

**SEX PREFERENCE AND FAMILY PLANNING PRACTICES IN YAKURR,
CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA**

BY

MICHAEL ANAKE USHIE

Department of Social Work,
University of Calabar, Nigeria

UDE BASSEY OBETEN

Department of Social Work,
University of Calabar, Nigeria

ISOKON BROWN EGBE

Department of Social Work,
University of Calabar, Nigeria

&

USHIE ALORYE

Department of Environmental Education,
University of Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The paper examines sex preference and family planning practice among people of Yakurr in Cross River State, Nigeria. The study adopts a descriptive methodology and the findings provides insights into the attitudes of people towards sex preference and their decisions to adopt family planning practice. The preference for a particular sex, and decisions to adopt family planning options irrespective of education, exposure and status is based on social, cultural and religious practices exacerbate sex preference. These includes, the continuity of the lineage through the male child; social values in having a preferred sex, property, ignorance and stigmatization among others. The desire of parents to have a particular sex increases the family size and population growth because parent jettison family planning options. These affect parents emotionally and result in depression and alienation from society because of inability to produce a male child. The paper therefore,

recommends that efforts should be made to create sustained awareness and sensitization, enlightenment campaign and social work interventions through counselling programmes to help curb and eradicate the harmful cultural belief and practices for child preference especially the male child as well as encourage family planning.

Key words: Sex Preference, family planning, Literacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every human being is faced with certain choices and preferences in life especially those that involving family decisions relating to marriage, child bearing and family planning. These decisions are often tied to socio-cultural and religious practices which in turn affect the ability to make choices in patriarchal society. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation with different cultural affinity. Therefore, sex preference (child) is an authentic cultural norm in Africa, and Nigeria in particular where inheritance is predominantly patrilineal with pockets of matrilineal practices (Egwuavoen 2007; Etuk, Obeten, & Ojua 2020). This makes inheritance and indeed sex preference a very combustible issue of discourse. The desire to have a particular sex (child) dominates every home and family irrespective of the level of education, exposure and status in society. Among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria it is an abomination for a man not to have a male child that would serve as progenitor to continue the name of the family afterwards. These type of practices to a large extent affect the choices and decision making of the family. It also

influences gender roles, for example, these socio-cultural and religious practices make mostly women vulnerable and incapacitated to take certain decisions as regard family planning, choice of spouse, marriage and number of children to bear as well as the sex of the child (ren). Etuk, Obeten & Ojua (2020) observed that these practices make women disadvantaged and discriminated against.

In traditional Nigerian societies, it is believed that male child preference is central to success in family life. It is almost impossible to like two similar things the same way, usually a person will find himself/ herself having more feelings and attachment to only one. This situation cuts across relationship, career and all forms of social behavior. The cultural and religious orientation in most Nigerian societies, places more emphasis on the sex of a child, and it is common practice that parents place large preference on male children over female, mostly because of inheritance and to prevent the diffusion of the family name, especially if the family is known to be famous. The father sees a male child as a palpable evidence of his continuity, sustenance of family name and

inheritance as well as serves as the basis for power, privilege and social prestige (Henslin, 2004; Etuk, *et al* 2020). The mother on the other hand feels in-secured in marriage if she cannot produce a male. This attachment, inclination and affection as well as preference for a male child within an African society is largely sustained by the patrilineal nature of our society, and can result to hostility, prejudices discrimination directed against people (Henslin, 2004; Etuk *et al* 2020). Thus, a man prides himself within the rings of manhood if he has a son and will be consciously or unconsciously scorned if he has children but with no male child. Enthronement of persons to certain religious or spiritual positions are exclusive reserve of male children in most African traditional settings, especially among the south-south, south west and south east regions of Nigeria, the Nuer of Sudan, Ashanti of Ghana, (Mbiti, 1975). In some other societies like Yako (yakurr) of Central Cross River State family authority is handed to a male son regardless of age and experience. The perpetuity of African family system and to a large extent the sustainability of marriage is premised on male preference.

