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## **FEMALE INFERTILITY AND PATRIARCHY: A REFLECTION ON MEDICAL SCIENCE AND BIBLICAL POSITION**

***Adesanya Ibiyinka Olusola PhD and Margaret Ojo PhD***

*Department Of Religious Studies, Ekiti State University, Ado- Ekiti  
sanyatimi@yahoo.com +234-8133946799*

### **ABSTRACT**

Marriage traditionally has been based upon gender relations that prescribed authority of husband over wives. The rituals of throwing rice to symbolize fertility and the woman's obligation to bear and raise children also illustrate normative gender relations. In other words, in the home, infertile women feel and bear most the consequences of masculine power and privileges. In the main, the paper discussed the medical science aspects of female infertility which explain that both sexes are liable to infertility. This could be as a result of several factors like damage to fallopian tube, hormonal cause, age, smoking cigarettes, sexually transmitted infections, overweight and the likes. However, the study showed that infertility hinges on patriarchy in both the bible and Yoruba culture which was cited as example. In both cases, childlessness is viewed as female problems and the depression experience by such women are equivalent to suffering from terminal illness. The paper therefore argues for the exercising of "equal partner" model where the traditional marriage contract of shifting blame of infertility on women is completely disrupted. In other words, neither partner is more likely to perform provider roles. In practice, this might mean intentional sharing of blame, ridicule, abuse, segregation and violence associated with infertility.

**Keywords:** Infertility, Patriarchy, Women, Medical Science, Violence.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Central in any discussion of family is a focus on power. Power in families is understood as access to resources (tangible or intangible) that allows certain family members to define the reality of others, have their needs met, and experience more resources.<sup>1</sup> In most Nigerian society, men have more power in the family than women do if this is measured in the area of reproduction. In other words, in the home and family, many girls and women feel the consequences of masculine power and privilege on the issue of infertility.

Infertility is a global problem particularly in developing countries. This is because African societies place a passionate premium on procreation in any family. The woman's place in marriage remains precarious till confirmed through child bearing.<sup>2</sup> Although infertility can be commonly termed a medical issue but it has diffused into religion. This is because it was written in the bible that Yahweh is the one who causes women to be barren and it is Yahweh who opens their womb when he so desires to show his power<sup>3</sup>. It seems then that Yahweh is solely the cause of a woman's infertility and it never has anything to do with man.

The questions that arise are what must we think and do about infertility? Should there be strong reliance upon religious orientations to infertility or medical science approach? What do we do with patriarchal fertility mandate that is emphatic? The focus of this

paper therefore is to examine the prevalence of domestic violence against women with infertility, what the bible had to say about female infertility and the medical science point of view. Although many scholars had written on this based largely on the extent of violence against women living with infertility. This piece is just a juxtaposition of the concepts of infertility in the bible and how this could be resolved using medical science approach. Then of importance here is a brief discourse on the issue of patriarchy and how it affects women who have the problem of infertility.

### **WHAT IS FEMALE INFERTILITY?**

According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, female infertility is biological inability of a woman to produce offspring or get pregnant after a year of unprotected intercourse. As shown by the society, both men and women can be infertile. But one third of the time, the diagnosis is due to female infertility. Then one third of the time, it is linked to male infertility and the remaining one third is due to a combination of factors from both partners.

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#### ***Correspondence to:***

***Adesanya Ibiyinka Olusola***

*Department Of Religious Studies, Ekiti State University, Ado- Ekiti.*

However, for approximately twenty percent of couples, this was said could not be determined<sup>4</sup>. Several factors were noted to have been the cause of this problem in female and this include the following.

- a. **Damage to fallopian tube or uterus:** Damage to the fallopian tubes (which carry the eggs from ovaries to the uterus) can prevent contact between the egg and sperm. Pelvic infections, endometriosis and pelvic surgeries may lead to scar formation and fallopian tube damage.
- b. **Hormonal causes:** Some women have problems with ovulation. Synchronized hormonal changes leading to release of an egg from the ovary and the thickening of the endometrium (lining of the uterus) in preparation for the fertilized egg do not occur.
- c. **Cervical causes:** A small group women may have a cervical condition in which the sperm cannot pass through the cervical. This may be due to abnormal mucus production or a prior cervical procedure.

