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## CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT IN PRACTICE OF ART – A STUDY AMONG CHILDLESS COUPLES IN KERALA

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### Abstract

The inability to conceive often bears a stigma in many cultures around the world. ART is currently a common place technology that has successfully treated millions of infertile couples the world over. ART gives hope to fulfill childless couples' wishes to have a child. Due to the high financial costs of these procedures, the access to these technologies is largely limited to some sections of society. The growth and promotion of Assisted Reproductive Technology raise a number of issues with regard to their implications for women. The amount of stress and strain underwent by the couples, particularly women. The amount of time, money and energy spent by the couple during the period of treatment. The type and amount of support received from their kin and non-kin network members for the physical and mental wellbeing of the women during the prenatal and post-natal period. Numbers of studies have been carried out on the impact of ART on the life of childless couples, but most of these studies treaded on the Medical aspect of ART but little on the socio economic and cultural aspect of couples. Hence this study focused on the major challenges faced by the couples and support received while adopting ART. This study conducted in Kerala; Respondents were selected by snow ball sampling method. A total of 210 samples were selected for this study. A structured Interview schedule and a questionnaire was adopted for data collection.

**Keywords:** Childlessness, Childless Couples, Infertility, Assisted Reproductive Techniques.

### Introduction

The Childless couples are the section of a society who is deviating from the expectation of parenthood. As a patriarchal society, the childless couples in Kerala are experiencing many hardships and stress. The concept of offspring and male preference is very high in Kerala. The ultimate aim in the life of a woman is considered as motherhood. Number of childless couples is increasing. The mushroom growth of fertility helping centers shows the prevalence of a biological child in the life of couples. In some societies, barrenness is considered as a curse. Barren women are not allowed to hold newborn babies in their hand. The childless couples are not even inviting for ceremonies related to pregnancy and childbirth. The number of her biological children, especially male ones, denotes the status of women in joint families. This is also evident in our con-temporary Kerala Society. Childlessness affects the couple in general and women in particular. Childlessness may be a reason for second marriage of the spouse and divorce. Childlessness is a threat to the femininity and masculinity of the couples. Stigmatization is very much evident here. Childless couples are living in an empty shell.

### Significance of the study

National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-2016) indicates that total fertility rate measured as the number of children born to a woman has fallen from 4.97 in 1975-80 to 2.3 for the current period of 2015-20. Infertility is the main reason for childlessness. Childlessness is a great problem and sadness among the couples. It affects the couples both socially and psychologically. Number of studies have been carried out on the impact of ART on the life of childless couples, but most of these studies treaded on the Medical aspect of ART but little on the socio economic and cultural aspect of couples. Hence this study focused on the major challenges faced by the couples and support received while adopting ART. A comparative analysis among the couples on gender basis is also conducting in this study.

### Objectives of the study

- To understand the socio-economic background of the childless couples.
- To study the details regarding infertility and Assisted Reproductive Techniques.

### Clarification of concepts

- Childlessness- The inability to conceive or give birth to a child when desired.
- Childless couples – Legally married couples who have no children and have the Duration of Marital Life is six years and more and living together in these six years and didn't adopt any family planning methods.
- Infertility- Either individuals or couples who are unable to conceive after a specified period of regular unprotected sexual intercourse or those seeking medical assistance in order to conceive. The specified time of trying to conceive has varied from 12 months to more than 24 months (WHO, 2009)
- Assisted Reproductive Techniques – The use of technology to assist human reproduction in the treatment of infertility



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## Research Design

The research design of the present study is both Descriptive and Explanatory in nature. This study is based on primary data for drawing inferences. It is descriptive because it describes the data and characteristics of population to be studied. Explanatory because it tries to understand cause and effect and it connects ideas.

## Sample Design

The universe of the study consist of childless couples who are legally married and still living together. Minimum Duration of Marital Life of the couples is six years and the couples should have live in these six years together. Both husband and wife are studied. The sample constitutes 210 childless couples who are living in different parts of Kerala. No accurate data is available on the childless couples. Snow ball sampling method is adopted to collect the data. Data was collected from 10 Districts – Trivandrum, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam, Alapetty, Ernakulam, Thrissur, Palakkad, Malappuram, Kozhikkod and Wayanad,

## Inclusion Criteria

There are some criteria to select a couple as sample. Those who

- Willing to cooperate and respond
- Legally married and living together for a minimum period of six years
- Medically proved infertility
- Do not adopt any family planning methods.

