

Infertility and Women Empowerment: A Comparative Analysis of the Old Testament Jews and the Shona Traditional Beliefs.

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ABSTRACT

The global call for women empowerment through countless gender platforms is one of the topical issues in Zimbabwe. An objective analysis on the concept of barrenness in both the Jewish Old Testament and the Shona Traditional beliefs was carried aimed at establishing links to sustainable development for the Shona women. Given that the study impacts hearing on women, the methodology of feminism and cultural comparative approach were utilised. The literature review of both the primary and secondary sources was conducted coupled with interviews, in-depth discussions as well as biblical exegesis of the selected texts. The theoretical framework of women empowerment informed this study. The work yields that like the Jewish women of the Old Testament, the Shona women of Kutama area in Zimbabwe are still undermined by the notion of infertility since they are largely accused of being barren in the event that a couple fails to have children. In this case the infertility concept is still a major barrier to the sustainable development of women and the nation at large. Empowerment platforms with a view of eradicating blames on women should be put in place to avoid or minimise marriage break ups, suicide cases, sexually transmitted infections, 'smallhouses', children out of wedlock, loss of property, imprisonment and many more.

Key words: Infertility, women empowerment, Old Testament, Shona Traditional Beliefs

INTRODUCTION

The concept of barrenness continues to attract public debates among the Shona in Zimbabwe. The natural infertility is the context of this paper. The study is dedicated to the breaking of the nexus between barrenness and gender inequalities among the Shona Traditional beliefs in Zimbabwe. The cry of women to acquire gender equality for sustainable development has ignited this research. The comparative analysis of the Old Testament Jewish and Shona traditional beliefs is the driving force of this paper with the view of establishing justice along the circles of infertility. The Shona and the Old Testament Jewish traditions has more similarities than differences hence a comparative analysis is justified. To avoid generalisations the Shona people of Kutama area in Zvimba district will be utilised as the case study. This is an exploratory research aimed at discussing and understanding the impact of barrenness among the Shona women and offer recommendations to minimise or end the myth surrounding infertility among the Shona in Zimbabwe particularly of Kutama area.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

- **Marriage and motherhood**

Marriage is the gateway to motherhood. Meade (1998), argued that the sole purpose of marriage is to produce children. It is through marriage that a wife will qualify to be a mother. If the children are not produced within a reasonable amount of time, the wife will then be considered barren. Meade (1998), also noted that it is generally anticipated that the couple had been restlessly trying to have children since child bearing is the only business in marriage that will guarantee the marriage. The above is the notion of the Israelite society on the marriage institution. The above view of marriage has negative effects on the barren women as the qualification of motherhood automatically qualify her to be an outcast or less human. As a result of childlessness, barren women in the Old Testament had to go through thick and thin for them to be like other women. It appears the women were responsible for their infertility hence they suffer the consequences. Meade (1998), postulates that there a unique birth stories of sons in the Old Testament and none for daughters. From the social cultural perspective a woman who bears girl children only is also in the same predicament with the childless women. The sons in the Old Testament are portrayed valuable hence women could be honoured in the society if she has children especially sons. The above data directly applies to the question on the table as the researcher shall engage into an analysis of such beliefs and traditions with the view of establishing women empowerment for sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

- **Barrenness in the Shona Context**

The importance of children for the Shona women is prioritised above many other reasons for marriage. The chances on the survival of the childless marriage is very slim in the creation stories God commanded humanity to be fruitful (Mbiti 1969). There is need to consider the views of Mbiti from the Shona perspective so as to trace the harm caused by the notion of

infertility to the Shona women empowerment. Oduyoye (1995) from an African perspective bitterly voiced that barrenness makes a woman worthless as if they are responsible for the manufacturing of children yet the men should shield their wives rather than perpetrating them. For women empowerment to achieve reality in the circles of infertility there is need to address the cultural wrongs of the past on issues of marriage in the Christian and African Traditional Religion(Oduyoye 1995).

