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Childlessness through a Social Lens: A Sociological Study in Jammu District

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ABSTRACT: *Nature has blessed women to give birth to a child. The status of a woman in the society is defined by her ability to bear a child. When a woman becomes mother she gets respect and status within the society. Based on the research conducted in rural and urban areas of Jammu District, this paper makes an attempt to identify the problems faced by women because of childlessness. Due to the desperation of having the biological child, the childless status of women poses a severe challenge to their womanhood and also considers them as incomplete women.*

Keywords: *Childlessness, Infertility, Marital instability, Motherhood, Stigma.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the society desire for motherhood is inevitable and almost universal. Traditionally, as well as historically motherhood is considered as the priority for women. In the society, it is considered that women become mother they fully achieve the condition of 'woman' but if at that point is the failure to become a mother it is considered that achieving the status of 'woman' in the society is not fully accomplished. Thus, our social and cultural institutions continue to emphasize the importance of motherhood for the female role. If being a mother is considered fully achieving the status of women then the failure of not becoming a mother is considered not fully achieving the status of 'woman'. Motherhood is seen as a role for women and gives respect and identity to women in society. The significance attached to the institution of motherhood is as such if the expectation of motherhood is not carried out then it can result in the unfavorable attitudes of society and family towards the woman who is not able to bear a child.

The failure not to conceive becomes the social problem. Childlessness has been regarded as a great personal tragedy for women; involving much emotional pain and grief for women especially when it results from a failure to conceive. There is a negative impact of childlessness more on women than men. Being childless make a woman suffer a lot for her survival in the family and society. Thus, the paper has attempted to study the various problems faced due to childlessness by both rural and urban women of Jammu District and the paper has also attempted to

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look into if there is any change in the perception of society and women themselves towards the issue of childlessness.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in both the rural and urban areas of Jammu District. For the data collection, the material was collected through both primary as well as secondary sources. For the selection of the respondents, purposive sampling was used. 200 women respondents were selected that is 100 women respondents from rural and 100 women respondents from urban. The criteria for rural and urban were taken so as to get a perception of the women regarding childlessness.

3. CHILDELESSNESS

According to the World Health Organization (1991), childlessness is defined as a condition when a woman has no live birth or no living children at the end of her reproductive life span. The WHO (World Health Organization, 1991)¹ defines “infertility as the inability to conceive (organic or functional) a pregnancy after two years of regular sexual intercourse without contraception or inability to carry a pregnancy to live birth”. Unisa (1999)² in her work has argued about that childlessness is a product of the multifaceted interaction of certain biological, environmental and cultural factors, which requires to be understood at the local community level and for the planning to deliver reproductive health care services to address the various problems faced by childless women within the society.

Childlessness or infertility is a great curse in many regions of the developing world but is found in all areas. WHO estimates that infertility affects between 35 and 70 million married couples worldwide. It can be the result of untreated reproductive tract infections occurring during childhood, or it may stem from sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), mishandled abortions, and other causes. In societies where every woman is expected to produce children as a sign of her womanhood and desirability as a wife, being infertile brings with it a social stigma and great difficulty in finding a place in society.³

There are two distinguishable types of childlessness.

- Voluntary childlessness
- Involuntary childlessness

Voluntary childlessness is defined as a condition wherein women who are fertile choose not to have children. They take the decision of not to bear children of their own. They do not possess any kind of problem to become a mother. In voluntary childlessness, women want to be childfree. In the case of involuntary childlessness, a woman is not able to bear children. Involuntary childlessness may be defined as a situation in which women desire to become a mother but are not able to get pregnant. Infertility is one of the most prominent reasons for involuntary childlessness.

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Infertility is defined as the inability of women to conceive or bear children when desired. Infertility can be considered in terms of primary and secondary infertility:

- Primary infertility is infertility when a woman never conceives.
- Secondary infertility is infertility when a woman conceived once but not subsequently despite efforts to become pregnant.

