



THE CHOICE TO REMAIN CHILDLESS IN INDIA- A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: With the shift in paradigm the perception to childlessness in India is changing. A decade ago non-motherhood was perceived as a Social stigma for women and childlessness used to create serious problems within most families. However, with the change in Socio environmental status, women in urban India are exercising on their freedom to remain childless against the common societal norms.

Objective: To find out the perception of women on childbearing. **Methodology:** For this research, a survey involving 2 groups of women over the age of 30 was conducted. The first group, group α , included 50 women who did not have children, either by choice or due to medical causes. The second group, group β , involved 50 women who had biological or adopted children. The questions were focused on whether or not the respondents were satisfied with their decisions of having (or not having) children and their views on various aspects of having children.

Result: As per the responses received, as many as 72% of the women who were married for at least 3 years, did not miss being parent and 68% of these women were not planning to conceive or adopt in the next 3 years, whereas, 20% of these women were indecisive about this.

Conclusion: The study indicates that women in urban India have the option to choose whether or not they want to be a parent. Since the study involved a limited number of respondent from metropolitan cities, further in depth research is required to unfold the exact situations and perception of women on childbearing in India.

KEYWORDS : Parenthood, Childlessness, childbearing, social stigma

INTRODUCTION

Children are considered as the gift of God to mankind. They are the new beings which replace the older ones. There was a time in India when couples were expected to have two or more children within the first three to five years of their marriage. Remaining childless was a social stigma. Childless women were often banned from social and religious gatherings and were ridiculed. Their families (especially in laws) are disappointed with them because the infertility affected the continuity of their families. Having children is considered the primary responsibility of a woman. In absence of a child she is considered incomplete or a failure.¹

The sociological aspect of these changes has been studied from time to time. Some studies have been performed to analyze the spending habits of Double Income No Kids (DINK) and Double Income Single Kid (DISK) families. However, no defining study or statistics is available on the choice of remaining childless.

This survey was limited to women living in the metropolitan cities only. Interaction was done with women who are over 30 years of age and do not have children (voluntarily or involuntarily).

Currently the world needs vigorous population control measures. Therefore the concern with infertility may not seem to be vital. However, unless a society's perspective to childlessness changes, or couples (especially women) are given the freedom, to decide if they want to have biological children, the social impact of childlessness will remain significant.

Statement of the Problem

Studies conducted a decade back have shown that childless women are subjected to shame and ridicule. Parenthood till a couple of decades ago in India was a mandate and not a choice. Couples would primarily get married to reproduce. Non-motherhood was perceived as an indignity. Childlessness used to create serious problems within most families. Women were generally blamed for infertility. There are higher chances of divorce, separation, polygamy, and extra-marital affairs.² Social and cultural

consequences may be a factor for this.³

To combat with issues of childlessness, different scientific and unscientific methods are adopted by couples. Scientific methods include InVitro Fertilization which is not fully dependable and may give success in 20-25% cases only.⁴

The risk of complications is much higher with Assisted Reproductive Technology than with conventional methods. There could be increased risk of Pre-term delivery, Ectopic pregnancies, Perinatal morbidity and mortality, Multiple gestations, Spontaneous abortion, Still birth, Congenital malformation etc.^{5,6}

The typical blessing for a newly married Indian woman is to have a large family and preferably at least one male offspring. Infertility or inability of having children can affect both men and women in the childbearing age. However, more often than not, it is the women who are blamed for involuntary childlessness. In most cases, male infertility is also blamed on the woman.⁷

To avoid the stigma associated with childlessness, most women in rural or suburban India have children within an 'acceptable' timeframe after getting married. Between 2005 and 2015, United Nations Population Fund estimated 11.8 million teenage pregnancies in India.⁸

Since there is very little scope of voluntary childlessness in rural parts of India, the sample of this survey was limited to urban India.

There could be many reasons for voluntary childlessness. Contrary to popular belief, women who do not have an occupation also are choosing to remain childless. In most cases, the decision is undisputed between the couple. The purpose of this mini research is not to identify the reason for remaining childless. It is to understand if these couples are happy with their decisions.

Affluent married women who were biologically incapable of bearing children chose to 'rent-a-womb' i.e. surrogacy to avoid

social humiliation.⁹

It is commonly believed that babies improve the quality of relationship in married couples. However, earlier studies conducted in the west have shown that during the transition to parental role, leisure and marital quality declines.¹⁰

Objective

The objectives of the current study was done to find out the perception of women on childbearing in urban India

Sample

For this research, a survey involving 2 groups of women over the age of 30 was conducted. The first group, group α, included 50 women who did not have children, either by choice or due to medical causes. The second group, group β, involved 50 women who had biological or adopted children. The two groups were given different sets of questions. Some of the questions were common in both the sets, some were different.

