

**IDEATIONAL VALUES AND COUPLES REPRODUCTIVE
BEHAVIOUR IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA**

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Couples could be trapped by inter-generational cultural values prevalent in their society. The pressure to conform to social norms even among the educated and urban couples is quite high. Children born to couples be believed to decrease the hazards of marriage disruption as having children is perceived as a signal of long term commitment to marriage, Waite and Lillard (1991). The children may also increase the satisfaction within the marital relationship.

Onwuejeogwu (1981) notes among the Igbo of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states of Nigeria that the number of children a woman bears enhance her social status within the community.

Uchendu (1965) has noted that in Igbo marriage, the primary duty of a wife is to produce members for her husband's lineage, else, she becomes easily dispensable for failing in this duty. As Uchendu argues, the nuclear and extended family forms an integral part of a lineage whose members are recruited on the basis of filiations. Its main character is perpetuity and relatives other than husband, wife, and children share residence adjacent to the nuclear family. The extended family is used as a reference group in decision making while elders exert authoritarian control over relationship and family decision making. Thus the interest of the extended family affects the behaviour of nuclear components.

Fertility and residence are influenced by kin considerations as contracepting couples are viewed as agents of lineal extinction (Ihejiamaizu, 1999:64).

Material and non-material values attached to children have been found to be positively related to family size, use and non-use of family planning. Caldwell and Caldwell (1977) have argued that wealth flows from children to parents.

Access to children and their income can ensure that parental consumption does not fall dramatically if parents experience an unexpected drop in income that cannot be offset by asset sale. They also provide old age security beyond money to parents in terms of love, affection, respect and personal care. Ihejiamaizu et al (1998) found 59.6 percent of 1,922 parents in Akwa Ibom state saying that children were their only hope of support at old age. Parents can modify their pronatalist fertility behaviour to the extent they can have their own provisions. As Orubuloye (1995:10-11) puts it:

Children are generally regarded as greater than or equal to wealth, fame and honour. Wealth, fame and honour can be acquired in one's life time but children are regarded as gifts from God and those who have children have every other thing added to them. Children, particularly male children, are needed for lineage continuity and the more their number the greater the chance for such continuity and family security.

Uchendu (1965), Nwala (1985) have shown that among the Igbo, when parents die, their children are needed to perform the final rites. Many couples are worried if they have no children to perform these rights. In Ngwa land, burial ceremony of a rich man with well placed sons and daughters can cost as much as N5million or \$35714 and in some cases a corpse stay up to 12 months or more as the children prepare to give their deceased parents befitting burial.

The sex of children affects reproductive behaviour. In the Nigeria segment of the changing Africa Family Survey, Orubuloye (1987) found that

three-fifths of men and one half of women said they would like to have four boys and two girls in a family of six children. Practically all respondents both males and females said that they would like to have at least one boy in the family of six children. Practically all respondent both male female their like to have at least one in the family. Economic support, continuity of the family names, social prestige and their permanent residence near the ancestral home, unlike girls who leave at marriage are the main reasons given why it is important to have sons. It is therefore hypothesized that couples reproductive behaviour in Abia state is shaped by ideational value of sex and high fertility preferences.

However, the continuous destabilization of the traditional system through Western education, urbanization and the expansion of non-agricultural employment opportunities for women outside the home, increasing costs and parental aspiration for high quality children and the negative impact of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) since 1986 are also play a significant, role in altering high reproductive norms of couples in Abia state.

The Area of Study

Abia is an Igbo speaking state located in the Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. By 1991 census results, it has a population of 1.9 million in 422, 032 Households. This population comprises of 980,878 (51.4 percent) males and 933, 039 (48.6 percentage males or 2.2 percentage of the national population. Total fertility rate is 5.5 while the population grows at 2.83 percent per annum. Contraceptive prevalence rate is low averaging less than 10 percent,

(National Population commission 1997). The population aged 0-14 years is 44.9percent and the elderly population aged 65 and above is 2.5 percent. This population structure makes for high youth dependency burden and much expenses in servicing the population at the detriment of savings and investment

Abians are predominantly farmers in the rural areas while resident of the

major urban centres of Aba (commercial city) and Umuahia (state capital) are mostly traders and civil servants. Farmers grow cash crops like oil palm, and food crops namely yam, cassava cocoyam banana, okro and vegetables. The family is the basis of social organization and procreation cherished as a value. Marriage is regarded as a permanent institution which only death can disrupt. The people have embraced Christianity although insignificant proportion of the population still maintain their traditional religion