- **Marriage and the social status of women**

A woman will only acquire a higher social position if married and have children. Meade (1998), purported that once a girl reaches puberty stage she is old enough to get married so that she fulfil her role as a woman by being a mother and bear children. From the Jewish cultural perspectives, they are never girls but brides. The pubertal stage in the Shona custom usually associate girls with cattle, they will be seeing cattle and not girls at all. The dream of cattle will come true when the woman produce children after a legal marriage. The above indicate that women are nothing apart from bearing children and real mothers will be those who bore sons for the reason that daughters will be married away and sons will inherit the father's estate.

De-White (2014), also supported the above notion by stating that in the Hebrew Bible child birth is the locus to women's identity. It is in this context that beliefs associated with the barren women are similar to Shona consideration of infertility as a predicament condition of women. It is in the above context that feminist scholarship appeared on the stage vigorously voicing the need for a re-reading of Old Testament texts with fresh eyes that situate the message in the cultural context of the barren women. The notion that it is only a wife with children that earn respect should be a thing of the past in the Shona communities if one is to consider the praxis of the women empowerment for sustainable development in Zimbabwe. It is because of the concept of barrenness that the childless Shona women are to spend the rest of their lives regretting as if they chose to be in that situation.

It has also been purported that childlessness can be interpreted as social defeat. The six Old Testament Hebrew women as well as the Shona women are reported to go through the tribulation since infertility is treated as women's burden. For SewPaul (1999), there is need to revise the handling of infertility given the experiences of the barren women. The Old Testament Hebrew and Shona cultural traditions has a section on life cycle rituals from birth to death and the most important one is the graduation from puberty to motherhood with reference to girls. De-White (2014), pointed out that the curse of the barren women will go as far as every generation hence bringing misfortune in the whole family. It is to this extent that child bearing rubber stamps the identity of women in both the Old Testament and Jewish and Shona traditional beliefs.

In addition Mackay (2014), in the fairy-tales and folklores children and adolescents learn the acceptable moral and social behaviours especially of being virgin, marriage and motherhood.

This view clouds the issue that women can independently contributing positively to the sustainable development of the nation if they are not undermined by being socially destined to motherhood. It is because of the Shona religious beliefs that women require men in order to be of societal value and without husband and children women are reduced to the dustbins and the barren women is the case in point.

- **Insecurity and infertility**

Mbiti (1969) articulated that divorce is usually a solution if the woman fails to conceive. Concerning the Shona and Jewish women security and fertility goes hand in hand since the husband will have an alternative of marrying the second wife if the first one proved to be fruitless. Divorce is the most calamity that awaits women that are barren, disabled or those suffering from a severe illness. Further than that Moyo (2006), in her dissertation with flavours of infertility on the Karanga people in Zimbabwe purported that the Old Testament Hannah stories is a reflection of the assertiveness of the infertile women as amplified by the challenges and hardships that confronted Hannah in search of a child for her to be fully recognised in the community. It is only a married women with children who are given due respect in the society. The failure to have children is only attributed to women and not men for the reason that it is the women who becomes pregnant. In line with the above Okonofue (1997), asserts that most African societies value child bearing but are not very sure of the causes and appropriate treatment of infertility. This is evidenced by ample time spend by the Shona community elders in moulding the youth girls to become efficient mothers with children. Efforts are not directed to them on the explanation of the concept of barrenness including issues to cope up with it. Conversely most teachings are directed to issues of motherhood and fatherhood issues whereby childbirth will be the leading aspect in the discussions. As a result the social and cultural beliefs on infertility have detrimental effects on women to a larger extent hence issues associated with barrenness is one of the major stumbling block to women empowerment for sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

- **Experiences of the infertile couples**

Teg-Ne Faah (2013), articulated that infertility is a global reproductive issue that affects many individuals and couples and stigmatization is their daily bread. In addition many barren women are not comfortable to attend children related actives like baby welcome parties' birthday celebration activities or any form of children competitions. Some barren women would go to the extremes of even avoiding pregnant women all in the name of frustration. Kambarami (2006), concurred that even at puberty stage the girls in Zimbabwe are nurtured towards a good mother cemented by bearing of children. The work to follow is objecting for the replacement of the patriarchal society with marital justice coupled with sexual fairness if the Shona society is to ensure empowerment concerning infertility.