Sex preference varies from society to society and is therefore, based on individual choices and cultural practices inherent in the society. Faced with the current socio-economic realities and the over-bearing cultural and religious practices, most families and homes are forced to adopt family planning. Literate parents subscribe to family planning as a means not

only to control population but to secure a decent living at the barest minimum standard. In some societies, family planning is practiced by a family which responsibilities does not outweigh their income. The question then is, what is the place of attachment and preference for sex (male or female) to the adoption and practice of family planning irrespective of literacy level?

Furthermore, our intellectual muse is drawn to the place of education as it relates to family planning based on sex preference especially among women. That is, does women's choice or preference for sex, affects their adoption of family planning options? Can literate women adopt any method of birth control regardless of the sex (child) already gotten? It is equally important to note that, sex preference goes beyond the choice and preference of particular sex but also includes birth placement of male and female children; the choice of the sex within preferred family size; In an attempt to get a preferred sex (child), caution is sometimes thrown to the wind leading to family size increase with concomitant effect on the socioeconomic indices and fortunes of the family.

It is against this background, that this paper examines the factors influencing most people in their decision or preference for a particular sex in relation to knowledge and practice of family planning in Yakurr Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria.

The specific objectives is to examine sociocultural factors influencing sex

preference and family planning, and how does literacy level affect the choice and decision of sex preference and family planning

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

i. Sex preference:

Sex preference is defined as the likeness and or acceptance and inclination to a sex over the other and is determined largely by cultural factor, level of education, and religious beliefs. Sex preference is the practice of attaching greater importance and value to a male or female child (Etuk, Obeten & Ojua, 2020), as the case may be. It is a major determinant of family size, because of certain cultural values and practices that places the right of inheritance on the male child. Karku (2008), in his study conducted in Nepal maintained that, sex preference and the value placed on male and female children reveals that among those who reportedly use contraceptives as a means of family planning, the mean number of living males was higher than females for all respondents. Their choice for family planning are anchored on the premise that they must have at least one male child before they adopt contraceptive method. Sometime before adopt it, they must have had an average of three to four births before adopting contraception. This evidence point to that fact that male preference is dominant and pervasive in all human societies. It is important to note here that although most societies' are patriarchal, Noiva do Cordeiro in Brazil 'a female dominant town' where men do not live in but

go out to work outside in cities and return to the town on weekend is a matriarchal society as the custom permits women to take the decisions and resolve conflicts through consensus. A similar situation exist in Utanga in Obudu Ranch, Obanliku Local Government Area in Cross River State where women live differently up the mountain and speak different language from their husband and men who live down the hill. In such situation their locality and customs influences their choices and decisions irrespective of the male dominated society. The choice of sex according to Marlab (2001), contributes to abortion which equally affect fertility rate. Therefore in countries where the preference for sons is strong, sex selective abortion is very common putting women in a more disadvantaged position in society.

Heliyon (2020), noted that among the South East Asia the preference for sons influences contraceptive use. He noted that the preference for a male child is the primary consideration when permanent contraception is being considered. Adebayo (2020) noted that there is a strong preference of male children to female in Otta Ogun state. However contemporary socio-economic determinants has also influenced the attitude towards family size. This is common with parents who already have at least a male child. Udeze (2015) noted that among the Abbi people of Ndokwa, Delta state the male child of any family commands same authority as the father and that for a man to be admitted into the council of chiefs he must at

least have a male child. The choice and preference for male or female child is thus culturally rooted, strong and wide spread in most Nigerian societies, and a determinant for decision making process irrespective of status and education. Some societies in Africa are predominantly patriarchal and not having a male child is more or less a social stigma (Etuk *et al* 2020). In some cultures in Nigeria, irrespective of the level of education, when it comes to the issue of male child preference, traditional pattern and practices predominates. This assertion according to Eguavon *et al* (2007) is derived from the study on “sex preference, decision making and fertility control in Ekpoma, Nigeria” where it was discovered that, 89.5% of respondents preferred male children. These responses are attributable to social and psychological reasons.