## Pilot study and pre-test

A pilot study was conducted among the childless couples in Tholloor, Orumanayoor and Mullassery Panchayath in Thrissur District. A pre-test was conducted among 25 childless couples and statistically checked its reliability and proved that the interview schedule can be considered as reliable.

## Tool of Data Collection

A structured interview schedule and a questionnaire are used as the tool for collecting data. 90% of the couples have given their response through interview. A Questionnaire was given to the remaining respondents, which is translated into Malayalam language. Separate schedules were given for husband and wife. Most of the questions are similar.

## Data Analysis and interpretation

To study about childless couples, the socio-economic profile is an important sphere. The socio-economic profile throws light into the basic conditions and living nature of any subject. The following details are presenting here to understand the socio- economic condition of 210 childless couples with the help of primary data.

The socio-economic profile of the respondents shows that the mean age of husband is 48.9 years. The mean age of wife is 42.9 years. The mean age of husband and wife are 26.9 and 20.9 years respectively. The mean age difference of the couple is six years. The educational qualification of the couples shows that in females more than half have the education of graduation and above. In male respondents less than one fourths have the education of graduation and above. There is a great difference in the educational qualification of couples in higher education level. More than half of women are unemployed. Less than one fifth of men are unemployed. Variations have been found in income of respondents in gender basis. While considering the matter of both the couples unemployed, 4.8% is its representation. For their livelihood all of them are depending upon their network. Fertility rituals are common in all couples and there are no differences irrespective of religion. More than one tenths of couples are not performing or performed fertility rituals. More than sixty percentages of couples are living separately from the family of husband and wife. It is due to some reasons. Partition of property is the main reason. Treatment convenience, family conflicts, migration due to job convenience is some of the reasons for this residential change. Only a slight percentage is changed to independent living due to conflict with family in the matter of childlessness.



A healthy mind and a healthy body are essential for good living. The health condition plays an important role in the day to day activities and mind set of individuals. Among childless couples health condition is prominent. Menarche is the landmark in the life of every girl. Menarche shows the attainment of fertility among girls. It is the first menstrual cycle, or first menstrual bleeding, in female humans. From both social and medical perspectives, it is often considered the central event of female puberty and it signals the possibility of fertility. The world wide average age of menarche is very difficult to estimate accurately. It varies significantly by geographical region, race, ethnicity and other characteristics. Various estimates have placed it at 13. Some estimates suggest that the median age of menarche worldwide is 14, and that there is a later age of onset in Asian populations compared to the West. The average age of menarche is about 12.5 years in the US, 12.72 in Canada, 12.9 in the UK. A study of girls in Istanbul, Turkey found the median age at menarche to be 12.7 years. In this study about the childless couples, the mean age of women who attain puberty is at the age of 12.5. In south India the ceremonies related to menarche is very prominent. In Kerala also these ceremonies are conducted with great pleasure. The close friends and family circles and neighbors will come to see the girl who attain puberty and gift her new dress, food items and gold ornaments. After starting menarche the girl is considered specially and she had given nutritious food and not allowed to play in streets with other children. These all shows kind of consideration to become a mother in future. During the days of menstruation she is not allowed to do cycling, heavy works and play in play ground.

The inability to conceive often bears a stigma in many cultures around the world. ART is currently a common place technology that has successfully treated millions of infertile couples the world over. ART gives hope to fulfill childless couples wishes to have a child. ART is the use of technology to assist human reproduction in the treatment of infertility. Research shows that lack of access to ARTs in some regions of the world is prompting some infertile persons to travel internationally for reproductive reasons (Inhorn and Patrizio 2012). Effective and affordable fertility treatment and access to ARTs is often nonexistent in those areas of the world with the highest levels of infertility, (Franklin 2011, Whittaker and Speier 2010) Average success treatment ratio in ART centers is 4:10. The ART is becoming more and more popular now a days. The number of couples who are approaching ART is increased. The mushroom growth of Art centers reveals this fact. Generally some couples are consulting Gynecologists in hospitals and continuing treatment there and if there is no result from treatment then they try for or approaching ART centers. But now a day the number of couple who are approaching Art centers directly to attain pregnancy is increasing. Education is the main reason for this. The age at marriage is also high in present society. So the couples are not ready to waste their time so they are approaching ART centers with the hope of immediate result.