Methodology

Given the sensitive and personal nature of the questions, the survey was kept anonymous. Google forms were used to build a questionnaire and it was sent across to women in different age groups and relationship statuses.

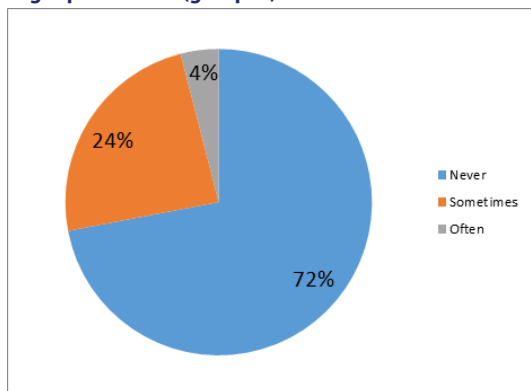
The questions were focused on whether or not the respondents were satisfied with their decisions of having (or not having) children and their views on various aspects of having children.

Results

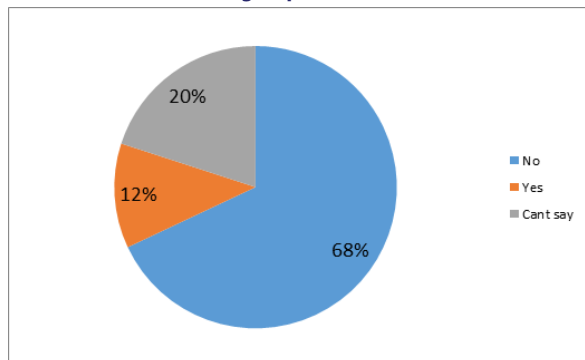
Table-1 showing relationship status of the respondents

Response	Group α (%)	Group β
Married	34 (68)	42 (84)
Divorced	4 (8)	4 (8)
Single	10 (20)	0 (0)
Separated	2 (4)	0 (0)
Widow	0 (0)	4 (8)

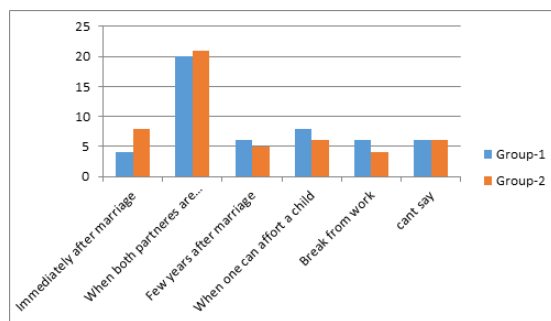
Missing of parenthood (group-α)



Who wants to have child (group-α)



Best time for parenthood



DISCUSSION

During an informal interaction with some women from group α, they suggested that their choice of not (yet) having children is questioned in most social settings. However, these women described their relationships as 'fun', 'amicable', and 'satisfactory'. They indicated that not having a biological child was not a stigma against them anymore; however, it did arouse curiosity in people. Some women in this group who were involuntarily childless said that they missed parenthood and people asking them questions did make them uncomfortable.

Most women agreed that they had a say in the decision making process either by themselves or along with other members of the family. This scenario was uncommon in India until about a decade back. As per some other studies, it is still uncommon in most rural and suburban parts of India. It can be assumed that a woman's education, financial independence, and social status impact her right of decision making.

Women in group β described their relationship with their children as 'fulfilling', 'beautiful', and 'joyous'. However, when asked how satisfactory their lives were, they said things like 'I feel overworked', 'I have no one to help me', and 'I hoped for a better life'. This was irrespective of their work status. Overall satisfaction with life and relationships seemed to be lower in the group β respondents. Without exception, all of the group β respondents (irrespective of their relationship status) described the relationship with their children as beautiful and fulfilling.

During an informal interaction with members of the society, it was noticed that very few people in urban India consider adoption as an option. This could possibly be due to the complicated adoption laws of the country and ease of access to ARTs. By including this aspect in the questionnaire, this assumption was successfully tested.

The respondents were asked their reason for having children. Only 12% from group α and 24% from group β indicated that they loved kids. For most others, the reason was either extending their families or to comply with the wishes of their SO or families. This indicates that most of the respondents were one way or another obliged to have children.

CONCLUSION

Women were included in this survey irrespective of their marital status. As per the responses received, as many as 72% of the women who were married for at least 3 years, did not miss being parent and 68% of these women were not planning to conceive or adopt in the next 3 years, whereas, 20% of these women were indecisive about this. This indicates that women in urban India have the option to choose whether or not they want to be a parent. In most cases, this decision is unanimous with their partners.

The survey was conducted amongst women from metropolitan cities, so further in depth research is required to unfold the exact situations and perception of women on childbearing in India.

Conflict of interest- the author declares no conflict of interest.

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