

PLIGHTS OF CHILDLESS COUPLES IN A PRONATALIST IGBO SOCIETY: STUDIES IN UMUOMAKU, ANAMBRA STATE

Nwokorie, M. C. O.

Department of History and Strategic Studies,
Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
omcnwokorie@gmail.com

Arinze, E.

Department of History and Strategic Studies,
Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

Onu, C. S.

Department of Social Science Education (Political Science Unit)
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria
capricononu@gmail.com

Yemisi, O.

University of Illorin, Nigeria
yemisiwaleisaac@gmail.com

Abstract

The issue of childlessness has led to so much damage and most times led to broken homes. Couples feeling ridiculed, constant visit to ‘prayer houses’, herbalist homes and spiritual centres despite the wave of modern technology in virtually all sphere of life is appalling. This is because advancement in technology avails peoples the opportunity to facilitate solutions to problems that hitherto were very difficult to solve. Childlessness has major psychological and social implications for affected persons, especially in settings where childlessness is highly valued. The study documents how childlessness is perceived in a pronatalist Igbo society and the multitude of adverse consequences suffered by affected individuals. Childlessness evokes strong negative feelings among the Igbo being represented by the Umuomaku in Anambra State. It is important to note that childlessness goes beyond the core of the individual in African setting. Nevertheless, how men and women respond and the language they use reflect their individual experiences. These individuals experience unimaginable social and emotional burdens on a daily basis in their homes and the community at large. In desperate moves to avoid being tag childless, these couples go to any length to have children. Using thematic and narrative approach, the study uses qualitative methodology and relies on Primary and secondary sources of information for its analyses.

Keywords: Plight, Pronatalist, Stigma, Childlessness, Prayer house, Herbalist.

Introduction

Marriage is a social and universal phenomenon; factors that influence one’s decision to marry can be culture-specific. It is a union between a man and a woman that brings together families, communities, and ethnic groups. The system of marriage varies from people to people, and what is considered as the importance of marriage varies, however one general belief is that marriage is aimed at procreation, that is to say marriage and procreation are inseparable (Lawrence-Hart, G. and Onah, G., 2019).

Prevalence of childlessness is high worldwide including both developed and developing countries. In many parts of the world, getting married and expectation of parenthood or having children is extremely valued and

considered a natural part of adult life. For example, in most parts of Igboland, the main reason for marriage is childbirth, as raising a family is very essential. Hence, childbirth is a way of safeguarding and validating marriages, Therefore, challenges associated with marriage or childbirth might leave the person or couple in a dilemma and discomfort. For that reason, in some studies in Umuomaku childlessness is a social misfit that incurs displeasure and hostile attitudes from the family and society.

The benefits of children as people presume are thus closely linked with core psychological needs for connectedness, security and control (e.g, reliable support in old age), and experiencing a positive self, and is associated with

subjective well-being. Thus, young adults anticipate the prospect of becoming biological mothers and fathers particularly in African culture. In line with most of the cultures in African countries, children do not only serve as a source of caregivers in old age but are also perceived as a means of continuation of the lineage of an individual (Holloway, I. and Wheeler, S., 2013).

Procreation is one of the major functions of the family. Every man takes a wife apparently to have children, and where this purpose is not forth coming into fulfilment, it results to tension in most cases which lead to misunderstanding and disputes in the family. Other reasons or purpose for marriage include: sexual satisfaction, companionship and economic incentive. Many wives try to ensure the procreation of children to its fullest limit. For most people, bearing children is very important, and the inability to do so is a great life problem. Childlessness is usually blamed on the woman. In most cases, childless women in Igbo land are regarded as worthless and deserved to be divorced.

All human beings are expected to be treated with respect and dignity. On the contrary, being married for a reasonable number of years without a child in Igbo land come with very big challenges to the concerned couples (Laurie, L., 1996). Wanting children in marriage but not being able to procreate in Africa, especially Igbo land including Umuomaku, is a major source of psychological distress. Societal deep-rooted stigma, deprivation of traditional rights, feelings of abandonment, and treating women as being useless are among the conditions childless couples find themselves in Igbo land which exacerbates stress and depression.

Social Stigma

Humans live in a world governed by norms that influence every aspect of life. Although every society has its own set of norms, which makes them universal, it is constructed based on culture and history on how things are supposed to be or should look like. Though certain attributes may be universally undesirable (e.g. disabilities), the intensity may differ based on the norms of that society. The power of norms makes it possible to differentiate between normal and deviant characteristics. Consequently, it helps streamline certain human behaviour and activities (Lawrence-Hart, G. and Onah, G., 2019). Nevertheless, in its quest, it discredits others rendering them unfit should they deviate from the norms as ascribed by the society.