In India, primary and secondary infertility figures, as given by WHO (1980)⁴, are 3 percent and 8 percent, respectively. According to the National Family Health Survey 1998-1999 (NFHS II), 3.8 per cent of women between the ages of 40 and 44 years have not had any children and 3.5 per cent of currently married women are declared infecund.⁵ Overall 7% of women are childless in India. Region wise, Southern (10.9) and Western (10.7) region show the highest percentage of childless women followed by Eastern region (6.5). However, the central region exhibits lowest (4.7) percentage of childlessness. In addition to this, the rest of the regions Northern and North Eastern show childlessness below the national level average.⁶

Government policies in India have largely ignored the issue of infertility. The National Population Policy, 2000 mentions it only briefly in the context of providing information, counseling and regular supply of medication only for communities like tribals, displaced and migrant populations who may not need fertility regulation. There is also limited focus on services for the infertile in the Reproductive and Child Health Programme. Though the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-07) has discussed access to essential clinical examination, investigation, management and counseling services for infertility, such services are in practice rarely available in the public sector. In India, there is little evidence on the levels and patterns of childlessness and infertility.⁷

Childlessness is a painful condition if a couple, especially if a woman is not able to have a child. Childlessness is a private matter to be resolved; in the medical area or in the case of adoption. But still, women get stigmatized just for being unable to bear a child. This condition of being childless has serious demographic, social and health implications. Living as an involuntarily childless is challenging for a woman as well as for her femininity. Norms may be difficult for those who prefer to live according to their own choices, but it is more difficult for those who have no choice.⁸

It is a social expectation that men and women marry and carry on the lineage of the family. This is very common that after the marriage of a woman, people ask a woman's name and then "How many children do you have". Women are often uneducated so their only identity comes from being a mother. Our social and cultural institutions continue to emphasize the importance of motherhood for the female role. If being a mother is fulfilling the status of being a woman; then the failure of not to become a mother considered as not fully achieving the status of a 'woman'. The failure not to conceive becomes the social problem. Childlessness has been regarded as a great personal tragedy for women; involving much emotional pain and grief for women especially when it results from a failure to

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conceive. There is a negative impact of childlessness more on women than men. Thus, being childless make a woman suffer a lot for her survival in the family and society.

Thus, Childlessness is a subject of social concern to the family and community in our Indian culture. Not having a child within a couple of years of marriage brings about a great deal of queries from folk and friends.⁹ Childlessness has both personal as well as social consequences.

Joshi (2008)¹⁰ in her work has given various problems experienced by the childless women

- Taunting and stigmatization
- Isolation from community activities and ostracism
- Remarriage of husband and further loss of status and control within household and community.
- Violence and harassment
- Blaming the woman
- Consistent and chronic mental distress
- Experience of related physical ailments

The individual, family and community perceptions related to childlessness imply not only a personal sense of loss for the woman but also related social categorization of the childless woman as '*vanzhooti*' (infertile), '*banjh*' (barren), and her complete subordination in the family.

4. CONSEQUENCES OF CHILDLESSNESS

In society, culture shapes people's beliefs, thoughts, practices, perspective and attitude toward childlessness. It is well known that women are blessed by nature to procreate and when women are not able to produce children they face societal pressure and they are also blamed for their inability to procreate. Childbearing is highly valued and childlessness can have devastating consequences for Indian women wherein infertility is perceived to be a very serious problem (Pachauri, 1998)¹¹.

Joshi (2008)¹² in her work has argued that it is difficult to distinguish between women's fears perceptions and the perceptions of other people. The perception of the other people regarding the childless women can somewhere lead to the consequences for the childless women. This is because of the reason that the need for the children is related to achieving a status that they are supposed to fulfill in order to integrate into the community, rather than being a personal choice or decision. In society, childlessness is considered a crisis for women. Women in particular face lots of consequences because of the childlessness.

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4.1. Childlessness and Marital Instability

Childlessness is a condition that threatens social relations, social status, and family honor. The ability to bear a child is considered to be a woman's most essential role as well as her responsibility to society so as to continue it (Izubara, 2000)¹³. For young brides in the patriarchal kinship system most of the north India, this threat is predominantly severe, because the woman in the family gets recognition and respect by producing children—especially sons (Bumiller, 1991)¹⁴. In India, women who do not fulfill the expectations of the society face social difficulties, potentially including divorce or dowry threats directed towards the wife's natal household (Unisa, 1999¹⁵; Patel 1994¹⁶).

