chiefs.

There is a primary school and a secondary school in this community as well as a Primary Health Centre to cater for the formal educational and health care needs of the people respectively. Contemporary healthcare is provided by Midwives with nursing background, Community Health Officers and Community Health Extension Workers with a Medical professional visiting occasionally. The Health Centre mostly attends to children and women for maternity care. Alternative maternity services are provided by the seven traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and some Churches/Spiritual homes in this community.

This community is a pronatal one in that members attach high value to procreation.

Design

Phenomenology design was utilized in this study to explore the meaning attached to childbearing by women in this context.

Inclusion criteria

The participants selected for this study were as follows:

- i) Women of childbearing age (15 – 49 years)
- ii) Menopausal women

Exclusion criteria

Women below 15 years

Sampling

Women who have given birth previously as well as those who do not have children were selected from the inclusion criteria through purposive and snowball sampling since this study is exploratory and non-generalisable.

Ethical issues

Permission to conduct the study was obtained formally from the Community leader. Further approvals were obtained from the individuals that participated in the study. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Data generation

Data were generated through in-depth individual interviews of twenty-seven women to explore the meanings they attach to childbearing.

4. Data analysis

Audio tapes of the interviews were transcribed (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Since the interviews were conducted in the local dialect (*Efik*), the translation and transcription were done by a secretary who understands both the local dialect (Efik) and English very well. For technical and conceptual accuracy, thus enhancement of rigour, the transcribed interviews from the audio tapes (written in English) were read through by an independent person and translated back to *Efik* for credibility and confirmability as was used for the interviews. These were compared with the recorded interviews in the audio tapes, to ensure that the transcription was correct. In recognition that the *Efik* language used for the study like most other languages, does not have adequate vocabulary to match the English language (Fredrickson, Rivas Acuna, & Whetsell, 2005), a professional with nursing and midwifery background was engaged to do the back translation. Following the transcription of the data, they were organized into codes and categories. Consequently, thematic data analysis was undertaken. This process involved coding of the key concepts into categories and themes.

5. Results

Meaning of childbearing emerged as the following themes from this study:

- i) Childbearing means the attainment of full womanhood
- ii) Childbearing is a fulfillment of religious obligation
- iii) Same sex children means partial fulfillment of parental joy
- iv) Childbearing strengthens marital relationship
- v) Having children is a means of attracting respect from the family and community
- vi) Childbearing is motivation for maternal reward
- vii) Having children is a means of parental security for the future
- viii) Childbearing is an inevitable sacrifice
- ix) Childlessness is unacceptable phenomenon

Childbearing means the attainment of full womanhood

All the participants in this study expressed that childbearing or having children makes the woman attain full womanhood. In other words, any woman who does not have a child / children is not recognized as a complete woman. Childlessness attracts derogatory names from other members of the community to the woman. Such names include 'Ada' meaning infertile woman; some even refer to such women as men and so do not deserve to have a successful marriage. Direct responses from some of the respondents include:

'A woman who has children is now part of womanhood, even in her marriage, she is now respected' (Int. 1).

'The woman has now achieved the rite of womanhood' (Int. 2).

'Naturally, women were created to bear children; a woman who has children has fulfilled this obligation, therefore, she is a fulfilled woman' (Int. 21).

Most of the respondents emphasized that having only one child does not qualify the woman to be a fulfilled woman because she may lose that child and become childless.

'A woman should have about three to four children before qualifying as having attained womanhood. If she has only one child and loses him/her, it means that she cannot call herself a mother' (Int. 1).

'One child can never be enough, the standard number of children a woman should have is five to six, otherwise she cannot attain the full rite of motherhood' (Int. 3).

'... at least the woman should have five children' (Int. 4).

Childbearing is a fulfillment of religious obligation

While the women believe that childbearing makes them fulfilled by attaining womanhood, some of them went further to express that having children is in response to divine authority. For example,

'Having children is a religious obligation and such women have sense of fulfilment because they have obeyed divine authority' (Int. 2).

This view was also held by some other women.

'Having children means the fulfilment of religious obligation and attainment of womanhood' (Int. 9, 21, 22).