ii. Family planning

The decision and choice to have or not to have a child and the desire to have children spaced is not a new phenomenon. Historically, Family planning is voluntary and responsible decision of individuals and couple to have the desired family size and the timing of pregnancies and births. It is access to safe and voluntary family size; voluntary family planning is a human right concern and is crucial to gender equality and women’s empowerment as well as a factor in poverty reduction. Family planning is achieved through the use of contraceptives method. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020)

defined, Family planning as a practice which allows people to have the desired number of children and to determine the spacing of their pregnancies and births. One of the benefits of family planning is the prevention of unintended pregnancies which helps to lower maternal ill-health and the number of pregnancy related death. Family planning helps to delaying pregnancies in young girls who are at increased risk of health problems from early child bearing and preventing pregnancies among other women who also face increased risk of unplanned child birth (Etuk, *et al* 2020). Family planning is thus concerned with birth control either in the number of child birth or the spacing of children. The intentional act of regulation, controlling and directing expected births in line with your decision is referred to as family planning (Wikipedia). It is thus a social construct which deals with population control and child placement.

WHO (2020), maintained that “among the 1.9 billion women of reproductive age-group (15-49 years) worldwide in 2019, 1.1 billion have a need for family planning; of these, 842 million are using contraceptive methods and 270 million have an unmet need for contraceptive”. The report further state’s that, the use of contraception advances the human right of people to determine the number and spacing of their children, right to life and liberty, freedom of opinion and expression, and bringing significant health and other benefits to people. Edward (2020), noted that, “the use of contraception prevents pregnancy-related

health risk of women especially for adolescent girls; and when birth are separated by less than two years the infant mortality rate is 45% higher than when birth is 2-3 years; and 60% higher than when birth is four or more years apart". It offers a range of benefits not just health benefits but also education opportunities, empowerment for woman and sustainable population growth, and economic development for countries. In developing countries there are about 218 million women who want to avoid pregnancy but are not using safe and effective family planning methods and contraceptives, (United Nation Family Planning and Population Award, (UNFPA 2021). Meaning they sometime do not have access or right information about the use of contraceptives and methods.

The various contraceptive methods available includes oral contraceptive pills, implants, injectable, patches, vaginal rings, intra-uterine devices, condoms, sterilization, lactational amenorrhea methods, withdrawal and fertility awareness based method and the non -invasive methods such as billings method and abstinence, others includes surgical procedure that limits fertility, (WHO, 2020. UNFPA 2021). Access to contraceptive information and services are fundamental to the health and human rights of all individuals especially couples. Its helps in reducing the rate of unintended pregnancies. Contraception also reduces the need for unsafe abortion and reduces HIV transmission from mothers to newborns as well as reduce sexually

transmitted diseases (STDs). The 2017 estimate on family planning as cited in Duncan (2011), showed that, about 214 million women of reproductive age in some developing regions have an unmet need for contraception. This may be attributed to a number of socioeconomic and cultural factors which includes; lack of information, limited access to contraception, limited choice of contraceptive methods, fear or experience of side effects, cultural or religious practices, and poor quality of available species, gender-based barriers, spouse decision and child preference. Oluwasanu, Desmenunu & Adebawale (2019), maintained contraption has a direct link to population dynamics in any giving country, for example, Nigeria's current population is estimated at 200 million people, on an annual population growth rate of 3.2% and a total fertility rate of 5.5 per woman. Thus, the use of contraceptives affect fertility decline and has the potential of increasing economic growth and reducing poverty (UNFPA 2021).

iii. Education and family planning

Generally the level of education and exposure as well as the knowledge one has about a particular issue affects his behaviour and ability to make certain decisions and choices in life. Therefore, discussing on the education and family planning, Undelikwo, Osonwa, Ushie and Osonneas (2013), noted that there is strong association between the literacy level of men and women and their attitude towards contraceptive application in birth control. Also,

Odumosu, Ajala, Nelson and Along (2002), cited in Undelikwo *et al.*, (2013), asserts that men's education was negatively related to unmet need for contraception. The practice of family planning depends on knowledge of methods and the places where they are obtained and availability. Similarly, Ushie and Etu (2014), asserted that the preferred choice of sex could lead to a change in attitude towards family planning.