The negative consequences of childlessness by couples are much stronger in developing countries than in the Western societies and these are mainly characterized by personal suffering and social stigmatization.

There is a tendency of society to blame the woman for a failed conception. Consequently, the accepted norm is that

childlessness in a couple stigmatizes the wife as barren and the husband as sterile. In this manner the implication of sterility presents men with an opportunity to abandon barren wives and de-stigmatize them by opting out of childless marriages. Participants' in a study conducted in Umuomaku Town indicated that they had to deal with being called barren.

Traditional customs, such as having to wear a scarf until a woman has a child also contributes to more pressure on women who suffer from childlessness. Women expressed that they felt especially stigmatized and ridiculed in their families and in the community. Women described how they were sworn at, shouted at, cursed and victimized, seeing themselves as outcast, especially within their husbands' families. Prior to the realization of childlessness, the individual probably identifies him or herself as a normal, conforming member of society. It may be therefore, that social reaction to the disclosure of childlessness plays a part in the establishment of a stigmatized identity. Women regard childlessness as discreditable, negative, and as representing failure. (Lisle L., 1996).

In addition, most experienced anxiety, isolation, and conflict as they privately explore the possibility of personal childlessness. To avoid feelings of personal inadequacy, many women exclude themselves from gatherings such as baby showers or avoid their pregnant friends prior to revealing their childless status. Studies have also revealed that the inability to have a child is often devastating to both partners. However, there are differences in men and women's reactions to childless. Prior research has tended to concentrate on the woman's experience while virtually ignoring the men.

Nevertheless, as a rule these feelings are generally expressed differently. In general, women are verbal and tend to seek out support during times of stress, while men use avoidance, minimization, and denial. In fact, childlessness affects the personal well-being of couples especially women that are involved. In Umuomaku, childlessness has been an unbearable social problem for the man, woman, the couple, the extended family and the entire community. It is seen as an agent of genealogical termination and as such it is hated by all, but feared most by Igbo man. In particular, childless women suffer a lot because women are always blamed for childless situation and motherhood so often the only way for a woman to stabilize her position with her husband's family and community. Constantly, childless women complain about domestic violence and disrespectful attitude (from their partners and relatives) and quite often dehumanizing treatment by husband and in-laws. There have been cases where couples are being abused publicly for not having children. In most cases, childless couples do not enjoy public appearance to avoid being chastised. Often times,

couples look down on themselves as being different from others for not being able to produce children (Azubike, V. C, 2021).

The unfavourable attitude exhibit against the childless women by other women include, gossip, scornful laughter downgrading looks, direct/indirect reference to their plight and sometimes open confrontation. The attitude of most children to the childless woman at times demands pity. The attitude exhibited by most children towards childless women is not good. They do not usually respect the childless women. Children feel that they do not have peer in the childless woman's house and as such do not have much to benefit from her. Sometimes, children do mock the childless women, calling them witches and they hardly help or assist them in any chore.

During the first two years of marriage, the attitude of most husbands of childless women is that of empathy, pampering, tolerance and love towards their wives. As time passes by, couples are faced with pressure from relatives and friends, these husbands change their attitude negatively. Some childless men are compelled to acquire a second wife in an attempt to prove their fertility in an effort to escape the ridicule and stigma that goes with being childless in the community. Many individuals went into marriage with a strong hope to become mothers and fathers. However, the possibility of childlessness began to occur to them after several months of unprotected sexual intercourse with their partner without conception. Denial was a common theme and many reported mixed angry-denial mood or a fluctuation between anger and denial. Denial is facilitated by the assumption that, since their parents were not childless, they will also be able to beget children (Chidiogo, E., 2021).

Women generally reported more concern about their inability to give birth to a child than were men. Women without children in their old age are often branded as witches and abandoned by their relatives. Such women are not allowed to interact or take care of other people's children as they are often accused of having "eaten up" all the children in their womb and could bewitch and cause the death of other people's children. Being stigmatized appears not to be enough; the couples suffer deprivation of certain traditional rights and privileges in the area as a result of being childless.

Deprivation of Traditional Rights

Antithetically, Igbo cultures are popular for the strong support emanating from its extended family structure. The extended family has been referred to as a traditional social security system that caters for the vulnerable, poor, and sick. However, this traditional system is fast depleting, because of social changes arising from labour migration, demographic changes, urbanization and increased

westernization. However, chieftaincy in most parts of Igbo land are known to be through inheritance, that is, it moves from father to the eldest sons of the same family and as such are considered as their inheritance from their forefathers. This inheritance can only leave the family circle when the couple (King and queen) were unable to produce children especially the male child as the heir to the throne. In such situation in Umuomaku land, the couple faces a lot of challenges ranging from restlessness, anxiety, mental torture, stigmatization, depression and so on.