### Reason of childlessness

There are a number of reasons behind childlessness. It may be either related to wife or husband or both the couples and in some cases there are no scientific reasons for childlessness. According to National Survey of Family Growth, 2010, one in six couples is infertile. The reason for infertility is 40% due to male factor, 40% due to female factor, 10% combined and 10% unexplained causes.

In this study, a small proportion (1.4%) of childlessness is due to the cause of husband. Less than fifty percentage (44.8%) due to female factors, a little less than half (49.0%) of the childlessness is due to the reasons of both male and female. In 4.8% of childlessness is due to unexplained causes.

### Treatment Type adopted by the couples

All respondents undergone treatment for childlessness. All the couples had undergone allopathic treatment for childlessness, less than half (44.3%) of the couples tried Ayurvedic treatment, more than forty percentage (42.9%) seek treatment in Homoeo and only a slight percentage seek treatment in Naturopathy and Sidha.

Unisa S (1999) "childlessness in Andhra Pradesh, India: Treatment-seeking and consequences", reveals that a large majority adopts allopathic treatment first, and tried other sorts of treatment, prayer, rituals and traditional treatments when allopathic treatment did not work or cost too much.

### Miss carriage

It is clear that more than three fourths (78.1%) of the women have previous miss carriages. among the total women in this study, more than sixty percentage experienced three to six number of miss carriages. A little less than one fourths (19.6%) of the women experience less than three pregnancy and miss carriage. 15.2% have more than six miss carriage.



### Companion to go for treatment

In the treatment of infertility the role of the companion who is going with treatment along with the couple is very important. Seeking treatment for childlessness is a kind of secret keeping thing in many couples, even the close relatives and neighbors didn't know that the couples are going for infertility treatment. The role of companion for treatment is playing a crucial role. The companion should be supportive and inculcate optimistic thoughts in the mind of couples. More than half (55.7%) of the couples going independently for treatment. Wife or wife and husband going with the parents of woman constitute 31%. Couples with the parents of husband who is going for treatment is 2.4%. Wife with relatives and wife with colleagues going for treatment are 3.8% and 2.8% respectively. Selecting friend as a companion for treatment in both gender includes 4.3%.

Callan (1987) conducted a study "The personal and marital adjustment of mothers and of voluntarily and involuntarily childless wife's. The study reveal that the couples going through the stress of infertility and seeking advanced reproductive treatments give increased support to the respective partner. In this study a great majority of husbands are accompanying their wife for infertility treatment. It is found a great support from the partner for infertility treatment.

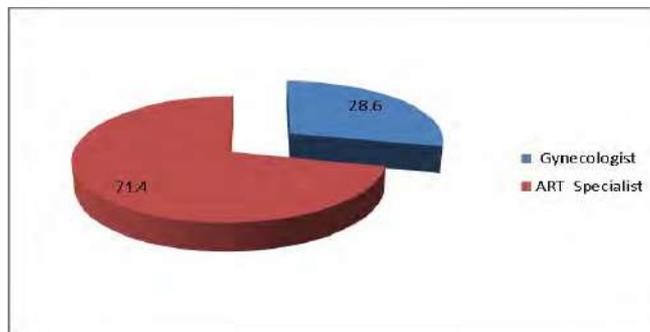
### Assisted Reproductive Techniques (ART)

The couples who are adopting ART in their treatment increases.

#### Nature of treatment adopted by the couples

Among the total couples, less than thirty percentage (28.6%) couples seek treatment from Gynecologists in Hospitals and about seventy percentages (71.4%) of the couples seek treatment from Assisted Reproductive Centers.

Figure 1: Nature of treatment adopted by the couples



Source: Primary Data

### Time taken to Confirm infertility

With regard to the time take to confirm infertility, the data shows that more than sixty percentages (65.7%) take below six years, more than thirty percentages (34.3%) take above six years to confirm their infertility.

### Confirmation Place of infertility

Confirmation of infertility or the problem to conceive is an important land mark in the life of the childless couples. They received a medical diagnosis that there are some specific problems to conceive. It creates many far reaching results in their life. The time in between starting of consultation and confirmation of infertility is a time of expectation.