Family planning is a contemporary social construct created by man for population control and birth placement. Ogumba (2017) in his study of Education and family planning methods among Ngwa people of Abia State noted that the adoption of family planning is greatly challenged by cultural conflagration. Within our African setting children are viewed as gift from God and a conscious attempt to bridge sexual interaction seen as disrespect to God who knows more than man. The religious consciousness of "God-child (ren)" has been practiced even by the most educated within our society. However, Onwuka (2018) observed that women are increasingly conscious of the economic demands of large family size and are consciously reducing this size through the use of contraceptives. This implies that contemporary society is moving gradually from their religious and cultural belief to a more pragmatic reality, and that socio-economic reality determines number of children in some families.

Giving the foregoing, scholars have argued that accelerating fertility decline can be achieved

through education and family planning. Access to information and education is thought to accelerate fertility decline and these is through two main sources; increasing the level of awareness and opportunity cost of women. Easterlin and Crimins (1985) in their work titled; Demand and structural theories of fertility decline, observed that educated women have higher status and access to opportunities, and family planning options, thus increasing their opportunity cost of childbearing. Microeconomic theories based on quality-quality trade-off also emphasized the role of children's enrollment shapes parent's childbearing decisions in the future (Axinn & Barber, 2001).

Although, education and other factors may change child preference practices in the society, family planning is needed to translate those preferences into fertility and provide plausible options for child rearing. When women are exposed and educated they tend to have higher demand for a greater use of family planning.

iv. Education and sex preference

The patriarchal nature of African societies and indeed the Nigerian society forms a great bane to the orientation of sex equality and promotes discrimination against women (Etuk *et al* 2019, Egbe, Oyema, Itita, Archibong, & Obeten 2020). Culturally gender role socialization see the female child as added blessing and the male child as an heir and the palpable perpetuity of the family; a fulfillment of marriage, and the

solidifiers of a home. However, the increasing educational attainment of contemporary women is gradually shifting focus. Parents are beginning to place priority in gender as against sex, quality of education, and career. Same can't be said of women who are exposed to little or no education who are enculturated with the ethno-religious understanding of children being gift from God, a source of strength, instrument for increasing farm workforce and farm hands etc.,

3. Sex preference and adoptions of family planning method by literate women

Understanding the place of education in child's preference (choice of sex) which predisposes women to family planning, is a social and contemporary concern. The global concern is the control on population growth, especially through the adoption of accelerated decline in fertility. Educated women now see the need for a reduced family size as it is more beneficial in the face of current global reality and excruciating poverty. The acceptance of population control is influenced by sex preference which is rooted in our patriarchal culture. Esemé (2010) noted that while there is increase in the number of literate women, the consciousness of the role of man as the provider of family sustenance still exist. The increasing exposure of women to education and the current achievements of women in all sphere of life that hitherto was not imaginable has shifted focus especially among literate women. Women are assuming more positions of authority, captains and chief executives of

industry, and controllers of economic and industrial ventures, all thanks to their educational attainment (Udensi, 2018; Etuk et al 2019). The orientation has thus, shifted from the type of sex to the number of children. It is this shift in sex to number of children that is fundamental to economic planning and development.

According to Udensi (2018) the number of children that parents decides to have is devoid of the sex preference. Hence, the educational attainment of women is gradually shifting focus from the sex of the child to the economic capacity that would give the child, the best of life; an act which leads to the adoption of family planning method. Ojo (2015) asserts that economic determinant has a direct relationship with the number of children by parents irrespective of their sexes, while Osang (2018) observed that there is a significant association between women literacy level and family size irrespective of sex. Also Osonwa & Ushie (2009) held that the level of education of spouses, exposure and convenience could dispose them to the type and method of family planning.