Men without children therefore do not receive the same respect as fathers. Some men reported that they were excluded from leadership roles in their communities because they did not have children (Ogbuehi, O., 2022). Most childless couples are being deprived of their inheritance such as landed properties in the village due to lack of children especially the male child. Children are sometimes the connection between a couple's relatives as children often have inheritance rights to their fathers' property as mainly practiced in the community. Men without children, therefore, do not receive the same respect as fathers. Some men reported that they were excluded from leadership roles in their communities because they did not have children (Okafor, V., 2023). With the deprivation, the couple begins to feel rejected, lonely and abandoned.

Feelings of Abandonment

Children are meant to take care of their parents when they are old, this is one of the major problems confronting childless couples in most communities in Umuomaku Land because they are being abandoned due to cultural belief. Some communities in Umuomaku land view some childless couple as the architect of their problems believing that they are diabolical or perhaps witches and must have sacrificed all their children through some supernatural means. In most cases childless couples are ostracized and treated with contempt, isolated and abandoned. Abandonment re-echoed in the accounts of the widows. They felt left to their own fate; they were not cared for by their families and communities.

Many of the interviews with childless individuals and couples in the study also revealed negative experiences, unsupportive reactions to childlessness from family members and painful social scrutiny.

Here were mixed responses concerning the experiences of couples within the extended family setting. While some people reported support from their families, others blamed their families for their unhappiness (Chukwuokezie I., 2022). The study finds out that although the couples suffer consequences of being childless together; women bear more of the consequences than their male counterparts, thereby giving the situation a feminine posture.

Feminising the Challenge

It has been discussed in the preceding sections how childless couples suffer some social and emotional consequences in a traditional pronatalist Igbo society, it is, however, noted that in several societies, including Umuomaku, the female gender tends to suffer more, as women are more often than none at the receiving end of the consequences.

Married couples face a lot of problems and discrimination, from the society due to the fact that the married couples cannot procreate. Also Childlessness has been regarded as great personal tragedy involving much emotional pain and grief, especially when it results from failure to conceive or from the death of a child, this is because children are seen as a symbol of self-fulfilment both socially and economically.

Recent studies showed that women who are childless are often segregated and excluded from social gatherings like *August Meeting* or despised. Childless women are in traumatic human conditions. (Aditya, B., 2000), observes that in most places (Africa, in particular) women suffer a lot of maltreatment as a result of their inability to have children. In fact, the pressures on childless women have made existence a reproductive trap. Corroborating this, (Ajuma, O., 2011), asserts that women who are childless are relegated to the periphery of the society. They were, in some areas, not allowed to participate in communal events; these women were regarded as nobodies and perceived of as liabilities. In these cases, a household without children was considered incomplete and the women were automatically regarded as the guilty parties.

Infertile women had no status, no voice and were often maltreated by their husbands. In these communities, the infertility of a man was not discussed but treated with secrecy and women were expected to guard this secret. In these cases, the women use evidence from their husbands' previous marriages where they were not able to have children. These defiant women were given a voice in the courts and could demonstrate that they were not infertile and that this medical condition was, in fact, their husbands' problem.

(Okonofua F., 1997) is of the view that Failure to have children is seen as a curse, which may lead to stigmatization, violence, battery and divorce. Infertility therefore, produces profound social and legal consequences for African women particularly in terms of economic deprivation, grief, powerlessness, frustration and other forms of psycho-social problems.

(Jacques, M., 1961) made similar observation in his study of the Tutsi in Ruanda where the most cherished items are children and cows. In short, women actually bear the brunt

when the child refuses to come. Constantly, childless women complain about domestic violence and disrespectful attitude (from their partners and relatives) and quite often dehumanizing treatment by husband and in-laws. There have been cases where their husbands abandoned them for a second wife. For (Owo, C., 1994), having many children makes one feel contented and important and also usually respected by others for not being childless. Marriage which fail to produce children often end in divorce. It is also describe as the dissolution or abrogation of marriage. He opines that childless couples, especially the women, are always depressed about their condition. They always feel bad because most of the blames are levied against them.

The pains suffered by childless couples, especially women, attract sympathy. Every action, utterances and words from either the husband, his relations, especially those of the mothers, brothers and sisters in-law are carefully analysed and deeply interpreted to have been directed to the very fact that they have no child.