Same sex children means partial fulfillment of parental joy

The respondents expressed diverse opinions about the sex of the children. Mostly, the meaning here is that having same sex children particularly all females is that the woman has not yet got children as some place higher value on male children.

'I have two children and both are males, I am happy for this in that male children are more valued than females because they will continue the family name ... husbands are not happy when the wives have all female children' (Int. 22).

'If the woman has all girls, she has to keep trying more pregnancies so that she can have males also' (Int. 18).

'The sex of the children must be mixed although male children are preferred for the sake of people to inherit the family properties. If the woman has all girls, the husband will not be happy because the girls will be married out to other families' (Int. 16).

'If a woman has a particular sex of children, she should keep trying to have more children and she may eventually has the required sex of children' (Int. 11).

Some of the respondents expressed a contrary view about sex of the child. To them, it does not matter whether male or female.

'Sex of the child does not matter ... enlightened people do not bother about this' (Int. 8).

'In the past quest for male children was very common but it is waning in recent times. It does not matter whether one has all females or all males, they are gifts from God, the important thing is to give them good education (Int. 23).

This view was also held by Int. 17.

'In the past, male children were appreciated more than females but it is not so these days. I realize that it is more expensive and stressful to rear male children because they can easily be lured into wrong associations or gangs' (Int. 4).

Childbearing strengthens marital relationship

In addition to the meanings presented previously, childbearing to some women also means a source of strength in marital relationship. This implies that having children provides some security for the woman in the

marriage because the husband would not have the need to marry a second wife or seek divorce on grounds of childlessness.

‘Children are a source of peace in marriage and where these are present, the marriage is bound to last’ (Int. 16).

‘Childbearing accords the woman full right in her marital home and so can be part of decision-making in my culture’ (Int. 1).

Having children is a means of attracting respect from the family and community

Some of the women hold the view that a woman who has children is treated with respect both in the family and community.

‘A woman who has children is respected in her family and in the larger community. On the contrary, a woman who does not have children is not respected in our culture because she is alleged to have aborted all the ‘seeds in her ovary and so cannot have any child; she is called derogatory names like ‘Ada’ (meaning a barren woman); she does not have any say in the family or community’ (Int. 1).

‘Any childless woman is an unhappy person and is not respected in the community’ (Int. 2).

‘Women who do not have children are not respected. Some people ridicule them that they had committed abortions in their youthful years which have resulted in childlessness’ (Int. 4). This view is held by some other women (Int. 16, 17, 19, 21, 23).

However, a few of the respondents were of a contrary opinion and asserted that some childless women are respected depending on certain circumstances such as wealth and family believes.

‘I have observed that if a childless woman is from a wealthy family, she is respected even in the community’ (Int. 18).

‘Well, some families are reasonable and show empathy to the childless woman. In such families, a childless woman is respected’ (Int. 24).

‘Some people in the family and community show respect to childless women particularly when they are elderly... in some other cultures, they are sent out from the matrimonial home but that is not common in our culture’ (Int. 25).

Childbearing is motivation for maternal reward

Some respondents assert that in this setting, the woman is rewarded with gifts from her husband or partner each time she puts to birth. For example

‘Having children attracts gifts from the husband or partner to the woman because each time she has a baby she is given new clothes, shoes, headgears and food items are

stocked in the house to ensure she feeds well at least during the period she would be fully at home caring for the baby’ (Int. 1).

‘Women attract gifts from their husbands at childbirth and in the preparation for ‘Christening’ of the baby’ (Int. 7).

Having children provides parental security for the future and heirs for inheritance

Another meaning ascribed to childbearing is that having a child or children proffers security for parents in future when they are aged and weak. Below are some of the responses from the respondents.

‘Having children is very important because it is a source of security for the mother or parents in old age. Children are expected to take care of their aged parents at the stage when they can no longer fend for themselves (Int. 26).

‘Truly, children are expected to take care of their parents in old age; but if this must be so, the children need to be well brought up so that they can take such responsibility ... they are also heirs to family properties’ (Int. 25).