- **Old Testament Barren Figures in the context of the infertile Shona Women**

Abasili (2011), also noted that in the Old Testament marriage and creation are usually viewed as soulmates evidenced by praying for the fruit of the womb for the newly married couples. In other words the religious rituals for both the Old Testament and the Jews has much emphasis on procreation. It is in these circumstances that a man without children from the Shona perspective is as good as a dead person because his life will not continue when he departed the physical world. The Biblical Tamar in Genesis 38 can be equated to the tribulations of the childless Shona women. Baloyi (2017), supported the above notion stating that gender inequality and women abuse continues to manifest as a humiliation to human given that a childless marriage is usually classified as a bad omen.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology of feminism and the cultural comparative approach were simultaneously utilised. The feminists argue that the bible like the Shona- culture approved women's gender, imposed their sexual matters and defined their social roles unto this day. The study impacts hearing on women and the cultural beliefs are likely to be the driving forces and this justifies the applicability of the methodologies selected. Both interviews and in-depth discussions were also carried out.

All in all thirty-one(31) people were purposively sampled to participate in the investigation. Out of the sample eleven (11)were barren women and another twelve(12) women and (eight)8 men of mixed ages also formed part of the research sample. Interviews as well as in-depth discussions were the major methods of tapping data from the respondents. By utilising one on one interviews and informal discussions, the researcher aimed at deeper understanding of the concept of barrenness from the perspective of both the barren and the fertile people in the light of women empowerment. Dindiya and Allen (1992), assert that generally women tend to be more willing to disclose their experiences and emotions to strangers and in particular to other women. The ethical considerations of anonymity and confidentiality helped the researcher to gather data on sensitive issues which the participants regarded as personal and secret.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

- **Definition of Barrenness**

The eleven barren women on separate occasions all concurred that the term barrenness refers to the inability of a sexually mature men or women to have a child after several attempts of sexual intercourse. All these barren women were convinced that there are equal chances of infertility between males and females but the concept is often misinterpreted in the Shona society because of its patriarchal nature in which the men are superior rulers. As a result it is the women who suffer the consequences of being barren. The other twelve fertile women who

participated in the investigation also supported the notion of the barren women that infertility of a couple can be attributed to one of them and not necessarily the women as in the case of the larger part of the Shona society. These women indicated that it is unjust to blame women for infertility since it takes two for one to become pregnant. These women also insisted that there is need for the society to revisit the tradition and other beliefs that undermines infertile people and redefine or discuss them in favour of women empowerment. To be infertile is not a crime and there is more to marriage than children. Women are very important in the society because of the multiplicity roles they play but if a women fails to conceive she is usually regarded as half –women. It is in this view that the concept of barrenness is usually misconception as women’s own problems that need no public attention as they are the root causes.

In addition out of the eight men who participated in this research six of them responded that infertility has to do with women and not men. These respondents actually arrived at this conclusion by mentioning the names of the barren women in their societies and none of them alluded to men. For these men barrenness is defined by failure to conceive hence it is the women to blame. The researcher probed for further explanations and it was further reviewed that in the Shona society it is rare for man to be infertile and in most cases when the man married a woman she will automatically become pregnant. The other two men of advanced age also supported that it is possible to test the infertility of men via traditional procedures and herbs can be used to rectify the issue before marriage. Three devoted Christian man make reference to the Old Testament in strengthening the view that it’s rare for men to be infertile since it is only the women who were barren. Two men on different occasions were frank enough to review that they were infertile by birth. However these two interviewees were in agreement that they never revealed it to the public that they were barren but just blame their wives as it is a misfortune for a man to be infertile. Tabong and Adongo (2013), concurred with the above participants as they pointed out that regardless of the biomedical factors on infertility women are blamed to a larger portion. The research yields that the definition of barrenness is biased towards women as only few cases were mentioned as men being infertile. The Encyclopaedia Judaica (2008), records that even in the Old Testament it is the six women who were barren and not their husbands. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, wife of Manoah, Hannah and the great Shunammite women. All in all regardless of the biomedical factors on infertility women are blamed to a larger portion

