



## **SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF STERILITY AND INFERTILITY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Every human being has an instinctive desire to become a parent and look after the offspring. Being a parent has many rewards and pleasures. For most people, to live without having a child, in spite of having a loving mate, is unthinkable. Parenthood, as a stage of life, is characterized by the need to look after, to take care, to give both materially and in terms of affection. For a woman, it is also an expression of creativity and has both biological and psychological roots.

It is evident from our holy books, old stories and myths, how people were blessed with children after praying and fasting and performing various types of religious rituals. Fecundity or ability to produce children has a positive social value. Procreation is socially desirable for religious and family reasons. Children ensure the continuation of the family lineage. Generally, couples who do not bear children within few years of their marriage start worrying. The inability of the couple, to conceive or produce a live birth, is known as childlessness.

The lack of uniform definitions has hounded research on childlessness while it is clear that infertility childlessness or sterility all refer to the inability of a couple to conceive or bear a child when desired. The actual definition of infertility is somewhat elastic; the classical period of time is usually taken as two years after a healthy marriage, without any contraception. But, in well over half the patients attending an infertility clinic for the first time, the period of infertility, is shorter than this.

Infertility is failure to produce a child. It is slightly different from the term 'sterility' which is inability to conceive and produce a child, where, after all the necessary investigation it has been confirmed that conception is not possible. In the context of the Indian society, if these two terms are viewed from a sociological viewpoint, their definitions clearly bring out their effect.

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Infertility is a condition in which the woman can conceive but not deliver. She is not considered as banjb or 'dry womb'. Her status and situation is not stigmatized in her family, kinship and society. But sterility is 'barrenness'; it is a stigma for her. A woman who can neither give her family an heir nor can bring continuity in the society, is a curse, her life will always be incomplete due to lack of motherhood. Due to her own, or her husband's sterility, she is not considered worthy to attend family, religious or social occasions because her presence on these occasions is considered inauspicious. People even consider looking at her, especially in the morning, as inauspicious. Such a woman is addressed as 'barren', 'dry womb' or a 'cursed womb. Many conditions are known to cause, or to contribute to, childlessness. Contrary to the popular belief that childlessness is due to some physical problem in the woman, when studied scientifically, the causes of childlessness may be found in both men and women. The causes of childlessness can be physical as well as psychological and sexual.

Sometimes, all other factors are positive and yet conception does not take place. This may be due to circumstantial factors like the couples staying together but not having enough privacy for sexual union, the frequency of intercourse not being adequate and appropriate, psychological distance inspire of living together, etc. Such problems are reflected among cases who often seek the help of counselor, when on medical investigation all tests give positive results and yet conception does not occur. It is also seen that certain genetic or social factors seem to be correlated with infertility.

Sterility and infertility have negative social values in the Indian culture. Formerly, these were viewed as a disgrace and a mark of shame. The social consequences of infertility impose serious emotional effect on the infertile couple, especially, the women. There is social and cultural deprivation, and divorce is its major outcome. The individual finds it difficult to interact with spouse, family, friends and acquaintances. The infertile couples generally lie deliberately, and reject social exchanges. They do not get genuine support from the relatives and friends and have negative feelings towards pregnant women and other's children.

Many factors are responsible for such a situation, be it the effect of westernization and urbanization, or the effect of education and the industrial age. But, the family scenario in the society is undergoing a rapid change. Decisions like marriage, childbearing, etc., are now made on the basis of logical reasoning. Consequently, the level of satisfaction of the family has also

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changed; among other decisions, for the good of one's nuclear family, the time of having a child, the number of children, and the gap between each child, are also present. In case of any problem, an attempt is made to solve it by holding discussion between the husband and wife. This condition shows that the role of the family is changing.

A couple's response to childlessness can be understood as both a crisis and a mourning process. Many aspects of the marital relationships are affected profoundly by efforts to come to terms with infertility, sexual identity, self-esteem, communication patterns and futures life choices. Many couples use denial as the first method of coping with infertility, which often prevents them from moving forward in the mourning process. Anger, directed inward in the form of depression and learned helplessness, or outward through expression of rage and bitterness, can lead to depression or emotional isolation. The expression of anger is mixed with the feelings of intense grief and commonly, somatic distress and guilt.

The couples viewed bearing and rearing children as a confirmation of one's masculinity and femininity. Procreation, for a male, was a concrete demonstration of his virility and maturity, to self and community. For women bearing children is a demonstration of their fecundity, femininity and conformity to the virtue of motherhood. Infertility affects the couples in a number of ways. The females undergo a conflict over their femininity and fear of reproduction and pregnancy. A man's self-esteem is directly associated with masculinity, and that of a woman with femininity.

It was found that in those cases where the problem was diagnosed in the males, the respondents tried to hide the fact and held women responsible for childlessness. In other cases where females were diagnosed infertile, it was disclosed instantly. Gender difference was seen in the fact that the respondents found it easier to put the blame on women. When couples were asked, whom they held responsible for their childlessness, the responses of husbands and wives were remarkably different.

Infertility affects the marital relationships on aspects such as sexual identity, self-esteem, communication patterns and future life choices. After diagnosis the problem or due to delay in pregnancy, major change in the interpersonal relations of couples was observed. Some respondents reported that their relations did not suffer because of infertility but had become more strong. There was no friction due to childlessness.

