

Extended Abstract

Involuntary Childlessness: An exploratory study of Men's Perspective on Infertility – A study of rural childless men in Andhra Pradesh in India.

Authors: Sucharita Pujari*, Sayeed Unisa**

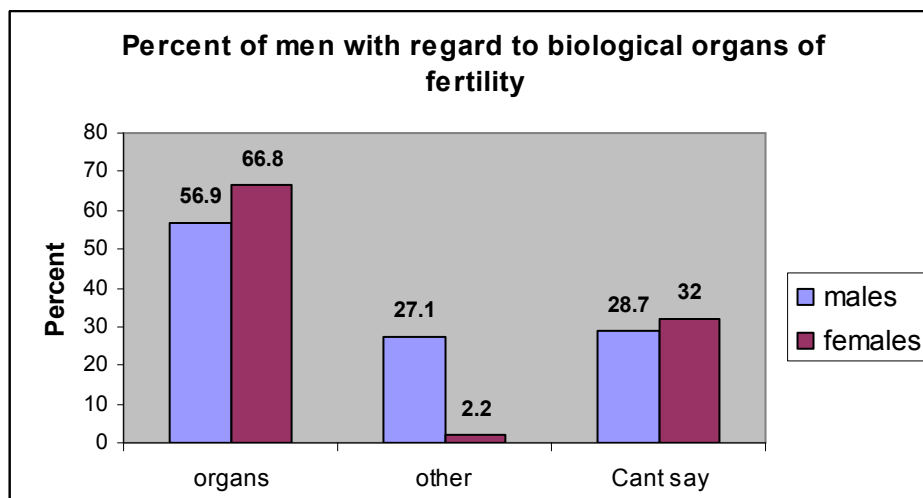
Introduction: There is very scanty literature in the Indian Context, documenting men's experiences of involuntary childlessness. A problem with demographic data concerning fertility and childlessness lies in its emphasis on women. There is a paucity of data on male fertility behavior. We actually know less than we should about men's feelings during and after an infertility experience. Because motherhood is more salient to the women's role than fatherhood is to the male role, and because women talk about their feelings more than men do, most of what we know of people's reaction to infertility is from the female perspective. In a patriarchal setting such as in India, Infertility is perceived as a threat to men's procreativity and the continuity of the lineage (Unisa 1999, Iyengar and Iyengar 1999; Jindal and Dhall 1990; Jindal and Gupta 1989; Mulgaonkar 2001). India being a pronatalist society where fertility is highly valued, it becomes all the more imperative to understand the perception and view point of men who have not been able to have a child despite three to four years of marriage.

Study Area and Data: The present paper is based on a community based research study carried out among childless men in 30 villages of rural Andhra Pradesh in India during April and May 2006. In the study more than 7000 households were listed and near about 181 childless men were interviewed face to face, to gather data on various aspects of infertility such as knowledge about reproduction and fertility, perceived causes of infertility, attitude towards child adoption and men's role in the treatment seeking pattern. The consequences due to childlessness at the family, marital, and community level have also been examined.

Objectives: The present paper dwells around certain very crucial aspects associated with fertility and infertility. To begin with men's knowledge about organs of human fertility,

knowledge about reproduction such as ovulation fertilization and implantation, knowledge about fertile period, menstruation and abortion have been explored. The paper also looks into the importance attached to biological fatherhood as against child adoption by these men and also briefly discusses about the causes of childlessness as perceived by these childless men. Most of the men are in the young age group of 25 – 39 years. Except for 21 men who were married more than once, as they failed to have children from the first wife, the remaining were in monogamous marriage.

Preliminary Findings: Preliminary results based on simple percentage distributions and cross tabulations show that over all, close to three quarter men, most of them aged 30 years and above posses some knowledge about the biological organs of reproduction including male and female organs of reproduction. Knowledge about female organs of fertility is relatively better compared to male organs of fertility. Literacy, occupation (non agricultural activities), standard of living are positively associated with knowledge of organs of reproduction. Awareness about organs of reproduction is more among men in polygamous marriages in comparison to men in single marriage and among couples where the interspousal age gap is more than ten years.



However all of them were well informed about the age at menarche and length of the menstrual cycle. Except for very few all men knew about the correct age at menarche to be between 10-14 years and correctly reported about the length of the menstrual cycle as 28 days to 30 days.