Childlessness is considered as the deviant behavior as per the norms and values of the society. If a woman is not able to bear the child after marriage then she has to face excessive harsh comments from her in-laws and her husband which disrupt the on-going married life and give rise to the problems for childless women. This situation proves curse for women and results in being ostracized by society. The women who fail to conceive are not accepted easily by society and have to face severe difficulties and sometimes they even commit suicide. Although childlessness has a negative impact on the stability of marriage, some husbands do support their wives and whenever they are offended by the society they defend them. They also protect them from the pressure of the family and society.

Table- 1: Childlessness and Marital Instability

Response	Number of Respondents		Total
	Rural	Urban	
Yes	80 (40%)	76 (38%)	156 (78%)
No	04 (2%)	18 (9%)	22 (11%)
No Response	16 (8%)	06 (3%)	22 (11%)
Total	100 (50%)	100 (50%)	200 (100%)

The table shows that the majority of respondents that is 78 per cent (40% from rural and 38% from urban) were of the view that a woman faces marital instability if a woman is unable to bear a child. The institution of marriage is considered one of the most important institutions of our culture. The reason it is important is due to the fact that it continues the lineage of the family. If the wife is not able to conceive or she does not bear a child, the relation

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between couple becomes strained. Since a woman has been biologically structured by the nature to procreate and if somehow she doesn't have the capacity to bear a child, her husband loses interest in that relationship and there is strong chance that he can go for a second marriage. A woman who is without the support of her husband and has not been able to conceive has to face a lot of societal problems as a result. The above data also shows that even in urban areas where the education level is high among the people and where the facilities of legal adoption of a child are available to the couples, marriage instability rate is almost equal to that in rural areas among the childless couples.

Table-2: Women held Responsible for not bearing a Child

Response	Number of Respondents		Total
	Rural	Urban	
Yes	14 (7%)	10 (5%)	24 (12%)
No	83 (41.5%)	86 (43%)	169 (84.5%)
No Response	03 (1.5%)	04 (2%)	07 (3.5%)
Total	100 (50%)	100 (50%)	200 (100%)

The table shows that the majority of the respondents that is 84.5 percent (41.5% from rural and 43% from urban) said that woman is not wholly responsible if she cannot bear a child. The majority of were a view that both men and women are responsible if cannot bear a child, but the society always held women responsible for not being able to bear a child. When a woman is held responsible for her inability to bear a child. Her husband and her in-laws use violence as a mean to control women within the family. This is because of the patriarchal conditions which give men the right to use violence against women. Violence is a tool that men use constantly to control women as a result of patriarchal conditions which gives men the right to beat their wives¹⁷.

Violence is defined as ‘injurious and destructive behavior which damages the victim physically, mentally or financially. Women all over the world face violence in one or other form.¹⁸ The problem of violence against women is not new. Women in Indian society have been victims of ill-treatment, humiliation, torture, and exploitation for a long time. The violence against women in the context of marriage has become more significant when a husband who is supposed to love and protect his wife, ill-treated and beats her. For a woman, being battered by a man, whom she trusted most, becomes devastating experience. The violence can range from slaps and kicks to breaking bones, torture, and attempted murder and even murder itself.¹⁹

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The childless women experience domestic violence perpetrated by their husbands or in-laws. The violence against childless women has been beaten, physically mistreated, taunted by husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law and sister-in-law. In the society, women are considered responsible if they cannot bear a child because according to society it is the foremost duty of a woman to continue the progeny. Not only society holds the woman responsible but the family also considers woman at fault if she is not able to get pregnant and this leads to the rise in violence and harassment against the woman in the family.

In India, without divorce, a man cannot marry another woman. If a woman is considered as infertile the male partner can go for divorce and marry for the second time to another woman. Thus, childlessness can also lead to the divorce because the male partner of the woman considers that the childlessness is because of the female partner who lacks to procreate. They always find fault with the females, divorce them and remarry (Mishra, 2001)²⁰.