In confirmation place of infertility, more than three forth (77.1%) received their confirmation from gynecologist in hospitals. Less than one forth (22.9%) get confirmation from ART centers.



**ART treatment Duration**

More than half (54.0%) of the respondents have taken treatment in ART centers for 4-6 years, more than one third (35.3%) of the couples seek treatment in ART centers for 7-9 years, less than ten percentage (6.7%) have the duration of 1-3 years of treatment and only a slight percentage (4.0%) have the treatment duration of more than 10 years.

**Table: 1 ART treatment Duration**

ART duration	Frequency	Percentage
1-3 years	10	6.7
4-6 years	81	54.0
7-9 years	53	35.3
10and above Years	6	4.0
Total	150	100

Source: Primary Data

**ART treatment Regularity**

Assisted Reproductive Techniques (ART) is now a day makes many results in the life of childless couples. Like all other treatments ART treatment will give great and positive results only if the treatment is regular. ART is getting more attention and the number of infertile couples seeking treatment in ART Centers is increasing day by day. Nearly three forth (74.7%) of the respondents seek regular treatment from ART centers.

**Table: 2 ART treatment Regularity**

Regularity of Treatment	Frequency	Percentage
Regular	112	74.7
Irregular	38	25.3
Total	150	100

Source: Primary Data



### Pregnancy happen through ART treatment

More than sixty percentages (68.7%) of the women become pregnant during the time of treatment from ART centers. But all these pregnancies resulted in miss carriage. It is clear that the total number of women who become pregnant are all those who seek treatment in ART centers.

### Information Source about ART Centre

The couples in this study receive information about ART centre from various sources. A little more than forty percentages (40.7%) got information from relatives, 35.3% from friends and colleagues, nearly one fourths (24%) from media and the experts works in medical field.

### Affordability of the cost of treatment of ART

Table No: 3 show the affordability of the cost of treatment of ART. Among the 150 couples who take treatment from ART Centers, all the couples openly agree that the cost of treatment is very high. Nearly three fourths (74.7%) couples couldn't meet the expense of the treatment.

**Table: 3 Affordability of the cost of treatment of ART**

Affordability of ART treatment cost	Frequency	Percentage
Affordable	38	25.3
Not affordable	112	74.7
Total	150	100

Source: Primary Data

The treatment cost in ART Centers is much higher than the treatment in ordinary hospitals. They have most modern type of machinery, finest quality medicines and frequent scanning and other techniques and tests. So the treatment from ART Centers cause large amount of money to spend. It is not easy for all the couples to meet the expense of treatment in ART, The number of IVF cycle experimented in couples also costs large amount of money. Normally one IVF treatment and related treatment cause nearly one lakh. If the couples have to admit in hospitals or ART centers cause more expense of money.

### Money borrowed for Treatment

Among the 210 couples in this study more than half (54.3%) of the respondents borrow money from friends, relatives and private money lending institutions to meet the expense of their treatment.

### Challenges faced and support received during treatment period.

The period of treatment is crucial for the couples. The couples face various challenges especially during the treatment. Emotional challenge, economic challenge, informational challenge and institutional challenge are the four main challenges Table:4 shows the details about the challenges faced by both the childless men and women and the source of support received by them during the treatment period.



**Table: 4 Challenges faced and support received by childless women during treatment period.**

Challenges Faced		Support Received					
		Family	Friends	Relatives	Colleagues	Hospital	Organizations
Emotional	206 (98.1%)	144 (68.6%)	122 (58.1%)	118 (56.2%)	49 (23.3%)	6 (2.9%)	2 (1.0%)
Economic	144 (68.6%)	26 (12.4%)	7 (3.3%)	72 (34.3%)	10 (4.8%)	1 (0.5%)	16 (7.6%)
Informational	156 (74.3%)	4 (1.9%)	82 (39.0%)	86 (41.0%)	56 (26.7%)	148 (70.5%)	18 (8.6%)
Institutional	146 (69.5%)	24 (11.4%)	10 (4.8%)	23 (11.0%)	54 (25.7%)	153 (74.8%)	14 (6.7%)