Childbearing is an inevitable sacrifice

Although the view of having children also means source of security for parents in old age as held by most of the respondents; most of them state that this gain is preceded by sacrificial living of the parents to accommodate the inevitable expenses or sacrifice of childrearing.

‘For parents to reap the benefit from children as future security, parent must first of all pay the price of taking care of the children right from birth to adulthood when they can independently care for themselves. Such care includes feeding, education, healthcare and prayers’ (Int. 12).

‘Parents must ensure that the children are provided for; they should be educated and also well disciplined’ (Int. 11).

‘It is quite stressful to bring up children who can in turn be able to take care of their parents in future. This involves giving the children basic care in the areas of feeding, clothing as well as good education and helping them grow up disciplined’ (Int. 9).

Childlessness is unacceptable phenomenon

This setting being pronatal with the importance attached to the meaning of childbearing, the respondents view childlessness as an unacceptable phenomenon. This would cause any woman so affected to exhaust all avenues in the attempt to have a child or children. The various ways of trying to have children as discussed by the respondents include seeking help from either traditional or contemporary healthcare providers as well as attending prayer houses. Where these fail, the affected women may marry a younger woman or girl to bear children for her or as last resort adopt a child or children. The respondents

commented widely on these and the examples are narrated below.

‘Childlessness is a terrible situation for the woman and so she tries everything possible to have children. She attends prayer houses; some may go to the hospital for help while others may seek help from traditional healers and traditional birth attendants (TBA). The TBAs usually give the women special enema known as *mbit-mbit ukebe* (which means cold enema). If the remedy is not successful, the woman would reach an agreement with her husband to adopt a child as last resort’ (Int. 1).

‘... a childless woman could go to the extent of marrying a young girl who is given the liberty to sleep with any man or men of her choice and if she gets pregnant and puts to birth, the child belongs to the childless woman who married her’ (Int. 5).

Similar responses were given by (number) other women.

‘A childless woman is unfulfilled and so an unhappy person. To get out of that situation, she tries to get help from various places such as prayer houses, traditional healers and even marrying a younger woman/girl to sleep freely with men and the children born in such affairs belong to that childless woman’ (Int. 3).

Of all the women interviewed, only one mentioned artificial insemination as a means of overcoming childlessness.

‘... I am aware that artificial insemination can be helpful to the childless woman to become a mother. It is worth trying by childless couple who can afford it so that the woman can experience the joy of motherhood’ (Int. 5).

6. Discussion

Meaning of childbearing by women in this community is here discussed. The findings of this study show diverse meanings of childbearing. It means different things to the individual woman although many of them seem to share common meanings in some aspects which are discussed consequently. Meanings of phenomena as observed by Humanistic researchers are often linguistically constructed. This implies that meanings do not exist *a priori* but are developed in social and cultural interactions (Fornas, 2017; Lenkauskiene & Liubiniene, 2002). In this study, being mostly a homogenous cultural community, the meanings the women assign to childbearing appear to be influenced by their cultural belief about value placed on having children. These are discussed based on themes presented earlier in this narrative which are:

- i) Childbearing means the attainment of full womanhood
- ii) Childbearing is a fulfilment of religious obligation
- iii) Same sex children means partial fulfilment of parental joy
- iv) Childbearing strengthens marital relationship
- v) Having children is a means of attracting respect from the family and community
- vi) Childbearing is motivation for maternal reward

vii) Having children provides parental security for the future

viii) Childbearing is an inevitable sacrifice

ix) Childlessness is unacceptable phenomenon

Motherhood means the attainment of full womanhood

For all the women in this study, childbearing means a highly valued aspect of the life of the woman which culminates in sense of fulfilment as a woman. In other words a childless woman in this context cannot claim to have self-actualization unless she has resolved not to have children (Van Balen & Bos, 2009). This finding is supported by the Life course perspective theory which emphasises normative trajectory marked by transitions and life events (Elder, 1998). This explains that as part of normal life transition, the adult woman is expected to find a partner, get married, bear children and raise them. This life trajectory is universal although it is argued that the order of events may be race, ethnicity and class specific (Edin & Kefalas, 2005b).