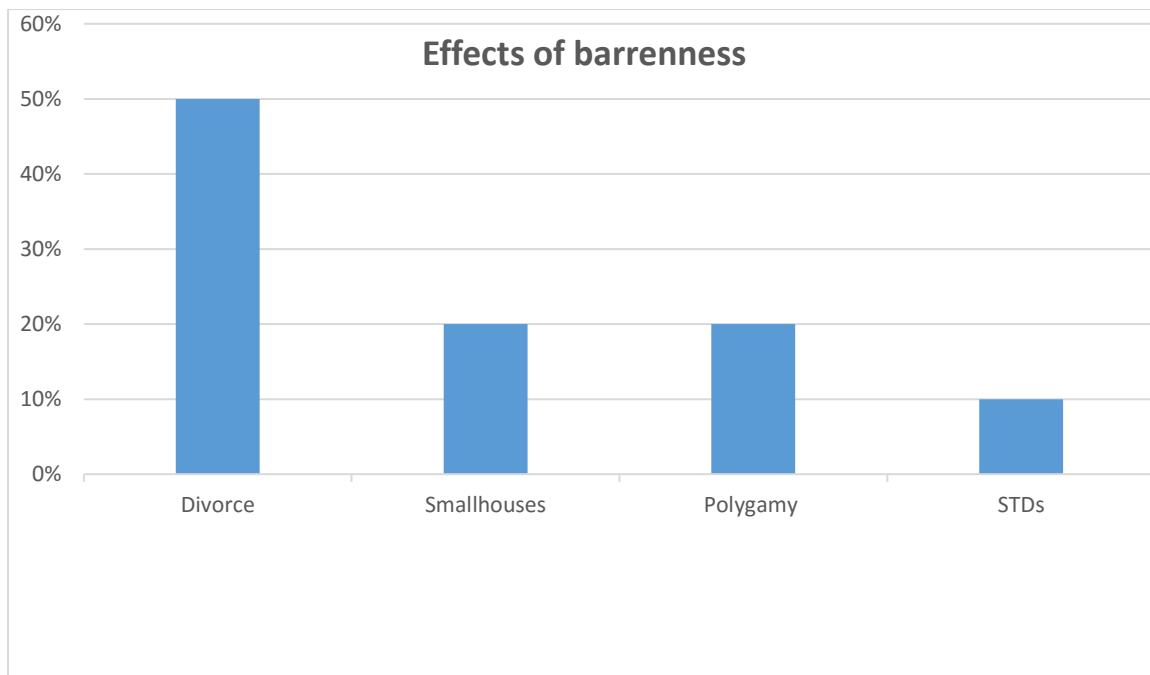
- **Reasons for marriage**

The research also established that children are the prime reason for marriage especially the sons. From the interviews carried out only 10% ascribed to the view that marriage is for companionship and also that children are a gift from God. Most Shona people- about 90% of the research participants nodded that a marriage without children is incomplete. All the barren women who participated in the research were still hoping that one day they will have children although some of them were past the child bearing stage. Oduyoye (1995), supported the above notion as she articulated that infertility makes a women worthless in the community. Furthermore the sons are still more valued than daughters among the Shona in Zimbabwe and