Literacy level of women also account for the easy adoption of family planning as a means to controlling family size as well as child placement. Ademola (2015) noted that as women advance in educational achievement and pursuit there is a steady decline in the preference of a particular sex above the other as focus is rather directed to economic ability to raise the child. And economic consciousness

has favourably contributed to family planning as a means to controlling fertility and family size.

4. Reasons for Sex preference and family planning decisions

The world is relatively in a constant flux and dynamic changes are taking place as a result of global interdependence, communication, cultural and knowledge diffusion. Socio economic and religio-cultural factors to a large extent determines the responses and decision making processes of couples, parents and family (Osonwa et al 2009; Obeten & Isokon 2018; Archibong, Bassey, Isokon, & Eneji, 2020). Some traditional societies are experiencing new waves of civilization and modernity as well as emerging socio-economic and cultural realities which affects decision making processes in different forms and across the globe. Given diverse cultural orientations to child bearing and family planning options, Nigeria like any other traditional society is faced with a number of social and economic, religious and political issues that tends to shape family interaction, communication, decision making and certain practice realities despite training and education of individual members of the society (Obeten, & Isokon, 2018; Archibong *et al*, 2020). The gender role socialization in traditional African and indeed Nigerian society suggest a complete sex preference matrix basically for social, economic, religious and cultural reasons. Etuk *et al* (2020); Eguavone *et al*, (2007), noted that, in Nigeria, land acquisition, property

inheritance, titles, status, succession to kingship and throne, and leadership positions constitute part of the primary reason for male child preference. Land and estate acquisition by a Nigeria family is a primary source of dominance and recognition, and form part of inheritance and property rights. The desire to maintain the leadership and throne succession make parents to be so desperate for a male child in order to guarantee their safety in marriage and to secure lands and other property as well as preserve family name and to prevent family extinction, (Etuk *et al* 2020: Isuigo-Abanihe 2003). A family without a male child usually may likely lose the tenure ship to other family members. This practice is common among the south-south region of Nigeria. Male parent are absolutely obsessed about the sex of the child and can be indifferent if their desire and expectations are contrary. In most cases, women do not have access to property and land cannot therefore be allocated to them; where they even have access to land without a male child such rights can be revoked (Etuk *et al* 2020). This practice is central to the choices of many women in regard to family planning options. Another striking factor that promotes this practice is marital rites, especially where women have to change their name after marriage to reflect society's expectations and to give a meaning to this bond of marriage. This practice to a large extent perpetuate male dominance, subjugation and discrimination against women. This is because women are tied to the apron-string of the men and the society

respect women who are married and bear their spouse's name.

Evidence abound in India, Bangladesh, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria and other African nations that sex preference especially male sex affect decision of women taking contraceptives (Pathak and Arya 2018; Eguavone et al, 2007). Again the desire for a particular sex can predispose women of child bearing age to depression and emotional imbalance as they continue to carry pregnancies just because they need to have the expected sex (child) Eguavoen et al, 2007; Etuk et al, 2020). And to a large extent sex preference practices provide grounds for harmful practices; such as the deliberate neglect, deprivation and abandonment of child (ren) especially, if the child delivered at birth is not the preferred sex. Again the quest for male child preference affect efforts for population control and exponentially increasing the general population especially in Nigeria and other developing countries. Thus many couple continue to bear children until they achieve the desired sex.

Etuk *et al* (2019; 2020) noted that, the literacy level of the female population in Nigeria is low, as a result of sex (male child) preference. The reason being that parents prefer to send male children to school, who would after competition remain in the family to continue the family tree, while the female children are kept at home for domestic family activities and other household work that will support the male children education. Female children are often time deprived schooling based on the

assumption and perception that female children educational investment is a waste since they will be married to another family who is going to be direct beneficiary rather than her immediate family.