Some other factors identified by the American Society for Reproductive Medicine are age, smoking, sexually transmitted infections, premature menopause, underweight or overweight, genetic factors. There is usually nothing that can be done to prevent infertility caused by genetic problems as shown by the medical scientist.

Having said that, should we then say infertility is just a woman problem. The answer is emphatic NO, infertility is not always a woman problem. Both women and men have problems that cause infertility. About one third of infertility cases are reported to have been caused by women's problem. Another one third attributed to man. The other cases are caused by a mixture of male and female problems or unknown problems. In other words, men have problems of infertility and is most often caused by varicose, that is, a situation whereby the veins on a man testicles are too large, illness, injury e.g. cystic fibrosis, heavy alcohol, drug, smoking cigarettes, age, health problems, environmental toxins, radiation treatment and the likes<sup>6</sup>.

Since the medical scientists have given their position on the issue under consideration, then, the stage is set to know what the Christian position is with special emphasis on the Old Testament.

## Female infertility and the Bible

Fertility and children were always viewed as blessings in the bible. It was shown that, it is not God's will to withhold any blessing from any man. No wonder, the first command God gave to mankind was:

... Be fruitful and multiply fill the earth and govern it.

Reign over the fish in the sky, and all the animals that Scurry along the ground.<sup>7</sup>

Also, there are several passages of the bible attested to God's will for mankind to conceive and give birth to children<sup>8</sup>.

However in the Hebrew bible, childlessness is presented as a particularly female problem. There are no biblical stories that centre on an infertile man<sup>9</sup>. The imagery of barrenness is never applied to a man. The focus and preoccupation with childlessness in the bible falls solely and consistently on women. Moreover, childlessness is never presented as a positive or acceptable condition. Every story of a childless woman in the bible is about how that situation was reversed. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Samson's mother and Hannah are all described as suffering a condition of barrenness which found its resolution in divine intervention.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the stories of these five women, the negative image of childlessness is communicated by promises which declare that if Israel is faithful to God, there would be no barrenness in the land.<sup>11</sup>, suggesting that childlessness is evidence not of the blessing of Yahweh, but a curse.

Socially, the position of the childlessness women in the Hebrew bible is ranked among the poor, the helpless, the despised, the widow (Job 24:2) and contrasted with the mother who is blessed, joyful and rich in children<sup>12</sup>. In psalm 113:9 and Isaiah 54:1, the image of the barren is used to illustrate the contrasting promise of joyful reversal that will be enacted by God. Compounding this negative image is the evaluation that often considered childlessness the result of sin and divine displeasure (Gen 20:17, Num 5:11-31, 2 Sam 6: 20- 23). It was God who opened and closed the womb (Gen 16:2, 20ff, 1Sam 10; 5) and conception after a long period of infertility. Also childlessness was one of the most common reasons that a man would resort to biogynous marriage<sup>13</sup>. The code of Hammurabi 5145 mentions the case of a man taking a second wife if the primary wife does not bear him any children (ca 1728-1686 BCE). Several Nuzi marriage contracts made between free persons contain clauses indicating when a man may have a

second wife (ca 450-1350BCE). The stipulations outline that the man cannot take an additional wife unless she fails to provide him with children. These clauses emphasize the importance of children in the institution of marriage at Nuzi. The bride's status as wife is usually depended upon whether or not she bore children. While the introduction of a second wife was one way to circumvent the problem of childlessness, divorce was also an option.

Although male infertility is implied in some cases” for instance, the stories of Tamar and Ruth imply that their first husbands were unable to produce children since both were left childless when their husbands died, but they went to bear children to another men. The case of king Abimelech in Genesis 20: 16 -17 suggest that he suffered infertility from his sin and required Abraham's prayers to heal him. But the narrative note it was not just Abimelech who was suffering, his entire household was afflicted, and we are told that God had “closed the wombs of the entire household”. Deuteronomy 7: 14 on the other hand promise relief for both male and female infertility<sup>14</sup>.

Even after giving consideration to these, one can still conclude that the focus of childlessness in the bible is consistently on the woman not the man. As rightly noted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the bible has most often been oppressive to women. This condition in the bible has largely been responsible for men's assertive and dominating posture over women in almost every sphere of life today<sup>15</sup>.

