



## Socio-Cultural Practices and Fertility Behaviour of Rural Dwellers in Alayi, Abia State, Nigeria

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### Article History

Received: 08.02.2023

Accepted: 26.03.2023

Published: 30.03.2023

**Abstract:** This study was carried to investigate the influence of socio-cultural practice (male child preference; women marginalization and adoption of large family size) on fertility behaviour in Alayi community. Survey design was adopted for this study. Data collection was carried out using two methods (questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions-FGDs). The questionnaire consists of four sections, with twenty items arranged on four Point Likert-type formats. A pilot test of the instruments gave reliability estimates of 0.5. Using the proportional stratified and purposive sampling technique, 356 respondents were sampled from a population of 3,273 respondents across the study area. Three hypotheses were formulated and tested using chi-square at 0.05 level of significance. Results obtained indicated that there is a significant influence of male child preference, women marginalization and adoption of large family size on the fertility behaviour of Alayi people. Also, result from the socio demographic data of respondents indicates that the level of education and occupation of respondents has a far-reaching implication for large family size among the Alayi people. It is recommended among others that age of entry into marriage should be checkmated by parents and stakeholders to prevent women from falling victims of circumstances. Also, there should be an appeal for the shift in the traditional beliefs and attitudes in which people consider many children with preferences to sons and synonymous with wealth. Lastly, the existing family planning programme should be strengthened and expanded to ensure that couples and individuals have uninterrupted access to the range of contraceptive methods at affordable prices.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural Practices, Fertility Behaviour, Male dominance, Rural Dwellers, Alayi, Nigeria.

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## INTRODUCTION

Demographers in the past have correlated fertility with a long list of social and cultural factors which include age in marriage, residence and marriage patterns, family type, caste, occupation, education, tribal affiliation, mortality and practices relating to pregnancy, child birth and child bearing. These macro level correlations fail to take into

account the fact that fertility behaviour is part of the culture of the people (Mairiga, Kullima, Bako and Kola, 2010). Therefore, fertility can only be understood in the total context of history, social structure, economic circumstances and world view of the people.

**Citation:** Udensi Esther Onyinyechi, Tobin Violet Duanyo, Dabit Joseph (2023). Socio-Cultural Practices and Fertility Behaviour of Rural Dwellers in Alayi, Abia State, Nigeria. *Glob Acad J Humanit Soc Sci*; Vol-5, Iss-2 pp- 67-75.

Many developing societies are characterized by rapid population increase; this can be linked with high fertility rate especially among rural dwellers. Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa and the seventh most populous in the world. Despite a high fertility rate of 5.5 per woman and a high population growth rate of 3.2%, Nigeria's contraceptive prevalence at 15% remains one of the lowest in the world (Etukidem, Ndifon, Elowa and Asuquo, 2017).

Over the years, Africa has consistently led the world in terms of fertility rates. Here, fertility rate has to do with the relative frequency with which births actually occur within a given population, while fertility is the frequency of child bearing in a given population. Fertility is a function of two basic variables, namely: biological and individual choices. Whereas biological is influenced by genetic inheritance, individual choice is modified by socio-cultural and economic conditions (Offiong, 2012). From the foregoing, it is clear that complete fertility varies among the rural people with strong attachment to their belief system (Ushie, 2009).

In the last four decades, research on fertility determinants centered on economic and socio-cultural factors towards family size reduction. These socio-cultural factors in the various contexts need to be clearly understood in order to implement a change from large to small family size in line with the enacted policies and programmes, which promotes family planning (Makinwa – Adebuyo, 2001). This study therefore seeks to acquire insights concerned with fertility practices and behaviour of the Alayi people in Abia State of Nigeria, with the intentions of making decisions linked to issues that border fertility.

### Statement of the problem

Significant improvement in the standard of living in Africa would remain a mirage unless population growth is slowed (World Bank, 1996). The Pan America, Health Organization (2009) supported the above assertion and observed that Africa has the highest fertility rates than other region of the world especially in the rural areas, which if ignored, hindered its chances of declining in the near future. In the developing world, the yearly report has it that, more than 500,000 women deaths are correlated with pregnancy and delivery (Mairiga, *et al.*, 2010). Others in their millions approximately experience problems patterning severe pregnancies complications. Yet the surge never seems to be declining even with several concerted effort (through birth control measures) to remedy the situation (Mairiga *et al.*, 2010).

The intervention of family planning as the principal tool in population control seeks to reduce

the number of individuals in a family though has not created the maximum impact (Smith, 2009). Consequently, the traditional African methods of fertility regulations have never been abandoned, besides most of these approaches have not been active and its influence is yet to be achieved (Isiugo–Abanihe, 2000). Attempts will be made to provide answers to the following questions.