this is evidenced by the 95% of the men who participated in the research who gives an endless list of the importance of sons than daughters. Henceforth other men supported polygamy and *small houses* in the event that the wife bore daughters only. A sixty years old man openly pointed out that daughters are not humans. Moyo (2006), pointed out the agony and restlessness of the Old Testament Hannah who was barren. Considering this view it should be also noted that Rachel from the Jewish Old Testament opted for death to life as she was going through the misery and tribulations of being barren (Genesis 29-30). In addition Sarah who was the wife of Abraham always prayed to God petitioning for the fruit of her womb (Genesis 15-21). To be more precise all the Old Testament Jewish women who were once barren for longer period of time were happy when they finally bear children and this is an indication that children played a pivotal role in marriage. In fact God commanded people to multiply through pro-creation as this is even attested by the punishment to Onan in the plight of Tamar who was childless (Genesis 38). Of importance to note is that all the Old Testament figures who were barren were later blessed with sons and never daughters. Considering the Old Testament barrenness is a curse and a shame no wonder why God finally blessed all the barren women in the Old Testament. These results has revealed that it is unfair to point out children as the major reason for marriage. Love and companionship should dominate marriage with or without children. It is high time that the Shona community should consider inflicted by blaming the women as far as infertility is concerned. It should be a thing of the past to undermine the girl child in independent Zimbabwe. Girls should be accorded equal opportunity with the boys hence the concept of infertility should be treated with fairness.

The research also revealed that barrenness is one of the breeding grounds for divorce, sexually transmitted infections polygamy and the sprouting of the *smallhouses*. The diagram below avails the research findings:

- **Diagram 1: Results of Barrenness**



Source: Raw Data

The 50% of the respondents agreed that divorce is very prevalent in the event that the wife is barren. This is evidenced by the eight (8) out of the (11) eleven barren women who were divorced by their husband after they failed to conceive. Three of these women articulated that they were given an ultimatum of less than five years to become pregnant. The whole blame is on these women and it is only one woman who later on sought medical help and she returned back to his husband informing him that she was now woman enough. However disaster started when she could not bear a son. She has six daughters but still his husband is unhappy. She even pointed out that at times her husband weeps in front of her cursing his ancestors for the bad omen of having daughters only. The 20% of the participants shared that the mushrooming of the *smallhouses* among the Shona in Zimbabwe is also among other reasons being a pointer to childless couples. These aired out that men will have multiple marital relations for them to have children if the wife failed to conceive. The concept of polygamy is almost similar to the *smallhouses* as alluded by the other 20% that a second woman is introduced in both cases. The last 10% of the respondents were of the view that the sexually transmitted infections can be also linked to infertility. Eight(8) people pointed out that the couple may engage in sex secretly with multiple partners to find out if they are indeed barren. Four(4) women asserted that women usually do this to protect their marriage since marriage is valued and regarded as destiny by most women.

- **Barrenness and stress**

In the research the respondents also concurred that the Shona women are equated to baby producing children and as a result they are always frustrated and stigmatised in the event of

being childless. This is supported by the collected data which revealed that 60% of the participants confirmed that women are sex objects to produce children. It is in this context that the same respondents articulated that the biological makeup of the women is self-explanatory that they are created to become pregnant so as for them to give birth to children. 24% of the responded argued that barren women are always frustrated wondering why they were created incomplete. The last 16% articulated that stigma is the daily bread for a barren woman. The table below reflected the above data:

- **Table 1: Experiences of a barren woman**

Category of Problem	Response rate %
Baby producing machines	60%
Frustration	24%
Stigma	16%

Source: Raw Data

- **Barrenness in the Old Testament**

Scott (2011), noted that the Old Testament biblical accounts on barrenness except for one ended on a positive note as the women were finally blessed with the fruit of their womb. Sarah the wife of Abraham was restless because of her inability to conceive (Genesis 15-21). Given that Sarah had pass the childbearing age she was hopeless that she will one day have a child that will suck her breasts and this is why she laughed when she received good news from the messenger of God (Gift2012). Finally God overrides the events and Sarah conceived and gave birth to a baby boy Isaac. The biblical Genesis accounts are clear that it was Sarah who was infertile and the extent to which the condition was a burden for Sarah. In order to protect her marriage the arrangements of the maid-servant Hagar was done so that Abraham would not die childless and leaving no descendants at all. The issue of Ishmael the first born of Abraham with the maidservant demonstrate how severely was the situation of barrenness to Sarah. Above all the Jewish customs did not embrace infertility of the men and the children were so valued especially the sons. It was a curse for a man to die childless as he would have shunned his life even for the other generations to come. The plight of Sarah was so severe that she always hoped that one day her shameful situation will be a thing of the past.