Orubuloye laments if a man cannot father a child, a male member of the family can always assist him in doing so. This is done in the western countries and it is called surrogate motherhood or fatherhood as the case may be. Having child is clearly more important than loyalty to one's spouse, which is evidenced by the common practice of divorce because of childlessness. The findings are in keeping with other qualitative and quantitative studies which indicate an overwhelmingly negative implication of the inability to procreate (Orubuloye, 1997). Nwosu affirms has shown that at times such men may not be true biological father of such children. Reports have it that some of the men do secretly contract the job to trusted friends or relatives. In other cases, the wives knowing that their husbands cannot impregnate a woman; on their own secretly seek assistance from other men (Nwosu, I., 2010).

(M'Carth, 1997) posits that children are considered to be of great importance in human existence. Childlessness of whatever sort is abhorred. Childlessness among married couple has been seen as a source of pain and distress. (Denga and Gbenda, 2004) opines that traditional value for procreation has always been a major cause of many family upheavals. Infertility represents a potentially serious source of conflict, quarrels, dissention and other forms of maladjustment in many Nigeria homes regardless of their educational attainment and socio-economic status.

(Ochefu, Y., 2000) agrees it is common within traditional African settings that the inability to make babies in a marriage is often blamed on the woman, as such the society exhibits some kind of bias against women which leads to a kind of stereotyping. This is often a cultural thing which has to do with values of a people that has been acquired overtime, and influenced by both internal and

external factors. As a system, marriage is literally consummated by the birth of a child especially a male child, who is believed to continue the family line. Marriage also has been viewed by some as the joining of two families to increase wealth of the clan through offspring. The issue of the continuity of family lineage or ancestry can almost be hampered if there is infertility in a family especially the absence of male children.

(Murdock K, 1992) sees the family as a social group where members are related by ancestry, marriage or adoption and live together, cooperate economically and care for the young

Child bearing is given legitimacy through marriages, and “marriage as an institution is recognized globally as a matrimonial relationship and /or union of persons who most often are usually of the opposite sex (Gowon D, 2009).

(Nwahaghi, F., 1995) notes some effects of childlessness to include causing psychological trauma, and leading to divorce, suicide, abandonment etc. Hence most couples are willing to stop at nothing to have children of their own.

Donkor concurs with Oduyoye about the rituals, practices and beliefs associated with infertility. When infertility is linked to witches and evil, spiritual means are used to treat women. In the Akan tradition, many people seek herbal treatment. These herbs are used to prepare soup to drink. Some women go to a fetish priest who performs rites to their gods. When a child is born to this woman, they are given special names as a sign that they have been delivered through the power of the spirit. Infertility and childlessness in some instances lead to divorce and emotional abuse from husband.

What is helpful, especially from a liberal point of view, is that (Oduyoye, M., 1999) affirms that all women are diverse in their gifts and abilities even if they are childless and that they can be fruitful in other areas of their lives and still be complete women.

In Umuomaku, there has been a general belief that women are at fault for any case of childless is why in some communities like Umuomaku, a name for childless women (Nwanyiaga) but no name for childless man. At times, some of the men whose wives could not be pregnant do marry other women, who finally give birth. In such situation, such men are exonerated from childlessness. The Umuomaku people overtly or covertly believe that childlessness is a woman issue that does not concern men.

All participants in the study agreed that women are blamed for childlessness. ‘It’s always the woman’s fault’ was a very common theme. Many of the interviews with

childless individuals and couples in the study also revealed negative experiences; unsupportive reactions to childlessness from family members and painful social scrutiny. Several childless women reported negative behaviour towards them from their partner’s family. Some of the women felt that childlessness denied them full membership of their husband’s family, and that their role in the family would not become secure until they had a child (Eboh, O.,2022).

The study further revealed that childlessness affects both the physical and spiritual well-being of the individual. Childlessness has inter-generational effects, as couples without children do not have the opportunity to live again. Reliving is achieved through either reincarnation or having the opportunity to live in an unseen world.

Among the people of Umuomaku in Anambra, the unseen world is believed to harbour all departed souls and forms a spiritual home for ancestors. Even at death, there is also disparity in the attitude of people towards the deceased childless women. In Umuomaku, such a woman is not given full burial rites. For instance, the usual gunshots that accompany people’s burial in the area are absent. The ceremonial dance that is supposed to be led by her children is also missing, understandable because she had no children. Other cultural practices may also be denied (Okoye, E., 2022).