Motherhood is a socially valued identity and people show great commitment to identities they value. This implies that loss or gain of valued identities can have an impact on the psychological well-being of the individual (Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008; Chrouser, Christina, & Ryff, 2006); therefore, achievement of identities might result in lasting consequences for well-being (McQuillan, Stone, & Greil, 2007). In corroboration with the finding of this study, some other studies have found that motherhood is associated with greater well-being because children are a source of love, pride and self-fulfilment (Holton, Fisher, & Rowe, 2010).

Childbearing is a fulfilment of religious obligation

Having read through some of the literature, it becomes apparent that the reliance on religious beliefs is consistent across Nigeria and some other cultures. One of the factors which influence the attribution of meaning is religion (Mboho, et al., 2013). It has been observed that for many centuries religious traditions have set standards and rules about life and it has been regarded as having a great influence on sexuality (Sanjakdar, 2011). Furthermore, it has been observed that some religions believe that human procreation is a God-given capacity (UNFPA, 2016). Data from this study showed that women of this community hold the meaning that having children is a fulfilment of their obligation to God.

Same sex children means partial fulfilment of parental joy

This study revealed that some women who have same-sex children, particularly all-females are generally regarded as not yet having children with the consequence that such women have feeling of partial fulfilment of womanhood. In the attempt to achieve full womanhood, the affected women would try more pregnancies and childbirths depending on luck to have male children in particular.

The implication of this is that the woman goes through pregnancy and childbirth several times to be able to achieve this purpose to please her husband and larger family. From scientific position, this practice invariably compromises the maternal health thus making her highly susceptible to complications like hypertension, diabetes, anaemia, postpartum haemorrhage, placental complications, fetal malpresentation, microsomia and preterm delivery (Simonsen, Lyon, & Adler, 2005).

This situation is not peculiar to this community but also typical of some other cultures in Nigeria. For example in the western part of Nigeria, it is believed that a woman can only be assured of settling in her husband's home when she has given birth to a male child. A research study in that part of Nigeria revealed that 99% of the respondents preferred male to female children (Olarwaju, Kona, & Dickson, 2015).

A study on child-sex preference in another southern part of Nigeria revealed that owing to the patriarchal nature of their setting, majority of women preferred to have male children in the index pregnancy. About a third of the study population studied would prefer male and female children for gender balance in the family. Major reasons for son preference were for inheritance, husband's satisfaction and consolidation of marriage. Consequent on these reasons, in that study, about half of the women who had only female children would keep trying more pregnancies for a son only to stop trying after about four attempts (Inyang-Etoh & Ekanem, 2016).

Another study in western Nigeria comprising both male and female respondents revealed that most of them preferred to have male children because these are thought to be more important than female. This position stems from their culture which values males more than females because they are stronger and would continue to bear the family name; unlike the female who would get married and bear the husband's family name (Olaogun, Ayoola, Ogunfowokan, & Ewere, 2009; Raji & Raji, 2016).

Male-child preference as found in this study and corroborated by other studies discussed earlier in this text infringe on the fundamental human rights of females. The Nigerian Amended Constitution (Section 21, 1999) preserves and promotes only cultures which enhance human dignity. It has been observed that in Nigeria women are still disproportionately disadvantaged in relation to human right despite the Beijing Conference of 1995 (Oluduro, 2018). It is argued that son preference is a form of harmful traditional practices against women in Nigeria and other developing countries. It supports gender inequality where female are made subordinates to males. Son preference has been found to pose health risks to the females and limited access to healthcare. It has also resulted in gender-based violence, female infanticide as well as other social issues such as denial of inheritance, education and economic opportunities (Oluduro, 2018).

Male-child preference has continued to be a social issue in some parts of the world and Nigeria in particular, despite the global movement on gender equity (Olaogun, Ayoola,

Ogunfowokan and Ewere, 2009). This idea is said to have originated from the feudal views derived from the warring states of the middle age which holds that men are superior to women. This belief is also held by some contemporary societies in various parts of the world like China, India, Nepal and Africa. The major reason for perpetuating this practice in the contemporary world including Nigeria, is that men are seen as the heirs to family properties and they would maintain the family name whereas, females loose these privileges because they eventually get married and leave their natal families.

