

Social Status of Childless Woman: A Sociological Study of District Srinagar, J&K

Fayaz Ahmad Parray

Research Scholar

Department of Centre of Central Asian Studies (CCAS)

University of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Abstract

Determination of the 'status of women' is not only limited to the consideration of women's rights and duties in society, but also includes their degree of subordination at home, education, economic status, role in decision-making in family affairs, and their self-perceived status. The present study may be viewed as an effort to focus on infertility with an empirical approach. The results of the present study may be expanded to the field of social work by enhancing the knowledge and understanding of the implications of infertility on women by focusing on the effects of social support, and confidentiality, and examining the level of despair and its effect on a marital relationship.

Methodology: The methodology adopted for this study includes a research design, which is adequately suited for the contextual sample sizes of the research areas. The methodology covers tools like interview schedules, field observations etc. Moreover, the quantitative data collected from the field study has been interpreted through some of the statistical methods and the Likert scale was put into the practice to draw the logical inferences about the same.

Keywords

Status, primary infertility, Adoption, coping, Neo Malthusian, reproductive Health, Masculinity.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Fayaz Ahmad Parray,

Social Status of Childless Woman: A Sociological Study of District Srinagar, J&K,

RJPSSs 2017, Vol. 43,
No.2, pp. 316-327,
Article No. 43 (RJ1956)

Online available at :
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=2012](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=2012)

Introduction

Status refers to a complex dynamic and relative concept that assigns a position to a person with a designated social role based on the comparative levels of respect, divergence, and social image or prestige. The status of women, like the general concept of status, is a multi-dimensional concept, which is assigned based on the comparison. Various dimensions that are important to determine the status of women in this context are: the possession of materials and merits, having access to life opportunities, privileges, and the autonomy to make independent decisions. The status designated to women in any society is an index of the standard of the social organization in that society. In a paper by Lela Visaria¹ on Regional Variations in Female Autonomy and Fertility and contraception in India, three critical components of Women's autonomy are mentioned:

- a. Control over material and social resources.
- b. Knowledge opportunities and alternatives available to women.
- c. Women's position within the household

In other words, the status of women can be understood in terms of decision-making, freedom of movement, and domestic autonomy. The concept of autonomy according to Van Stave Rencorrespond to freedoms such as freedom from ignorance through access to education; freedom from an unhealthy short life through access to health services; freedom of survival through access to economic resources; freedom from discrimination, especially sexual subordination through active liberty to make decisions, equal rights, and the abolition of discriminatory traditions².

Education and Women

Education and work are the two variables, which have been internationally acknowledged as important, particularly to fertility. In several studies on fertility-education, economic participation, health status, and the legal status of Women are considered important. In demographic literature, the position of women in terms of education, labor force participation outside the household, occupational mobility and so on, is found to have a strong association with fertility behavior in developed and developing countries globally. Education and labor force participation may bring about several qualitative changes in the behavior of women. These may include changes in lifestyle, norms and values, levels of aspiration, motivation, and modernization, changes in the role and so on Dr. Usha Sharma³, as an Indian Women's rights advocate, argues that improvement in the position of women is not the consequence of family planning programs as believed by the population planners it is a more complex outcome resulting from a rise in the age of marriage, education, employment, better living conditions, general awareness and so on.

Neo-Malthusian analysts argue that pregnancy leads to suffering, powerlessness, and low status of women and that improvement in Women's status is a direct consequence of the acceptance of modern family planning. The national policy on Education (NPE)⁴ stated that the government would advocate education as a means of attaining gender impartiality and as a tool to correct counter-gender discrimination. As the NPE states, education can be used as 'An agent of basic change in the status of women'. To accomplish that, the system needs to play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women.

Motherhood is an essential identity of woman

Role differentiation between men and women is constructed by understanding the conceptual idea of motherhood prevalent in society. Some feminists claim that motherhood is a significant instrument by which gender inequality is created and maintained. The idea of motherhood projects women as producers of children and labor-power. Women, in the context of inheritance of private property in capitalist societies, are needed to adhere to this particular construct of motherhood. Men need children to have heirs and to prove their masculinity, but even though they might envy the female capacity to bear children, women are subordinated precisely because of this capacity in most societies. The female social role and activities are restricted to child care and maintenance of a family. This affects the position of women in these societies by subordinating them to men. Such subordination is possible firstly, because, women's activities are restricted to the household and secondly, because women are not considered economically productive. Simone de Beauvoir, an eminent feminist, rebuts the prevalent understanding of motherhood which she considers a major reason that prevents women from proclaiming social independence and from being creative⁵.