Source: Primary Data

During the treatment period the childless couples are facing many challenges. Emotional challenge is one of the important challenges faced by the couples. The diagnosis that there is some problems in normal conceiving itself creating stress in couples. The questions from network regarding childlessness, stigmatization from society are the main emotional challenges faced by the couples. In this study, a great majority (98.1%) of women face emotional challenges. The cost of treatment is the main economic challenge. The cost of the treatment starts from registration fee to main surgeries. The treatment in ART is more costly than other hospitals. The admissions in ART centers and tie up hospitals causing huge bill. Most of the couples couldn't meet the expense, so they will borrow money from different sources, and it creates more burdens. More than sixty percentages (68.6%) of women face economic challenges. Informational challenges include problems faced during the treatment period about the treatment type, selecting the specialist, kind of medicines taking and all. A little less than three fourths (74.3%) of wives face informational challenges. Institutional challenges include consulting in prescribed regular interval, admission in hospital, availability to get by stander, blood tests, scanning and other surgery need. A great majority of women (69.5%) face institutional challenges.

**Table: 5 Challenges faced and support received by childless men during treatment period.**

Following table shows the challenges faced by men and support received during the treatment period

Challenges Faced		Support Received					
		Family	Friends	Relatives	Colleagues	Hospital	Organizations
Emotional	205 (97.6%)	110 (52.4%)	143 (68.1%)	74 (35.2%)	54 (25.7%)	0 (0)	4 (1.9%)
Economic	146 (69.5%)	11 (5.2%)	21 (10.0%)	57 (27.1%)	10 (4.8%)	3 (1.4%)	14 (6.7%)
Informational	159 (75.7%)	4 (1.9%)	72 (34.3%)	57 (27.1%)	53 (25.2%)	127 (60.5%)	10 (4.8%)
Institutional	51 (24.3%)	13 (6.2%)	8 (3.8%)	7 (3.3%)	45 (21.4%)	149 (71.0%)	2 (1.0%)

Source: Primary Data

Among husbands, a great majority (97.6%) faced emotional challenges. More than sixty percentages (69.5%) faced economic challenges, a little more than three fourths (75.9%) faced informational challenges, a little less than one fourths (24.3%) faced institutional challenges



The main aims behind all these challenges are the one and only dream that to get a baby of their own.

The support received during the treatment period is an important concern in the life of childless couples. The details of support show that there is some one behind the couples to help them in all aspects. In emotional support great majority (68.1%) of men get emotional support from friends, among women, the main emotional source of support is family (68.6%). In economic support the main source of support received by husbands are relatives (27.1%), among women also the main financial support is by relatives (34.3%). The highest support of informational and institutional support for both the husband and wife is receiving from hospitals. Among husbands, 60.5% informational support and 71% institutional support is given by the hospitals and treatment centers. Among wives, 70.5% informational support and 74.8% institutional support received from hospitals and ART Centers.

### Summary

The reason of childlessness shows that the problems of wife and combined factors of both the couples are the main reason for childlessness. In this study, male cause is very low. 21.9% of women faced miss carriage. 71.4% adopted Assisted Reproductive Techniques to achieve pregnancy. This shows the popularity of ART in common people and the need of child between couples. 77.1% confirm their infertility from gynecologist in ordinary hospitals and 48.2% couples changed to ART Centers for further treatment. This also shows the better result in ART centers. The average success ration in ART centre is 4:10. Mouth publicity is attracting couples to select ART centers. The source of information about ART centers shows this. 22.7 % of ART adopted couples select ART centers through advertisement and media. Nearly three fourth of the couples could not meet the cost of treatment of ART. 54.3% couples borrowed money for treatment from different sources. Emotional challenge is the greatest challenge faced by the couple. The source of support is different in men and women. The main source of support in men is friends, in women it is family.

### Conclusion

The problem of infertility is treated as an ancillary issue next to the problem of overpopulation in India. Childlessness is a threat to the femininity and masculinity of the couples. In this twenty first century Kerala society, many hardships are face by the childless couples. The treatment cost and the related expenses result in further stress and strain among the couples. Moreover infertility treatment is much more expensive. This creates a blur in the dreams of the couples to become parents. Stigmatization is very much evident here. Childless couples are living in an empty shell. They are missing the smiles and vibrant activities of children. Childlessness affects the life of the couples in all spheres.

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