Childbearing strengthens marital relationship

A marriage without children in this context is acclaimed a weak marriage which could easily break up. This means that the expected trajectory of a girl growing to a woman, going into a relationship with a man and eventually getting married is truncated. Having children in a marriage relationship in this context means marital security for the woman. This finding corroborates the findings by some other authors who also found that having children consolidates the marriage relationship (Inyang-Etoh & Ekanem, 2016; Olarwaju, et al., 2015). Contrarily, in a marriage without children, marital infidelity may ensue with the man seeking another woman who can bear children that can propagate his lineage (Arugu, 2014; Ogwokhademhe & Ishola, 2013).

Having children is a means of attracting respect from the family and community

Having children attracts respect to the woman from her extended family and the wider community and has the prospect of availability of people to care for her in old age. Such women particularly when the children are grown are rarely verbally or physically abused by extended family and other community members for fear of reprisal from her children. Conversely, the woman who does not have children is derogated in this context particularly by in-laws. She is labeled a woman who may have been promiscuous and committed several unsafe abortions which may have damaged her reproductive organs. In similar contexts, the woman does not take part in decision-making during her peer group ('age grade') meetings and during traditional marriage ceremonies her servings are deliberately small because she does not have a child who will get married for other people to be feted in return. This confirms the findings of some researchers who also found that the childless woman is ridiculed; stigmatized; verbally and physically abused; suffers rejection by in-laws and other community members (Van Balen & Bos, 2009). The adverse reactions to the childless woman are an indication of probable ignorance about causes of childlessness and a potential for community education on this phenomenon and the available interventions.

Childbearing is motivation for maternal reward

In this setting and similar cultures in Nigeria, successfully giving birth to a child attracts gifts for the woman from her husband or partner. She is deemed to have contributed to enlargement of the husband's family. This finding is in

agreement with an ethnographic study on socio-cultural factors and beliefs influencing maternal mortality in Nigeria in which the authors found that giving birth to children attracted gifts from the husband and so, some women would want to have many children which obviously mean more gifts to them (Mboho, et al., 2013). Good as the gifts may be, the ill informed women may be unaware of the maternal health risks associated with going through many childbirths. In a typical rural setting in Nigeria where the women are poor and only dependent on their spouses for living costs, gift from the husband is a welcome relief to the woman. Where the gifts may clandestinely serve as motivators towards maternal health risk through many pregnancies, such situation calls for education and economic empowerment of women to enable them make informed choices about their health.

Having children provides parental security for the future

All the women in this study expressed their strong belief that having children is a means of security for the parents in future when they are old, feeble and not capable of earning income anymore. This view is supported widely by other authors who found that children are a resource for parents as they age (Gentzler, 2011; Grundy & John C, 2006). Critically evaluating this finding, it may imply that this assertion can only be possible where the children have means of livelihood and are psychologically well adjusted. This may be a challenge in places where there is high level of unemployment coupled with poor empowerment machineries towards creation of sustainable independence of the younger generation.

Childbearing is an inevitable sacrifice

While children are looked up to as parental security for the future, this follows a period of sacrifice by the parents to bring up the children. It is remarked that raising children is expensive with regard to feeding, clothing, education, healthcare and time required for personal attention to the child. This leaves women with less time for career and leisure (Hewlett, 2007). Additionally, mothers' wellbeing may be compromised due to energy spent in raising children. This goes with more household chores to be done by the mother after children are born (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Owing to the enormous task involved in bringing up children, some parents have experienced lower life satisfaction, lower marital satisfaction and more depression (Evenson & Simon, 2005; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). In spite of the stressful aspect of motherhood, some mothers have argued that the rewards of motherhood are worth the cost (Fox, 2009) and some scholars have found motherhood to be associated with greater well-being (Holton, Fisher., & Rowe, 2010).

Childlessness is unacceptable phenomenon

Findings from the study showed several attitudinal dispositions towards childless women. These ranged from use of derogatory names for them to rejection by some members of family and the community at large. This disposition is neither peculiar to this community nor

limited to Africa. Literature has shown that similar reactions happen in other sub-Saharan African countries and some low income Asian countries like India and Sri-Lanka.