The conception that there is a biological divergence between opposite genders creates an environment of discrimination in society. The inference drawn from this fact is that women are often considered inferior due to their reproductive function. Shulamith Firestone, one of the leading feminists, views this physical difference as a reason for female subordination and suggests that women should have absolute control over their bodies. Simone de Beauvoir regards pregnancy as a process that isolates a woman from herself. Feminists like Adrienne Rich feel that the way the perception of motherhood is constructed results in the devaluation and subservience of women in other social roles. She critiqued motherhood as an institution, yet, as an experience she considers motherhood empowering. Rich felt that because motherhood is not a choice for most women in patriarchy, it is oppressive⁶. Therefore, she stressed that women should have control over their bodies and sexuality to reduce control of this

institution over them. Though she has been criticized for emphasizing this biological ability of women, other feminists have agreed with her about its institutionalization as being oppressive for women. However, the feminist take on maternity is not always contextually negative. Since women can bear children and men do not, in many traditional societies, some women consider their reproductive function as a basis of supremacy that defines their identity and social status.

Interviews with childless women also revealed the same opinion. Motherhood is viewed as an extremely positive experience by most women because of its social importance. Feminists, in general, view the female reproductive function as a boon as well as a bane depending upon the specific culture and the limit to which men regulate the reproductive behavior of women.

Gender Inequality and Motherhood

Inequality in society has also been explained by understanding the capability of parenthood in society. Feminists view it as an important way by which this gender inequality is created and maintained. Under certain conditions in society, it becomes important for men to own children and control women's sexuality and fertility and then it becomes important to establish fatherhood. Controls on women's reproductive capacities were exercised in patriarchal societies to control the inheritance in the male line. The private property needed heirs who could be identified⁷.

The ideology of motherhood posits women as producers of children and labor-power. These women, in the background of private property in capitalist societies, are women who have to adhere to a particular ideology of motherhood. Men need children to have heirs and to prove their masculinity, but even though they might envy women's capacity, women are subordinated precisely because of this capacity in most societies. Women's activities are restricted to child care and maintenance of the family. This affects the position of women in these societies subordinating them to men. Such subordination is possible because women's activities are restricted to the household and they are not economically productive.

The role of 'mothering' is enforced on women in the society irrespective of whether they become mothers or not. This role affects ideas about masculinity and femininity and reproduces sexual inequality. These ideas have been explored in-depth by Nancy Chodorow⁸ who believes that the 'mothering role' has a psychological influence on girls and boys. The ideological understanding of motherhood varies according to differences in the socio-cultural setting, ethnicity, and social class in several societies, the question of reverence and authority of a woman may be associated with motherhood. For instance in Kashmir, where society is by and large patriarchal, mothers are highly revered

In most societies, a woman is considered complete or real only when she becomes a mother. She proves her womanhood through maternity and often feels secure in her marriage as motherhood is believed to strengthen the bond of marriage. A woman might also feel that she has succeeded in accomplishing what she was supposed to do as an adult woman. Women who cannot bear children often feel agonized by the fact that they cannot feel fulfilled like most women. However, a woman who is single or childless by choice is considered unproductive and selfish in most societies.

Religious and Social Purpose of Childbearing

Procreation is socially desirable for religious and social reasons⁹. Children ensure the continuation of the family lineage. I conducted an exploratory study to examine the socio-psychological motives and mechanisms that drive the desire to have children. In an interview schedule held with several married couples, five such motives were considered, namely - personal, religious, social, economic, and health-related. It was reported that in the case of the women, social and religious motives dominate as priorities in their need to have children, whereas, for their husbands, personal, economic, and social motives were reported to be more important. Another study conducted, attempted to analyze the reason why people decide to have children. To find appropriate reasons for having children, twenty-nine married couples, who ranged from having no children to being parents of four, were studied. The study revealed that the major motivation for childbearing is the desire for a close relationship with another human being and the wish to take part in the education and training of a child. The major restrictions were the expenses connected with the upbringing of children.

Marital Life of Childless Couples

In the context of marriage, the social superiority claimed by the family of the groom over the family of the bride is a common practice in traditional societies. Marriages are generally arranged within the same caste which ensures the continuance of the former caste status. Moreover, marriages of daughters into higher castes are usually considered a more reliable and preferred form of the marriage arrangement¹⁰.