#### **PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE INFERTILITY: YORUBA EXAMPLE**

Having established through the medical scientists that infertility affects both sexes, then what has patriarchy got to do with female infertility?. This is a question that calls for serious appraisal here. As rightly observed by Akintan in her work, “Patriarchy is the order of the day among the Yoruba because of its patrilineal nature<sup>16</sup>. By patriarchy, we mean :

A culture that is slanted so that men are valued  
Less; or in which man's prestige is down<sup>17</sup>.

Or

A system of social stratification and  
differentiation

on the basis of sex, which provides material  
advantages

To males while simultaneously placing severe  
constraints

On the roles of the females<sup>18</sup>.

In a patriarchal society such as Yorubaland, having children is very essential in marriage. Children are

the glory of marriages and the more they are , the greater the glory<sup>19</sup>. The essence of having children is widely recorded in Yoruba oral genres including song, stories, proverbs, dictums and dirges. A popular Yoruba song sums it up aptly, “ori mi ma je npo fo omo, omo lere aye (meaning, may my destiny not let me be a loser, for the children are the gains of living ). Then another one says , ina ku fi eeru b'oju, ogede ku fi omo re ropo, ijo a ba ku , omo eni nin wo le de ni ,(meaning, when the fire is out, ashes replace it, when the banana tree dies, it is the young one who replaces it , when one dies, it is the children who replace one). These explains why Yoruba people, especially the females go to any length to ensure they produce children, because to die without children is to become disconnected. To produce no children is to be erased and forgotten totally in the memories of one's family members and community<sup>20</sup>.

Women bear the larger part of the task of procreation. Women usually are blamed for infertility problems, even though statistically at least 40 percent of all infertility problems are attributed solely to the male, women still are the solution seekers.

She would move from one prayer house to another, patronize baba awo ,that is the herbalists, alfa- Muslim clerics, different hospitals and the likes all in the name of getting solutions to their problems not hers alone, while the husband would sit back at home waiting for results which is children.

Many researchers have concluded that gender based differences complicate the crisis. One sociologist observed that, in general, wives see their husband as callous and unaffected by infertility while husbands saw their wives as overacting and unable to put things in perspective. While wives felt their husbands were unwilling to talk about infertility, some husbands wondered what there was to talk about.

However, as a result of the importance to the man of fathering children, women face emotional stress, doubt, alienation, ostracism and harassment by kin and neighbors, issues of quilt, anger, frustration, remarriage or divorce by the husband and emotional or physical violence. Although it is not always women who feels more pain, men do, only that it could be psychologically taxing for women.

In fact, many times pressure to divorce comes from the husband's family. Although, men in loving committed marriage usually are happy with their wives despite childlessness, the problems come

from the husband's female relatives who could be very cruel and insulting. Although the wives family may want the marriage to work, the husband's family often tries to influence the husband to divorce.

Further, infertile women are stigmatized because of the danger they might pose to other peoples children. A major cultural belief in Yorubaland is that children fall ill because an infertile woman may be so envious that she gives a child an eye. People in the society even tagged are bad names like “ iya agan or iya aje to ti pa gbogbo omo e je”, meaning , a barren woman, a witch who has killed all her children in the witches coven. These and much other domestic violence are infertile women contending with in our society today. Although it appears the rate to which such women are stigmatized are reducing because of the various efforts being made to solve the problems through scientific methods. But the fact remains that the awakening still does not have much effects in some homes and families. This will take us to look at what should be done on the part of the medical scientists, religious bodies and societies at large\_.

## CONCLUSION

The chief value of a woman in biblical times and Yoruba culture is her chastity after marriage and her reproduction. Also there is possibility that, the medical scientists who understand the various factors that are responsible for infertility may have the patriarchal nature inherent in them such that they feel bad when their wives do not conceive on time. Besides, masculinity has worked against women's desire for effective integration in the scheme of things. Therefore it is not an overstatement to affirm that the modern assertion of patriarchy in all spheres is misleading and inaccurate. Hence, this paper is recommending “equal partners” model whereby both male and female are blamed for the failure to procreate. It might mean an intentional sharing of blame even if the wife is the one that has the problem of infertility. Lastly, since medical ideas are a central issue here, clinicians are advised to identify the abused women and provide them with medical care and supportive counseling. The couple should live healthy lifestyles to prepare for pregnancy. Then such women should try to discuss their feelings, hopes, fears and dreams with their partner. If they feel that they are beginning to have communication problems, they should try to find a counselor. The

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