Method of Study

The study involved a purposive sampling of the two major towns Aba and Umuahia to capture urban characteristics and geographical spread. Two rural communities were randomly selected from Aba zone Umocham and Umuojima and two from Umuahia zone Ubakala and Ikwuano. A structured questionnaire was administered to 456 couples in 228 urban households and 848 couples in 424 rural households. Four Focus Group Discussions sessions were held in each area and variables discussed included couples reproductive decision making patterns, influence of extended family, perceived values and disincentives of children, sex preferences and the attitude to reproduction and contraception under the present economic regime. Analysis of variance and percentage tables were employed in interpreting the data. The study was conducted between December 1995 and April 1999.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic characteristics of Respondents

Table 1.1:

Percentage distribution of respondents according to socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics	Numbers of respondents = 1304	Percentage.
SEX		
Male	540	41.4
Female	764	58.6
Age		
15-19	78	6.0
20-24	92	7.1
25-29	172	13.2
30-34	247	19.0
35-39	296	22.7
40-44	127	9.8
40-49	62	4.8
50-64	196	15.11
65 and above	35	2.7
Marital Status		
Marriage	1080	82.8
Widowed	125	9.6
Divorced	47	3.6
Separated	52	4.0
RELIGION		
Christian	1232	90.6
Muslim	9	0.7
Traditional	113	8.7

Table 1.2: Percentage distribution of respondents by Education and Occupational Status According To Sex

Variables	Male	Female	M	F
EDUCATION	Number	Percent	Numbers	Percent
No Schooling	21	3.8	83	10.8
Primary Complete	119	22.1	154	20.1
Primary Incomplete	13	2.3	44	5.8
Secondary	247	45.8	367	48.1
Tertiary	140	26.0	116	15.2
OCCUPATION				
Farming	99	18.4	379	49.6
Business / Trading	352	65.2	342	44.8
Public Sector Employment	89	16.4	43	5.6

From table 1.1, 82.8 percent are married 90.6 are Christians and 41.4 percent are males and females 10.8% attended no school compared to 2.8 percent of males more females complete secondary education 48.1 due to large number of female respondents compared to males 45.8 percent. Access to tertiary education is much easier for males 26.0 percent compared to females 15.2 percent. More females are engaged in farming 49.6% compared to 18.4 percent of males for the males, 65.2 percent are engaged in business/trading compared to 44.8 percent of the females. More males are employed in formal sector of government ministries and companies 16.4 percent compared to only 5.6 percent for females. Many wives in Abia state are therefore engaged in home based occupations that are very compatible to pregnancy and children bearing

COUPLES REPRODUCTIVE DECISION MAKING PATTERNS

In conjugal relationship especially in a patriarchal male dominating society couples reproductive behaviour is influenced by who makes crucial decisions.

Table 2 figures 1 and 2 show that 85.8 percent of couples approve that it is ideal for husband and wife to take joint decision on family affairs. In 80.3 percent cases, husband and wife jointly decide on family size and 71.0 percent also decide together when to have children compared to 12.3 percent for husband sole decision and 16.7 percent for the wife. And 59.3 percent approve of joint discussion because they believe that two heads are better than one in arriving at a workable solution to family problems.

But it has to be noted that in Igbo culture, while extended family kins cannot decide for couples when to have children or what number to have, their informal pressure, secret meetings and open expression of frustration when children are few or are only females or when there is out right childlessness make couples not only restless but to feel worthless.

Table 2**Percentage distribution of respondents by their reproductive decision making patterns:**

Couples Reproductive Decision-making Variable	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Couples approve of joint conjugal ? reproductive Decision-making		
Yes	1119	85.8
No	185	14.2
Person who decides on family size		
Husband alone	106	8.1
Wife alone	10	0.8
Husband / Wife	1047	80.3
Extended family Kins	5	0.4
Government official	3	0.2
Up to God	13.6	10.4
Person who decides on timing of pregnancy / child-bearing		
Husband alone	160	12.3
Wife alone	218	16.7
Husband / Wife	926	71.0
Extended family Kins	—	—
Government official	—	—
Up to God	—	—
Why couples approve of joint decision	531	40.7
Wife and Husband are inseparable		
Two heads are better than one	773	59.3

SEX PREFERENCES

Preference for sons is an important ideational factor influencing couples reproductive decision-making patterns. During the field survey at Abayi Umuocham, a married woman with three living female children was disturbed about her not having a baby boy and asked the author; what can I do to have a baby ?. In a tape-recorded FGD session with tears flowing from her eyes stated as follows;

I have three females children now and my husband says we shall not have another child. Though I have agreed with him; I am disturbed for not having at least one boy. Please for those of you who have read books, about the human body. Is there anything that can be done, such that if a couple wants a certain number of children, they can select the sex they want to able stick to the desired number. To me, if I can be sure that becoming pregnant again will result to a boy, it will not be hard for me to convince my husband that we should plan for another pregnancy (And. Urban, woman, Abia state, 1999).