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On getting news about pregnancy of some relatives, friends or neighbors, more females as compared to males showed negative responses. They reported that feelings of annoyance, jealousy, misfortune, failure came into their mind.

It was found that some of the females themselves avoided attending such ceremonies because they felt embarrassed and humiliated on such occasions, because people around them passed some remark or the other and they became the topic for gossip and conversation. Some stated that they were not invited on birthday parties of children, as they did not have children and they knew it very well that participation of childless females in social gatherings especially rituals related to pregnancy or childbirth, was restricted because these women were considered inauspicious or incomplete. They were called at the time of having food but not invited at the time of performance of rituals.

In most families, when childlessness is a problem, the wife is the first to present herself to the physician. There still are too many instances where the wife is subjected to extensive studies without any preliminary attention to the fertility status of the husband. In Indian society, husband do not wish to get themselves examined first for childlessness. Even today, in most cases of infertility, it is the woman who seeks help first. But the condition is not confined to women .It was also found that some of the couples never went for medical examination although they were worried about the problem.

In case of unexplained childlessness, couple consult medical experts ranging from simple physicians to infertility experts. They also visit outstation clinics for better medical treatment and expertise. There are occasions when patients may travel many miles to renowned medical centers. Yet, the investigation of infertility problems has become to common that many patients can be treated in their own local areas.

Many childless female respondents found it difficult to reveal about medical confirmation to their husbands and in-laws. as they were afraid of serious consequences. Males also had the feeling of depression and shock when they heard about the inability of their wives to produce a baby. They became angry with their wives. In other cases, where males were diagnosed infertile, they could not believe it and got very much disappointed. Many believed that medical treatment worked only “if one had good luck and if God wanted to give child to someone.” Respondents also took ayurvedic medicines.

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Along with medical treatment they try non-medical treatment that includes consulting astrologers, saints, magi co- spiritual healers, visiting various shrines, following religious practices, etc. There are paranoid symptoms

Sterility and infertility have negative social values in the Indian culture. Formerly, these were viewed as a disgrace and a mark of shame. Social consequences of childlessness impose serious emotional effect on the childless couples, especially, the women. Infertile or sterile individuals may undergo a loss of relationship, health, status, prestige, self-esteem, self-confidence, security, fantasy and loss of something or someone of great symbolic value.

In many societies, wife often has no status until she becomes a mother. Infertility had a far more negative influence on the female subjects, behavior with disappointment, jealousy and marital dissatisfaction. Psychological acceptance of this condition also developed significantly slower in the female group. Infertile couples undergo grief, depression, guilt and feelings of inferiority and isolation; women openly admitted more symptoms than their partners because infertility was found in them, and marital relationships and sexual life were also affected.

In addition to the psychological frustration derived from the inability to full fill their reproductive preferences, infertile couples are often exposed to a variety of family and social pressure. The infertile couples generally lie deliberately and reject social exchanges. They do not get genuine support from the relatives and friends and have negative feelings towards pregnant women and other's children. There is social and cultural deprivation, and divorce is its major outcome. The individual finds it difficult to interact with spouses, families, friends and acquaintances. The infertile couples' relative and friends did not give genuine support in majority of the cases. Pregnant women and other people's children often evoked negative feelings among them. In societies where a woman's identity is closely linked to her maternal role, infertility can lead to social stigmatization and may adversely affect gender relations, kinship ties, inheritance, and marriage and divorce patterns. Infertility affects both men and women of reproductive age. The inability to have children can have profound negative implications for the individual. The divorce rates among infertile marriages were greater than those of couples with children. Divorce rates were higher in urban areas as compared to the rural ones. In contrast to the above it is found that the infertile couples had succeeded in living together in spite of a long-lasting infertility problem, indicating that their marital relationship

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has been stable.

So, it is evident that fertility or ability to produce children has a positive social value. Family and society looks down upon the couples' who are not able to bear children. Insensitive behavior to their childlessness was extended by their family members, neighbors, relatives and friends. They were under constant social pressure from family and society and some women even had to face the threat of remarriage and divorce. Because of such attitudes the childless couples, especially women, felt isolated from family and society; they expressed the feelings of being excluded from couples having children at family gatherings and other social events. Men also reported the feelings of isolation but women reported greater social isolation especially in those cases where family members were not supporting them.

The wives face more problems of social adjustments, as compared to their husbands. Most of the women withdrew from people and activities that reminded them of their inability to conceive. They stopped attending social gatherings where they were reminded of their infertile. Childless males did not face any negative reactions for such ceremonies and rituals. It is because perhaps these ceremonies are more female centered and males did not have many roles to perform in these.

Family members and relatives have more negative attitude towards females as compared to male.

Gender difference was seen in the fact that it easier to put the blame on women. Men's infertility was generally kept as a secret. The wives themselves actively helped to keep it a secret when husbands were diagnosed infertile. Childless couples are under social and religious pressures that compel them to continuously try various methods for pre-creation as it is the offspring who is responsible for the continuation of the family line.

Childless couples often focus their attention on failure and when this is done, they undergo different types of losses, i.e., loss of relationship, loss of health, loss of status or prestige, loss of self-esteem, loss of self-confidence, loss of security, loss of fantasy and loss of something or someone of great symbolic value. Loss of significant relationship is an unspoken fear. Because both the man and woman are hurting, tired and under great pressure they feel depleted of physical and emotional energy. They may become less able to fulfill each other's need and thereby suffer a loss of closeness to the point of feeling worlds apart.

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