4.2. Childlessness and Stigma

Social stigma is defined as an accumulation of personal experience, societal settings, and normative expectations (Goffman, 1963)²¹. According to Link and Phelan (2001)²², the idea of the stigma is conceptualized as a convergence of the "identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into different categories, and the full execution of rejection, exclusion, disapproval, and discrimination.". This application of the term allows for a general understanding of the formation and potential effects of the presence of stigma. India is not exceptional in its emphasis on childbearing- making babies are the primary way women are expected to make families the world over and if women don't do so then they encounter stigma in the society.²³

Table-3: Childlessness and Stigma

Response	Number of Respondents		Total
	Rural	Urban	
Yes	80 (40%)	55 (27.5%)	135 (67.5%)
No	05 (2.5%)	18 (9%)	23 (11.5%)
Don't Know	15 (7.5%)	27 (13.5%)	42 (21)
Total	100 (50%)	100 (50%)	200 (100%)

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The above table shows the perception of women regarding childlessness and stigma. The majority of the respondents that is 67.5 per cent (40% from rural and 27.5% from urban) were of the view that a childless woman is stigmatized within the society. Motherhood is thus seen as the blessing for a woman which gives her a respectful place within the family and society. Those women who cannot conceive are considered *banjh* or fallow and are also considered as worthless as barren land where nothing can grow. Thus women who are forced to live with this set up suffer from isolation, inferiority complex, seclusion and lack of confidence. This gives rise to a stigmatized identity among women. It is also evident from the table that the rural women respondents are more in number than the urban women respondents who feel stigmatized due to the reason that orthodoxy in context of roles of women is still prevalent among rural people. N.N Bhattacharyya (1970)²⁴ in his work has argued that women cause the fruits to multiply because they know how to produce children. Whatsoever is sown or planted by a pregnant woman will grow and increase as the foetus in her womb. A sterile woman is injurious to the garden; a barren woman makes the field barren.

Thus, a woman who is unable to give birth seems to experience serious social stigma and dishonor and this is deeply felt by them. Women encounter stigma if they do not fulfill the demands of society. Even if a woman went to visit infertility clinic, in itself become a stigma for childless women to survive within the society. Childlessness is not the mistake of the women but still in the eyes of the society, a childless woman is considered as inferior and evil in the society.

Table: 4 Childless Women being Inauspicious (A Curse)

Response	Number of Respondents		Total
	Rural	Urban	
Yes	4 (2%)	1 (0.5%)	5 (67.5%)
No	76 (38%)	86 (43%)	185 (11.5%)
Don't Know	20 (10%)	13 (6.5%)	25 (21)
Total	100 (50%)	100 (50%)	200 (100%)

Majority of respondents said that a childless woman does not bring any curse on the pregnant woman. But not to invite the childless woman to the auspicious ceremony is still practiced in the society. In the rural setting inviting of childless women to the auspicious ceremony is less than the urban setting. Women in the rural area are of the view

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that a childless woman is stigmatized to the high extent that she herself avoid going to any auspicious ceremony. In one of the case study, one of the respondents was blamed for miscarriage of her sister-in-law. She was also considered as bringing misfortune for their family.

Not only motherhood imposed on women, but they were also conditioned to regard it as *summum bonum* of life; they deplored barrenness and suffered untold torture from rituals directed towards fertilization of the womb. Male impotence was known only hazily, it was always the woman who paid socially and emotionally for childlessness. Traditionally, for many rituals only a woman, whose husband and children are living, was eligible for an auspicious rite. With the in-laws, the fertile woman enjoyed some privileges which were denied to the childless one (Bhattacharji, 1990)²⁵.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the study conducted in the rural and urban area of Jammu District, it can be concluded that after marriage, childbirth is considered the primary responsibility for an Indian woman in the society. To become a mother is largely socially and culturally constructed in such a way that it affects the life of childless women and also degrades her condition within the family as well as in the society. It was seen that in both the areas women give importance to the institution of motherhood. The respondents consider motherhood as a blessing and being childless as a curse. Results from the fieldwork suggested that childlessness has major religious and social implications, especially for women because of the reason that fertility is highly valued, honored and respected in both the rural and urban areas of District. Even for attending the auspicious ceremonies, customs and practices motherhood is of great importance. There was a negligible change towards the perception of society towards the childless women. If women don't consider women as responsible for being childless but society still blames women for unable to procreate. Thus, the problem of childlessness is of great concern and women should not be blamed for this.

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