From the above information, an analysis of the narratives reveals how important the children were in the Old Testament as it was of primary importance Rene (2012). Barrenness is not tolerated at all despite the causes. An analysis of the barren narratives revealed that the theme of infertility must be a theological motif demonstrating the power of God, it cannot be put at par with modern science. Although it was a theological theme the bottom line is that barrenness was a curse and a shame no wonder why God finally blessed all the barren women in the Old Testament. It is only the women who were barren in the Jewish Bible since they are silent on the part of men. The women all finally gave birth to male children, an indication that daughters were nothing in the Old Testament. The above is witnessed by Rebecca who was Isaac's wife

in (Genesis 25:21) who was also barren and she did not conceive for the first twenty years of her marriage. In the next generations, the problems of infertility were also witnessed by Rachel. Rachel in (Gen 29-30) lamented to God that he gave her a child lest she dies. More so the wife of Manoah (Judges 13) finally bore Samson after tribulations of barrenness. In (1 Samuel 1) Hannah always weeps in anguish as she struggled with barrenness for many years. According to Knowler (2003), Hannah knew the importance of children. Also the great Shunammite woman was also barren (2 Kings 4:8-17). Another allusion to infertility as punishment is witnessed in (2 Samuel 6:23) by Michal the daughter of Saul. In the New Testament in (Luke 1) Elizabeth was also barren. These kind of traditions should be read with feminist eyes so as to address the imbalances associated with infertility. This indicates that barren women in the Old Testament lived a hard lonely life full of tribulations. The Old Testament narratives are so clear that infertility of both the womb and the land was associated with afflictions from God because of sins. Gender inequalities because of the Patriarchal society put all the blame on women and this amplified the suffering of women. Barren women were severely marginalised because they did not contribute new life to the society yet the married women represented survival De-Whyte (2014). For women empowerment in the modern society there is need to re-read the Jewish bible taking into consideration the contemporary Shona women if we are to achieve women empowerment. Women constitutes half of the global population and empowering this segment of the society will ensure overall sustainability of the nation of Zimbabwe. Barrenness in the Old Testament is a clear testimony of injustices against women.

- **Infertility among the Shona in Zimbabwe**

Issues on the definition of barrenness is a clear pointer as attested in the interviews and discussions that it is the Shona women who remains the victim. A few respondents still allude to the notion that women are responsible for infertility in marriages. Children are the driving force for the Shona to marry. The research has clearly pointed out that it is children especially the sons who cemented marriages. Marriage without children is incomplete and that is why most men will end up in polygamous or the recent *smallhouse* relationships. It is interesting to note that most Shona men are not comfortable with infertility than AIDS. For these men it is better to have children now and later die of HIV and Aids related illnesses. This indeed points to the need to level the ground on infertility in marriages if we are to empower the Shona women.

Furthermore, one woman anonymously pointed out that some of the women who has never conceived are labelled as men. These kind of expressions for the barren women will aid nothing but pain to their status. As a result the barren women are regarded as the outcasts in the community. It is so touching that no woman is barren by choice yet the Shona are still in the embryo stage as far as the full recognition of the barren is concerned. The Shona beliefs on ancestry also cloud the issue on infertility. Only married people with children can qualify to become ancestors. The roles of ancestral spirits as guardians and protectors of the living after the 'bring back' ceremony is one of the major driving forces to men to find alternatives for barrenness.

In addition another middle aged women purported that it is still a strong belief among the Shona that the sons are more important than daughters. She narrated her own situation that had they agreed with the husband that three children will be enough for them considering their economic status. However the goal post was shifted by the husband when the three were all daughters. It is because the women had daughters only that up to the present they have eight daughters and the husband cheated and it has been revealed that he had three sons out of two daughters and one son out of wedlock. It is clear from the above exposition that among the Shona the number of children depends on the sex of the children at times one son is celebrated than five daughters. All in all it is also clear that women with daughters only are in the same predicament with barren women.