When respondents were asked whether having sons mattered so much 98.5 percent (not shown) answered yes). But when asked (Table3.) “what advice would you give to a couple with four female children but are desperate to have at, least one boy” Responses are presented in the table below

Table3. Percentage distribution of respondents by likely line of action when all their children are females by residence

Reaction if all the children are female only Females in sex of children	Urban	Rural
	(N456)	(N= 848
Practice family Planning and stop child bearing	17.2	16.3
Keep having children until a male child is born	8.3	14.5
Husband should take another wife	2.0	8.4
Accept the female children As God's special gifts	55.9	53.0
Seek medical advice	16.6	7.8
Total	100	100

As shown in table 3, 17.2 % of urban couples and 16.3 % of the rural claim that they would practice family planning to limit child bearing even when they don't have a boy. For 14.5 % rural couples and 8.3 % of their urban counterparts, the solution lies in having more pregnancies in the hope that luck will strike and a boy will arrive. The option least favoured but very much in practice is for husband to take another wife (urban 2.0 to and rural 8.4). The data reveal a high response rate of accepting the female children as God's special gifts in more than half of the cases (urban 55.9 % rural 53.0 %). Even when the process of sex is formation in word is explained to depend on the male partner, the wife is always blamed and couples without one or two boys hardly know what happy marriage as the worry of lineal extinction overtakes them.

EXTENDED FAMILY ASSISTANCE

Education, urbanization, Christianity and Globalization have continued to exert influence on the African family in terms of acquiring new attitudes and life styles. This however, has not diminished the solidarity and mutual support of the extended kin groups. Obligations are owed to relations in cash and kind and these make them to have considerable influence on the reproductive orientations of members. A matched sample of urban and rural couples indicate that for the 774 who acknowledged various forms of assistance from the extended family, 32.1 % receive cash, 24.4 % enjoy child fosterage, 15.8% education of their children, 10.5 % clothing, shelter 2.2, feeding 11.5 % and 1.5% other forms of support (see table 4)

Table4 percentage distribution of respondents by the types of assistance received from the extended family

Extended Family Assistance	(N= 774)	Percentage
Financial	248	32.1
Child-fosterage	189	24.4
Education	122	15.8
Clothing	81	10.5
Shelter	17	2.2
Feeding	107	13.2
Others	10	1.5
Total	774	100

PARENTAL PERCEPTION OF THE VALUES OF CHILDREN

Decision to have children is greatly shaped by childhood socialization experiences in which children have both extrinsic and intrinsic values to parents. Though SAP tends to have slightly altered perceived values of children by parents, our quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate that the traditional expectations of parents are still much alive. Five major variables are used in measuring the value of children namely. Prestige/honour attached to children, marital security, concern for continuity of family line, worry about befitting burial rites and old age security mature. (see table 5)

Table: 5 Percentage distribution of respondents according to perceived values of children by sex

Value orientation	Male (N=540)	Female (N764)
Variables	Percentage	Percentage
1. Marital security	1.8	46.3
2. Prestige/ Honour	43.7	18.2
3. Continuity of family lineage	20.9	17.5
4. Befitting Burial Rites	19.8	27
5. Old Age Security	13.8	15.6
Total	100	100

The non material values as shown in table 5 indicate that concern for marital security has the greatest effect on reproductive behaviour of wives (46.3 %) while for husbands prestige/honour 43.7 %, continuity of family lineage 20.9 % and decent burial rites by children 19.8 % dominate their frame of mind. Wives are also anxious about prestige / honour 18.2, lineage continuity 17.5 %, befitting burial 2.7 % and old age security or social support 15.3 %.

The FGD results give a proper perspective of how these ideational values work on both sexes. The values for husbands can be summarised in the following sequence.

- (i) The need for a male heir or successor for the perpetuation of family lineage and inherit the family wealth is overwhereming
- (ii) To be identified as having many children especially sons who take important positions in industry, commerce, politics academics bureaucracy etc. confers prestige, honour and dignity on a man
- (iii) The need to be buried by one children and befittily too is cherished and taken as a sign of good life, clean hands God's favour.
- (iv) The need for old age security including provision of food, clothing shelter and older children taking responsibility, for their younger brothers and sisters who are still in school.

The values for women were differently perceived in order of ranking .