Dowry is seen as a 'payment for marriage' to ensure the well-being of the bride. This practice was more prevalent in the high-status group of the society but, over recent times, the practice has spread into low-income groups as well. Dowry is the conceptual opposite of 'bride price' which, in contrast to dowry, is paid by the groom. The type of marriage compensation involved depends on women's rights in property and their role in the production. Most communities, who claim a higher caste status, practice offering, and demanding dowry instead of paying the 'bride price'. Dowry taking has also exhibited a recent increase because of the increasing

popularity of the consumerist lifestyle. Dowry generally does not belong to the bride and is under the control of the groom's household. Women may often find themselves in a vulnerable position with the threat of severe domestic violence or being thrown out or, in extreme cases, even killed. In this context, a woman's position can become even more dangerous if she cannot have a child or is only able to bear girls.

Joint families, whatever type they might be, define property relations and regulate marriage and inheritance. Nuclear families seem to be more advantageous to women, as women can have more decision-making power. Though it had been claimed that modernization would bring about nuclear families and subsequently various other changes like freedom of marital choice, increase in divorce, the disappearance of dowry and so many other things, this change has been minimal and, if at all, it has been due to the rise of a salaried middle class. Some rules of patrilineality are relaxed but only to a limited extent as the marital choice is rarely free and the system of dowry exists. There are inequalities within the family in terms of the division of labor and distribution of resources. The accordance of important resources like education, food, and medical care is also influenced by gender¹¹.

Fertility is viewed as a blessing and infertility as a curse. Infertility is a grave source of disturbance for most couples regardless of their educational achievements and socio-economic status. When infertility is involuntary, the husband and wife often try to blame each other for the inability to produce offspring. Some studies show that the status of childless women depends upon their economic and educational status. In economically weaker sections of the society, for women with little or no education, the incapacity to bear children often leads to divorce or second marriage on the part of the husband. In numerous cases, childlessness leads to polygamy. Some wives allow and accept the second marriage of their husbands when their infertility is established.

Procreation is an indispensable aim of marriage. There remains a sense of compulsion in families to have children for the fulfillment of social and religious duties. Couples, in addition to the necessary measures, often seek consultations from medical professionals, offer sacrifices before gods, and confer with herbalists and saints to confirm that the problem of infertility is cured. In most traditional societies, a newly-married woman who enters the household is considered as subordinate to her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law. Her status in this hierarchy improves only after she delivers children in time. Contrary to this, infertility devalues a woman and is considered to bring social disgrace. It excludes women from social participation, especially in religious and fertility rites, and is often treated by society as legitimate grounds for polygamy.

In studies related to the subject, it was observed that couples with a low standard of living more often opt for a second marriage in comparison to their counterparts with a higher standard of living. The infertility of a wife prompts the husband to take another wife as the sole purpose of marriage, especially in most of the social groups, is to bear the children. Many a time, the infertile wife may herself encourage her husband to take another woman in marriage to have children to carry forward the family or clan name.

Adoption and Infertile Parents

Among the higher castes, the adoption of boys by widows was encouraged. They were encouraged to adopt the child of their husband's brother or cousin. This was done mainly to ensure the inheritance of property within the family. Sometimes, adoption was prevented in the greed of larger shares of property some of which would otherwise have gone to the adopted son. Another reason for polygamy in men is the desire for a male child. The man could also marry his wife's younger sister and if a woman was 'barren' her husband would remarry, sometimes with the wife's encouragement¹². That is because an adopted child would be a stranger, whereas the second wife's child is still the husband's child. But, most of the time, according to Irawati Karve, the other wife's children are a reminder to the woman of her defeat. Widow Remarriage was considered taboo but, there was no prohibition on polygamy¹³. Even now, with the laws against polygamy, some men have two wives. This is allowed in several social groups like Muslims. The threat of a second wife looms large over the first wife. Since relation by blood is so important, therefore, children outside marriage and adopted children are still not easily accepted by families even today.

Childlessness and Social Attitudes

Since early childhood, a woman is brought up with the idea that marriage is the goal of her life, and thereafter, becoming a mother is the ultimate purpose of her existence. Most women continue to commit to this as socially imposed role in subsequent adult lives. The function of a mother is considered to bear children and bring them up, if necessary as is often the case, at the expense of sacrificing and neglecting her own needs and aspirations. In a society where being a mother is knotted to the identity of a woman, childless women often feel traumatized. The evidence of severe emotional harassment experienced by a large number of childless women in their marital homes is prevalent though poorly documented.