More so a newly married couple often or those in youthful relationships discuss the names of their children to be and even the number of the children. The whole issue is usually clouded when the marriage failed to produce children. It is all because the beliefs among the Shona do not tolerate bareness in most circumstances

Most women participants in this research voiced that the relatives usually of the husband put pressure to the married couple if the wife failed to conceive in the expected period of from six months up to two years. Every morning the relatives of the husband will be expecting signs of pregnant like vomiting, the selection of food or the protruding stomach. If the married woman is away from the husband relatives, they always ask her neighbours if she is now pregnant/*ane chaainacho here*. One barren women for 8 years argued that her mother in law at times can openly tell them that they want her to die without seeing her grandchildren. It is this same barren women who was scolded by his husband that she thinks she has been married to come and eat sadza. The above reference to barren women in Zimbabwe indicates that there are still large binding chains between barrenness and gender inequalities that need to be broken in order to achieve women empowerment in Zimbabwe.

It demonstrate shallowness to turn a blind eye to the barren women in Zimbabwe who are being abused in the broad day light as if they are responsible for their condition. Women are blamed for their natural state as evidenced by one barren women who argued that his husband before they divorced always complained that what comes out of her vagina was nothing other than blood. The curse of childless continues even beyond the grave like *tete wenyu wakafa wasina mbereko*/your aunt who died childless as she was barren. The husband was irritated by his wife who could not conceive as he did not want to be buried with a rat, stone or a maize cob a symbol for a child among the Shona when burying married childless people. It is to this extent that this research is justified to unveil these unjust beliefs and practises among the Shona in Zimbabwe to ensure women empowerment for sustainable development.

One married man who willingly participated in this research pointed out that the wealth of the most Shona is measured by his children especially the sons. Usually married men without children are not respected like those with children. Most Shona married people without children are called with their first names despite the age.

As a result of infertility some few Shona women will resort to education for them to earn social status since at times they are accused of eating their own children. However the majority have been divorced and the few fortunate ones are in polygamous relationships or husband having the current smallhouse/s. Other men with barren women have resorted to the excesses drinking of beer as they are ashamed of their situation. Three women were reported dead through suicide since they failed to manage up with the issue of barrenness. Other women have attempted to fake pregnancies or stealing babies in maternity wards. One married men openly pointed out that the sex drive have been reduced since his wife is failing to conceive for the past four years. For him it is pointless to continue in fruitless action. Other women noted that they are seeking help from the four cardinal points of the campus like herbalists, traditional healers, white garment churches, prophets, religious leaders with a few who mentioned biomedical help.

Okonofua (1997), also noted that the orthodox treatment are less common among the Africans and this view is also celebrated among the Shona because of the perception on the causes and lack of confidentiality at the treatment centres. One barren women reported that she is always submissive to his husband, she is always in perpetual fear of either divorce or small house wife. Only a handful of the couples among study sample reported that they are happily married even without children.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Old Testament Jewish and the Shona societies brought to the surface that marriage and children should be viewed on the same side of one coin basing on the Genesis commandment of God to humanity be fruitful and multiply. Being a patriarchal society the Old Testament Jews like the Shona societies prioritise male children hence the bearing of sons was and is valued. Causes of barrenness among the Old Testament Jews and the Shona are not exact though majority attributed it to sin and judgement. Given that men are rarely blamed when it comes to infertility, a lot of husbands will end up being polygamists or having *small houses* or in divorce taking new wives and leaving their old, useless ones if it's the right term to use. From the above, it is clear that there is a wide connection between the concept of barrenness and gender inequalities among the Jews and the Shona Traditional Religious practises. The only way forward to women empowerment among the Shona is the re-reading of the Old Testament Jewish scripture in light of the barren Shona women in a bid to seek justice in the circles of marriage and barrenness is the case in point. Barrenness is a natural phenomenon hence its injustice to blame women on that issue. There is an equal chance between married couple for them to be barren.

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