Thus, the WHO (2011) in conjunction with OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF, and UN reported that, sex selection in favour of a male child portray injustice and manifestation of violence against women, and is a human rights violation because its deprives and denies women their inalienable reproductive right. It is a discrimination and total subjugation of the female gender, and an abuse and deprivation and alienation of their potentials.

Etuk *et al*, (2020); Eguavoen *et al*, (2007) averred that, marital separation and divorce, domestic violence, marital disorganization and disharmony are direct fall out of sex preference especially, that of the male child. The inability and desperation of some men to have male children drives them to infidelity, extramarital relationship, and serial polygamy which may result to separation and divorce.

Family planning is meant to make life easy and accommodating to enable families carter for only the number of children they can without compromising their fundamental inalienable human rights. Therefore, the ability to make decision to use or adopt the family planning methods is anchored on socio economic and cultural beliefs. At the long run, when such decisions are not in tune with the family, can result to family or marital disharmony as a

result of sex preference and desperation for a particular sex.

The paper examines sex preference and family planning practice among people of Yakurr in Cross River State, Nigeria. Nigeria is a multiethnic nation of over 200 million inhabitants with different cultural practices that determine decision making processes and the ability to undertake certain function and actions. The findings provides insights into the attitudes of people towards sex preference and their decisions to adopt family planning practice. The overriding implications of these practices are most often tide to socioeconomic and cultural factors (Egwauvoen, *et al*, 2007; Etul *et al*, 2020; Ushie & Etuk 2014; Obeten & Isokon 2018). These factors affect and frustrate the efforts at population control through family planning options (Heligon 2020; Kanu 2008). The desire for a particular sex especially that of the male child drive parents and spouse to certain actions that tangle them. Sex preference have a huge implications for literacy level among women (Onouka, 2018; Osang, 2018). The preference for a particular sex, and decisions to adopt family planning options irrespective of education, exposure and status is based on social, cultural and religious practices exacerbate sex preference. These includes, the continuity of the lineage through the male child; social values in having a preferred sex especially, the male child, property inheritance which the culture only transfer to a male child, ignorance and stigmatization among others. It is also observed

that the desire of parents to have a particular sex increases the likelihood of the family size and population growth because oftentimes parent avoid and jettison family planning options (Etuk *et al*, 2019, 2020; Osonwa *et al* 2009). These sometime affect parents emotionally and result in depression and alienation from society because of inability to produce a male child.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Nigeria and other developing countries in Africa are still buried in patriarchal orientation and practices that however affects the fortunes of the society despite the educational advancement and attainment. The overriding implications of these practices most often tide to socioeconomic and cultural factors. These factors affect and frustrate the efforts at population control through family planning options. The desire for a particular sex especially that of the male child drive parents and spouse to certain actions that tangle them. Sex preference have a huge implications for literacy level among women. Irrespective of the level of education, women ability to adopt family planning is hinged on the socioeconomic, cultural and religious beliefs especially of the spouse. The consequences are imaginable as most spouses are exposed to HIV/AIDs and STDs and increases the maternal and child morbidity and mortality rates as well as population explosion which would have been control through family

planning options. Family planning exponentially boost literacy not only of women but men also. More females are empowered and attend school thus increasing their socioeconomic fortunes and gains of the family. This paper therefore brings to fore the need to pay attention to this insipid and insidious killer called : sex preference and eliminate barriers that hinder spouses and families especially women from making decisions that affect their health, family planning, education and choices that can promote socioeconomic development and wellbeing. Education presents women with better understanding of the different family planning methods and options and a mirage of opportunities that can promote family wellbeing and reduces illiteracy, marital disharmony and disorganization in the society. Thus paper recommends that, parents can control their family size as they can, their child spacing and rightly prepare for the economic demands of raising a child and also maintain a healthy reproductive life. Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Civil Societies should to facilitate policies and programmes through inclusive awareness and enlightenment campaigns, social work interventions and family counselling, sensitization against and elimination of harmful cultural and religious practices that promote sex preference, and promote family planning acceptance and literacy improvement in the society.

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