Response to Childlessness

The behavior of men and women varies on different occasions. The variations in behavior are due to a varied array of reasons. Six main indicators of behavioral changes were analyzed. On attending a child's birthday party function, about fifty

percent of men had a neutral reaction and thirty nine percent of men felt happy, whereas, only around one-third of women can stay normal. Fifty percent of women reported that such functions were extremely stressful. They often fail to hide the grief of being childless and, as a result, have to refuse invitations to such birthday parties. It was also observed that even when the deficiency is in men, about sixty-three percent of them behave normally on seeing pregnant women, whereas over forty-five percent of women feel jealous and this leads to sorrow. The behavior of men and women on seeing the toys or clothes of a child also varied significantly. About fifty-two percent of men felt normal and around forty percent felt happy. On the other hand, forty percent of childless women become sad and tense. The difference in the emotional response of men and women to such situations can be attributed to the basic difference in their innate natures as well as to the role expectancy in their societies. Women are more sensitive and consider motherhood as an assurance of their womanhood. That might be the reason why even seeing children in films or on their television sets often triggers women and almost forty percent of the studied women failed to control their emotions in such situations. Contrary to this, owing to a greater degree of engagement in miscellaneous activities, TV serials or films do not trigger any significant response in men, and only about seven percent of men were seen to be affected by TV or films. Most of the women hesitate to attend auspicious occasions and only a few of them feel happy to do so, however, the opposite is true for men. Most of the men express happiness upon attending any auspicious occasion because the stigma against childlessness is not a hindrance to them. Regardless of who is functionally lacking to produce a child, women are the primary targets of the judgment of the society and are looked down upon.

Conflict and Marital Tension

In another study at Srinagar, the respondents were asked about their mutual relationship to see the effect of childlessness on married life. One variable was constituted by combining responses with merged factors like - conflict, tension, avoidance, and indifference under the tag of “conflict and avoidance”. Tension-free, cordial, and intimacy were designated as another variable ‘Cordiality’. It was found that the age of the female, and male, and the duration of marriage have a great impact on the husband-wife relationship. In addition to that, the type of family structure, the husband’s occupation, and the wife’s occupational status is deeply related to marital conflict and tension between husband and wife. When a female crosses the age of thirty-five years her reproductive capacity decreases severely. Consequently, conflict and avoidance behaviors are found to be more prevalent in older couples. Conflict is found to be the least when the husband’s age group is between twenty-

five to twenty-nine years. Based on rural and urban settings, no significant difference was found. The duration of marriage also seems to have a significant effect on the marital behavior of a couple. In couples married for less than three years, only fifty percent of wives hold their husbands responsible. The type of family, occupational status of the wife, and income also influence the marital behavior of infertile couples. Roughly, eighty percent of families having an income of more than 30,000 INR per month do not confront infertility issues because visiting for infertility treatments doesn't put too much burden on the family expenditures. The analysis of the behavior of husbands where wives are responsible for childlessness does not reveal significant differences by the type of residence. No significant difference was found in the age of husband and wife. In nuclear families less family pressure is experienced, as a result, both husband and wife hold more responsibility than their partner in comparison to joint families. It is inferred that couples residing in poor conditions (semi-pucca houses) and earning less than 15000 INR per month reveal maximum conflict and avoidance behavior in their families. Among poor families where more conflict is noticed, both the partners hold each other responsible for childlessness. In cases where one or both the partners are employed, less conflict was found and their marital relations were considerably cordial. They generally do not hold each other responsible for childlessness.

During this study majority of the respondents around one hundred fifty four accepted that they quarreled more frequently than other couples in their family. Eighty-three respondents do not observe a significant difference and feel that they quarrel just as much as other couples in their family. The remaining respondents questioned during the study, felt that they quarrel less than other couples in their family. The analysis of these observations suggests that over half of the respondents have more frequent arguments and disputes than other couples in their families. From this data, it can be inferred that being infertile is one of the major reasons for the frequent quarrels and disputes in the household. Due to the issues caused by infertility, childless couples suffer severe social and psychological disturbances. Most of the women under study revealed that their husbands had lost interest in them and were attracted to other women. In an attempt to study whether or not the life of infertile couples is regular, psychological and social aspects of their lives were explored which included a study of adverse states like mental pressure and living at a maternal home along with other variables.

The daily life of Infertile Women

The data reveals that a majority of the respondents carry on with their routine duties in the household despite being childless. We noticed an overwhelmingly dominant

fraction of the respondents two hundred two, (67.33%) who feel that they can maintain a regular life within their family units while the remaining ninety-eight (32.67%) respondents felt contrary to the normal functioning of their family life. To sum up the analysis, it can be said that infertility does not significantly affect the continuation of household duties and irrespective of that women can carry on with the routine work in their family units.

Whether Allowed to Visit Parental Home

Many people consider infertility a curse and due to this infertile women become soft targets of ridicule and antagonism. Infertile women have to bear disfavours and annoyance from society. Taking this into consideration, the women interviewed for this report were asked whether or not their conjugal family allowed them to visit their parental home. The collected information is presented in the above table.