- (i) Intrinsic joy and self-filment that; my husband married a woman not a fellow man' said one participant
- (ii) Honour and prestige “ my mother in-law will now accept me, co-wives will now receive and honour as a full member of their association” said a 30 year old woman.
- (iii) Marital Security- “I regarded myself as a full wife immediately my son Nwakuba (child is more than wealth) was born.
- (iv) Perpetuation of family name and property by a male child-“ Nwachuku (1996 10-11) .
- (v) Fears will arise that the following will happen
 - (a) Another wife will step into the home bringing polygamy and all its problems
 - (b) Another woman will be kept outside the home who bears children for the man fears about these children who would eventually claim legitimacy and right to property inheritance at the death of the husband.

- (c) Incessant kindred harassment and emotionally
- vi.) Generalised anxieties and a sense of failure in marriage as a home maker and society builder,
 - vii.) A sense of guilt and shame for being the source of ancestral break and eventual lineage extinction.
 - viii) Worries about mother and child abandonment in the hospitals and maternity homes when husband hears another female is born. Worries about husband withdrawal, non-communicative attitude and lack of interest in continuing the marriage.
 - ix). A sense of loss, wasteful life and having to live and labour for other women's and their sons
 - x). Emotional sense of rejection and lack of kindred belonging
 - xi). Fear of ancestral anger and ancestral curse.
 - xii). Worries about reincarnation issues

FAMILY PLANNING DECISION

As shown in figure 3, 83.3 percent of couples decide on family planning but the practice is below 50 percent as most couple prefer traditional methods.

The only modern method favoured is condom although most couples complain of reduced sensation when they use it.

Discussion

The fact that in over 80 percent cases husband and wife take decision joint, is a step away from that traditional stipulation that husband alone must decide on family matters. Equalitarian values are beginning to take place. Again parents are beginning to realize that well trained female children take adequate care of the parents at old age more than the boys who bear the burdens of their own nuclear families. This trend may alter the strong preferences for male children.

Similarly, couples are realizing that though children give prestige and honour and confer other privileges, they do so when value is added to them. Many parents are having high aspirations for the future of their children and would practice family planning if effective methods are available, safe, accessible and affordable.

Finally the continued slide in Nigeria's currency which makes cost of living very high, increasing educational opportunities for women, reproductive health concerns and exposure to small family norms in the mass media, will go a long way to alter reproductive behaviour toward responsible parenthood.

CONCLUSION

Couples reproductive behaviour in Abia state is shaped by social norms that families should be large and male children very important for purposes of succession inheritance and old age security. These values however are not static but dynamic as a result of modernizing influences. Further studies are required to situate the problem properly in the context of Igbo culture.

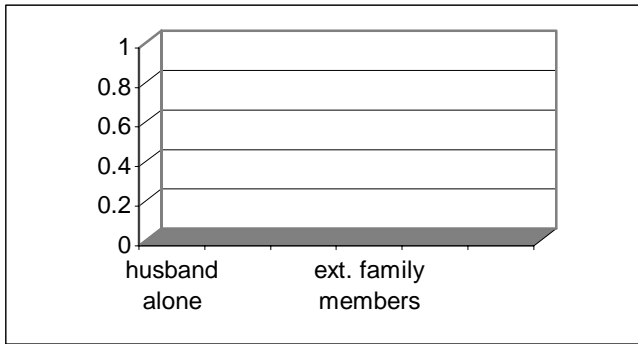


Fig1.3 who decides on family planning use

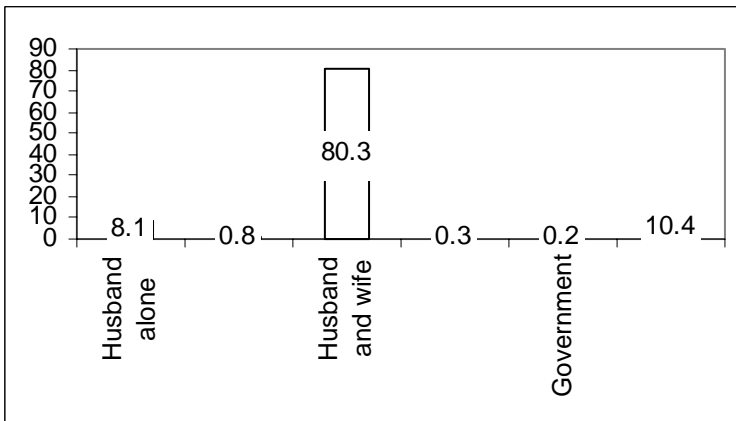


Fig: 4.1 who decides on the number of children.

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