Knowledge about the fertile period is very poor among childless men. On being asked when during the menstrual cycle a woman is most likely to conceive Less than one-quarter (only 14 percent) of the childless men showed correctly some knowledge about the fertile period. The percentage (77 percent) of men who have no knowledge about conception is more among those men whose wives are aged 30 and above. Higher the duration of marriage less is the correct knowledge about the fertile period.

Knowledge about what causes abortion and how to safeguard the pregnancy till full term is poor among the study participants. More than fifty percent do not know what causes abortion. Interestingly in about 23 cases the wives already had an abortion once. The men are well informed about the investigations conducted during semen analysis for male factor infertility.

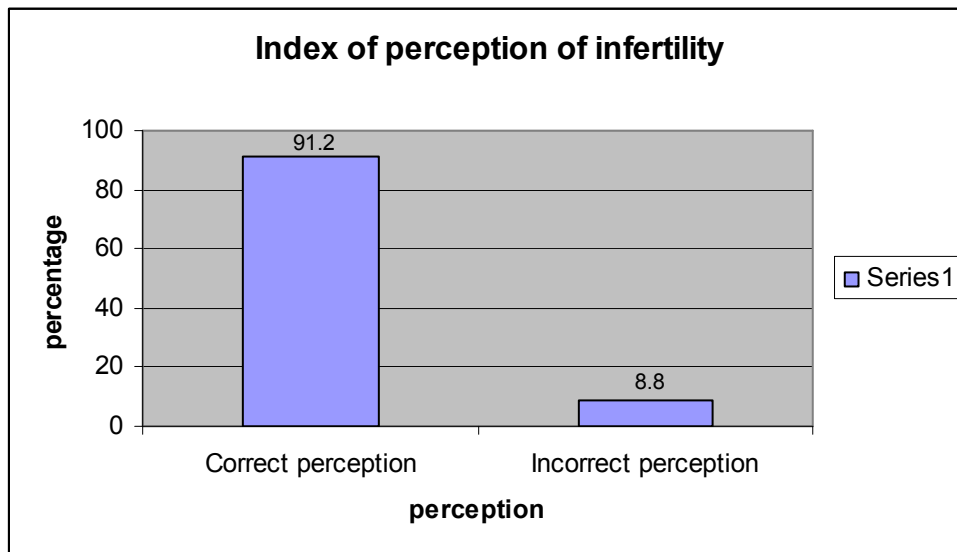
There is a negative attitude of childless men towards child adoption. Only 38 of 181 men had adopted a child at the time of interview. Most of them had adopted a male child from close near and dear relatives. It is also seen that the percentage of adoption is high among couples with ten years or more than ten years of marriage and especially where the wife is more than 35 years old. Thus the waiting period between marriage and child adoption appears to be 10 or more than 10 years and mostly among men of the middle age group.

Among those who adopted a child, nearly all refrained themselves from recommending other childless couples to opt for child adoption. This could be because adoption in India is often shrouded in secrecy. Biological child is perceived important for socio cultural reasons. In Indian situation, adoption is not an acceptable option for many, as a married couple face psychological, familial and community pressure to produce a biological child. There is an overall lack of community support and endorsement of adoption in India. More than eighty percent of these men feel the absence of a biological child mainly due to social and emotional reasons.

The childless men in the present study, expressed displeasure/ unhappiness and worry as their initial reaction after having realized the problem. More than 80 percent of the respondents were worried and disappointed at their wife's constant failure to achieve a pregnancy. This was followed by tension depression and anger.

Close to ninety percent of the respondents felt that either a man or a woman could be the cause of infertility. Nearly all of them disagreed on the fact that usually women /usually men is the cause of childlessness. So there was common consensus that either a male or a female could be the cause of infertility and not that only women are responsible.

Based on their answers an index with regard to perceived cause of childlessness was computed and it was observed that 90 percent of the men had the correct perception regarding the cause for infertility.



Conclusion:

Based on the above findings it can be concluded, that that there is a general lack of knowledge and ignorance on the part of these men about the real causes of infertility. Knowledge about male reproductive organs is poor. An understanding of the development of the male reproductive system and its functioning should be emphasized more in RH programs initiated by the government.

Men lack proper knowledge about the timing of intercourse at the time of ovulation. The men have very poor knowledge about what causes abortion and how to safeguard abortion. Child adoption should be encouraged which otherwise is considered a stigma.