The results of a review conducted on this phenomenon showed discrimination at family and community levels against the childless woman to include: harassment, pressure, rejection, exploitation, abuse perpetrated by in-laws; marital instability, which may culminate in divorce or husband taking a second wife and violence perpetrated by husband / partner. At community level predicament of childlessness include ridicule, verbal abuse; stigmatization, marginalization, isolation and exclusion from community ceremonies (Van Balen & Bos, 2009). These unpleasant occurrences have been associated with depression and loneliness (Umberson, et al., 2010).

Consequently, these ugly experiences make childless women go to great extent to try to get pregnant (Greil & McQuillan, 2004). In this study, childless women are said to engage in various help-seeking activities such as attending prayer houses, getting treatment from traditional birth attendants (TBAs) / other traditional healers, while only a few seek help from professionals in the hospitals. Non-seeking of healthcare from skilled professionals deprives such woman of appropriate scientific investigations and proper treatment.

Generally, if treatment is unsuccessful, some may adopt children while some of those who are advanced in age may go to the extent of marrying young girls and encourage them to have sexual intercourse freely with men and bear children which would be claimed by the older infertile woman. There is paucity of literature on older women who marry younger women to produce offspring for them. The implications of this include promoting prostitution, exposure of such younger women to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/ AIDS with its consequent complications for both the mother and baby particularly in a rural community where modern healthcare is inadequate. Additionally, this results in irresponsible fatherhood because the girl may not identify who the real father of her child / children is. This may lead to dysfunctional family with its psychological and social consequences such as high level of conflict and disorganisation (Flores, Salum, & Manfro, 2014).

7. Conclusion

Bearing children is an important phenomenon in the lives of women who have not decided to be voluntarily infertile particularly in a society that is pronatal. In addition to the generic meaning of childbearing which denotes a physiological process of procreation, this study has shown that there are other meanings attached to childbearing which are shaped by cultural and other values. Consequently, this has an implication for clinical practice which requires that midwives and other relevant healthcare providers should not gloss over this vital aspect of client care. It is imperative for this category of health care providers to familiarize themselves with the culture and

other values of the consumers of care in order to provide care that is culturally congruent.

Implications of findings to midwifery practice

Findings of this study show that high value is attached to having children in this community; therefore, midwifery should be strengthened to provide and maintain highest standard of care to women and their families during the childbearing cycle of pre-pregnancy, pregnancy and post pregnancy. It has been established that having children enhances the wellbeing of women (Umberson, et al., 2010), therefore, midwives should support women to the best of their capacity to prevent infertility, for example, through sensitization on Human papillomavirus vaccination for young girls.

Culture of the people influences the meaning attached to childbearing, therefore midwives should familiarise themselves with the cultural practices of the people and provide culturally congruent care to support practices that promote health of the reproductive aged women to achieve their aim of attainment of full womanhood in good health. Thus, the midwife should promote health of the women through monitoring, health education and referrals for adequate treatment where necessary.

Where cultural practice is inimical to health, for example, son preference and 'motivating gifts' for every childbirth which could subject the woman to many pregnancies, thus exposing her to risk of morbidity and mortality; midwives should engage in individualised, family and community education on the adverse effects of such practices. This is hoped to facilitate the reinvention of beliefs and values of the people by themselves (Esienumoh, Akpabio, & Etowa, 2016).

For deriding the involuntarily childless women, it is noteworthy for midwives to educate the people on the psychological implications of such behaviours as these can lead to depression (Umberson, et al., 2010). Rather than deriding, emphasis should be on encouragement of such women to seek appropriate medical intervention. The people should be sensitised on In-vitro Fertilisation (IVF) and other technologies for mediation in infertility as knowledge of these technologies seems only to be high among the elites (Jin, et al., 2013).

In view of enhanced technologies to improve the fertility of women, midwives should advocate for availability, accessibility and acceptability of these modern technologies to affected women particularly in the rural areas who may not be well informed.

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