



Infertility – A Social Stigma in Kashmir

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According to the International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technology and the World Health Organization, infertility is a disease of the reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse. Demographers, however, define infertility as the absence of a live birth in a sexually active woman. Infertility is a disease of the reproductive system which affects both men and women with almost equal frequency (American Society of Reproductive Medicine). Infertility is a world-wide problem affecting people of all communities, though the cause and magnitude may vary with geographical location and socio-economic status. Approximately 8-10% of couples within the reproductive age group, present for medical assessment, generally follow two years of failed efforts to reproduce. It is estimated that globally, between 60-80 million couples suffer from infertility every year of which probably between 15- 20 million are in India alone.

Social consequences of Infertility

According to WHO (World Health Organisation) health is a state of Physical, mental and social well being and not mere the absence of disease or

injury. This definition calls attention to the fact that being healthy involves much more than simply not being ill or injured. Being healthy also means having good social relationships with friends and family, being able to function or do things according to set norms of one's society. In any society like Iran and Kashmir motherhood is inscribed in the personality of a girl. The reproductive role of woman is highly recognized in these settings and the onset of puberty is joyously marked, accompanied by celebrations that declare the girl's fertility and announce her capability for future motherhood. As Dube (1998) describes it, "Menstruation is likened to the process of flowering or blossoming the necessary stage before fruit can appear". In a culture where much importance is accorded to motherhood and virility, one can imagine the boundless problems that infertility is likely to cause. In case a woman is unable to conceive, she is stigmatized and rebuked by the family and society. While these women are already feeling sad and threatened, society inflicts multiple psychological tortures on them by labeling them as incomplete or worthless. The plight of a childless woman is sad and she always lives in peril of being deserted or divorced. The incidence of physical violence experienced by childless woman is high. The woman may also be

ill treated or burdened with the domestic chores. She might even persuade her husband to remarry, just for the sake of an heir. In certain cultures childless women are purposely kept away from certain ceremonies. These women hide their faces from the world and refrain from participating in social activities. Infertility is an important issue that has major impact on the health of individuals and the societies. The rate of infertility changes among populations and during different times. Advantages in diagnosis and use of modern treatment techniques have been increasing recently, but finding and calculation of the exact infertility rate is still a problem. In order to assess the trend of fertility, a quantitative and reliable method for assessing infertility is needed

Women & Infertility scenario In Kashmir

The problem of infertility has not given its due attention in India because it is not a life threatening condition. Infertility is a life crisis with invisible losses and its consequences are manifold. The study was done to find out the prevalence and causes of infertility in ethnic population of J and K. Current estimates, based on the study conducted by the department of Endocrinology, SKIMS suggest that around 15.7% of women in Kashmir who currently of child bearing age will never have a child, if they do not seek clinical intervention. For most women, childlessness can have significant emotional consequences which may range from an occasional sense of loss, or guilt, to an acute and profound sense of grief, with debilitating consequences. IVF treatment is an alternative for couples who otherwise are left with options like adoption or in some cases, a second marriage. But there is no proper conformity to this practice in Kashmir. The social taboo often leads aspiring parents to go outside the state for IVF treatment, in which case, the already high cost of the treatment increases manifold. The cost of IVF treatment is very high. Achieving parenthood through IVF is a dream that can be realized only by affluent couples while the poor still wait for the

government to come up with IVF treatment facility in government hospitals. Most couples take a step back when they hear about its cost. The risk involved in IVF treatment is failed pregnancy. This is due to multiple pregnancies; this is when the mother carries more than one foetus in her womb. Another risk associated with IVF treatment is multiple births. Two women so far have delivered healthy triplets after IVF treatment at the infertility centre while there are many cases of twin deliveries.

The percentage of currently married women with any abnormal vaginal discharge in J&K is 50.5 while the all India average prevalence rate is 30.0 J&K is very much high in this indicator. The percentage of Reproductive tract Infections in J&K is 31.0. The all India average is only 17.8 this indicator is also high compared to India's average. The percentage of painful intercourse in J&K is 21.7 whereas the all India average is 12.5 this indicator is also high. The prevalence of all the four RTI problems in high range in J&K is clear evidence of high vulnerability of infertility of women. In this state three in every five currently married women report at least one reproductive health problem that could be sufficient cause to infertility. Infertility is known to cause an impact on the mental health of infertile couple in general but women in particular. In such women of Kashmir various social stigmas like social isolation, disfunctioning of marital status, family disputes etc. are inflicted upon her by society.