Conclusion

The cultural motherhood mandate forces a woman to establish her fertility. The incidence of childlessness is seen as a personal calamity for a woman, dropping her status to that of a social outcast. It can create a sense of embarrassment, frustration, and fear of personal insecurity as well. The other concerning matter could be ridicule and harassment by family as well as rejection and ostracism by society. Such familial and societal pressures have direct implications on the physical and psychological health of a woman. Social perception of infertility may also differ across various sections of society, but what remains widespread across the cultures is the stigma and stress faced by a childless woman. The issue of infertility has significant consequences on the marital life of the couple, often disrupting the bond of marriage. Despite the evidence and applied significance, the issues and problems concerning infertility have not been given satisfactory scientific attention.

References

1. Abbey, A and Others. 1991. *Stress from infertility, marriage factors, and subjective well-being of wives and husbands*: Journal of Health and Social Behaviour.
2. Affleck, G and Others. 1990. *Mothers, fathers, and the crisis of newborn intensive care*. Infant Mental Health Journal.
3. Aldwin, CM, and Ravenson, TA .1987. *Does coping help? A re-examination of the relation between coping and mental health*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.
4. Amir, M and Others .1999. *Infertility and adjustment in women: The effects of attachment style and social support*. Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings.

5. Band, D and Others .1998. *Correlates of psychological distress rr. relation to male infertility*. British Journal of Health Psychology.
6. Band, D and Others .1998. *Correlates of psychological distress. relation to male infertility*. British Journal of Health Psychology.
7. Baron, D and Dreman, S. .1987. *When spouses disagree A predictor of cardiac rehabilitation*. Family Systems Medicine.
8. Baron, D and Dreman, S. 1987. *When spouses disagree A predictor of cardiac rehabilitation*. Family Systems Medicine.
9. Beaufepaire, J and Others .1994. *Psychological adjustment to infertility and its treatment: Male and female responses at different stages of IVF/ET treatment*. Journal of Psychosomatic Research.
10. Beaufepaire, J and Others .1994. *Psychological adjustment to infertility and its treatment: Male and female responses at different stages of IVF/ET treatment*. Journal of Psychosomatic Research.
11. Beaufepaire, J and Others .1994. *Psychological adjustment to infertility and its treatment: Male and female responses at different stages of IVF/ET treatment*. Journal of Psychosomatic Research.
12. Beck, AT and Others .1979. *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* New York: Guilford.
13. Beck, AT and Others .1979. *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* New York: Guilford.
14. Beck, AT and Others .1979. *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* New York: Guilford.
15. Beck, AT and Others .1996. *Beck depression inventory: Manual*, second edition. San Antonio: Harcourt Brace
16. Glover, L and Others. 1998. *Male subfertility: Is pregnancy the only issue?* British Medical Journal.

(Footnotes)

1. Jeffery, Roger, Basu, Alka M. (eds) .1996. *Girl's Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Changes in South Asia*, Sage Publications, New Delhi p 120
2. Agnihotri Gupta, Jyotsna .2000. *New Reproductive Technologies, Women's health and Autonomy- Freedom or Dependence, Indo-Dutch Studies or Development alternatives*, Sage Publications, New Delhi p 66
3. Sharma, Dr. Usha .2001. *Women's Emancipation: Rights vs. Population Control*, Authors Press, New Delhi p. 68
4. Govinda, R. (ed) .2002. *India's Education Report- A Profile of Basic Education*, Oxford University Press in Collaboration with NIEPA and UNESCO

5. Beauvoir, Simone de.1988. *The Second Sex*, Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, Picador, London (First Published in 1949) p 74
6. Rich, Adrienne.1976. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, W.W. Norton, New York
7. Engles, F.1973. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, International Publishers, New York (First Published in 1884)
8. Chodorow, Nancy.1978. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, University of California Press, Berkeley p. 64
9. Graafland Johan .2015. *Religiosity, Attitude and the demand for Socially Responsible Products*: Journal of Business Ethics, p 121.
10. Hecker Ulrich, Sakerdej Maciek and Sankaran Sindhuja .2017. The role of Indian caste identity and caste inconsistent norms on status representation, *Journal of Front Psychology*, p 487
11. Uberoi, Patricia(ed).1993. *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India*, Oxford University press, New Delhi p 76
12. Karve, Irawati.1965. *Kinship Organisation in India*, 2nd rev. Edition, Asia Publishing House, Bombay p 45.
13. Ibid:60