In addition, most husbands of childless women do flirt around with other women for two major reasons. Firstly, to know if they could strike *gold* (child) through other women. Usually, this is how the journey to second marriage begins. When the other woman becomes pregnant, she is then brought home as second wife. Secondly, to serve as punishment to their wives, who they believed to have been involved in some evil practices when she was younger, which she is paying the price in marriage and the result being her inability to conceive. So, the husband often attempt to get at their wives through making their flirtation known in the society and even to their wives, in particular. (Nwosu, I., 2022)

In Umuomaku, a childless widow’s life is one of misery. Childless widows struggle to survive in a deeply patriarchal and superstitious world, which grossly abuses them. In Umuomaku, culturally speaking widows themselves are part of the inheritable property. Some widows may be lucky to be inherited by the brothers of her deceased husband who are wise and kind. But nobody ever inherits a childless widow. There is always superstition surrounding her existence. The discrimination against widows in inheritance is responsible for woman’s desperation to have children. And this desperation has its own consequences. The childless woman inherits not a single piece of land from her husband’s house However, she may be allowed by her husband’s relatives to farm on some of her husband’s land especially the particular piece

of lands which she was given at the point of her marriage to the family. If there is a second wife with children, all the land will be transferred to her children. Quite often, the childless widow may receive some token out of pity provided she has favourable relationship with her in-laws.

In terms of accommodation, the childless woman, at the death of her husband, is allowed to occupy her husband's house. But at her death, such a house is transferred to the relatives of her husband. Where there is a second wife with male children, such a house belongs to the children who may allow the childless widow one or two rooms in the house.

In the same vein, childless widow hardly inherit her husband's investment. Ironically, the childless widow inherits her husband's debts together with some household materials. She bears responsibility over the debts because it is believed that the deceased husband must have spent the money on her. The inheritance of other property at times depends on the evidence that they were purchased solely by her (Okoye, E., 2022).

As a result, childless women are left alone by their extended families, with no one to bury them. During the funeral rites of childless women, they are pitied as it becomes obvious that they had no children. This tends to make the plight of the childless couples to have a feminine colouration. Some of them go to herbalists and prayer houses to seek solution to their childlessness. Few opt for adoption, which some families still do not recognise such adopted child(ren) as being part of the extended family owing to the fact that they do not have same blood running in them.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the plight, predicaments, and the abuses of childless couples in Igboland focusing on Umuomaku, Anambra, South East Nigeria. The paper reveals that childless couples are verbally abused, psychologically abused, maltreated and sometimes, though not common, physically assaulted, especially the women. Very often, these couples are traumatized, stigmatized, deprived some traditional rights and rejected by their respective societies. The paper argues that although modernity has helped to reduce the way barren couples are maltreated, more still needs to be done. The pressures coming from society constitutes huge struggles for women and men when they fail to bear children after a couple of times. These couples, especially the wives, experience the torments of both social and cultural oppression which originate from the patriarchal nature of the Igbo. The emotional turmoil is further compounded by societal pressure. The paper has also revealed that family members compel the husband to take another wife for the sake of ensuring a continued lineage. These men, who truly love their wives, in some instances, bow to pressure

and see the bond they had with their wives being weakened. In some climes, these women experience domestic abuse, and divorce and are even driven out of their homes.

The plight of childless couples, especially women is unfathomable in most Igbo communities with regard to how society maltreats them because of their inability to bear children. Furthermore, the study has revealed that the social pressures and their predicaments have nevertheless become an impetus for these childless couples' self-actualization and self-realization as they know that they have no one to assist them do certain things in the community. These findings demonstrate that barrenness can have a serious effect on both the psychological well-being and the social status of couples in the developing world. Besides, the study provides insight into the cultural context of childlessness in Igbo land. Hard work and self-reliance become imperative for these childless couples if they really yearn for social thriving.

Through the research, it is found out that barren women prefer to seek treatment from local herbal and spiritual specialists and churches. When it is not possible to have one's own child, adoption or fosterage is commonly practiced by many in the selected communities as a mechanism to satisfy parenthood needs. Adoption and fosterage are solutions for childless couples to avoid public discrimination and to fulfil parenthood needs. However, while some people consider adoption as equivalent with biological parenthood, others consider it as of less valuable and incomparable with biological parenthood, arguing that the adopted children cannot be real children for adopters due to their felt needs for biological generational continuity. It is, therefore, the position of this paper that all forms of stigmatization, deprivation and other social vices meted to couples because of childlessness have to stop. Couples on their own need to seek professional medical advice and attention for solution, not resorting to prayer houses and herbalists who are not certified for gynaecological and/or urological practices. Religious institutions need to sensitize their members on the need to treat everybody equally not minding having a child or childless.

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