- i. What is the influence of male child preference on fertility behaviour.
- ii. What impact does women marginalization have on fertility behaviour.
- iii. To what extent has adoption of large family size influenced fertility behaviour.

### Objectives of the study

This study is aimed at advancing the understanding of socio-cultural practices and fertility behaviour in Alayi community in Abia State, Nigeria. The study specifically sought;

- i. To determine the influence of male child preference on fertility behaviour.
- ii. To examine if women marginalization influences fertility behaviour.
- iii. To find out if large family size influences fertility behaviour.

### Hypotheses of the study

- i. Male child preference does not influence fertility behaviour.
- ii. There is no significant relationship between women marginalization and fertility behaviour.
- iii. Large family size does not significantly influence fertility behaviour.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Male child preference and fertility behaviour

Male child preference is prevalence and extreme in Nigeria and Alayi in particular. This has been a substantial obstacle to achieving significant fertility declines (Igbolo, 2016). Lack of a male child in marriage sometimes leads to divorce, separation or the husband taking several wives, until one of the wives is able to produce a male child who is considered to carry on the lineage and name of the family (Nnadi, 2000). Agbor (2016), in a study among the people of Cross River State, Nigeria found that since the society is patrilineal in nature, with descent traced only through the male patriarch, there is a strong preference for male children, which in turn affects the fertility behavior of the people. This has led to the resultant increase in the actual family size; thus, contributing to the continuous growth in the population of the people.

One serious effect of son preference is the denial of inheritance rights to the girl child and in most cases, only a male child inherits his father's property when he die. And if the deceased had no male child, his brothers or their sons will inherit it (Smith, 2006). To most people, children are precious but sons are essential. This is attributed to the fact that most parents rely on their sons for old age support, continuity of family name and property inheritance. And they channel all their resources towards their survival (Yang, 2003; Umoh, Abah & Ekanem, 2011; Nurdan, 2002; Adhikan, 2010; Etukudo, 2002). Raji, Muhammed, Abdulbaqi, Raji, Sulaiman and Joseph (2016), supported the above assertion in his study carried out among the Ilorin people of Kwara state. They believed that boys have a better chance in the big world and are easier to raise than girls. Couple prefers having male children who will provide more economic support for them in their old age.

Furthermore, Nnadi (2000) sees male child preference as an act of violence against women in whatever way one looks at it and it is a violation of the human rights of women.

#### **Women marginalization and fertility behaviour**

Women's low status is constantly perpetuated in the society due to the patriarchal, hierarchical and polygamous organization of households in Nigeria. In such households most women cannot exercise much, if at all, talk less of being in charge of their own lives in the families within which they live (Kntz and Makinwa – Adebusoyo, 2002). Also, men in highly gender stratified societies usually influence their wives use of contraceptives (Smith, 2009). A married woman appears to all members of her husband's extended family as one with a low status, who do not have a place of her own, which eventually results to execution of high fertility. A woman's place can only rise in the society by the level of her educational achievements, ownership and control of landed properties and asserts (Caldwell, 2001). And in other to address the issue of women marginalization in Nigeria, adaptation of international norms as well as focus on domestic reforms in laws and culture might be a reasonable approach towards women development (Bako & Syed, 2018). Women suffer more when they are disadvantaged to acquire education and are denied access to gain inheritance and possessions. The base is that women and their children are seen as legal property of the husband (McAlister and Basket, 2006). To Udensi, Udensi & Nwagwugwo (2019), prejudice still exist for women that have gone to school and are in to positions. The domineering and patriarchal structure of the African society makes it even more rigorous for women to rise to the top. The stereotype therefore serves as a

hindrance for women aspiring for positions of power.

#### **Large family size and fertility behaviour**

Traditionally, rural societies have favoured large family size. To them, marriage should be early and universal; with the intention of having many children for both religious and economic purpose which can be depicted in prevalent saying: "May your progeny fill the hills and mountains" (Adhikari, 2010). A woman's status is promoted in the society base on the number of children she has, preferably sons, and the ones that do not have are ridiculed and disgraced.

Etukudo (2002) in his study carried out among the rural people of Akwa Ibom State found out that, because of the help children render to the parents and their families, there is a high value for children among the rural people. Similarly, study by Mairiga *et al.*, (2010) supports the above assertions, it posits that children irrespective of their gender are highly valued and desired among the Kanuri. The ideal family size in Kanuri is sixteen (16) children. Their men are highly polygamous, and in other to form large family size, they marry more than four wives.

Worthy of note is the fact that the extended family is a very important because of high fertility in rural areas. This is because extended family offers help to couples and makes the burden of child rearing spread across the extended family members, thus making it easy for couples to have as many children as possible (Social Sciences and Reproductive Health Research Network, SSRHRN 2001.) Eboh, Akpata & Owoseni, (2017), in their study carried out among married couples discovered that socio-economic factors of the married couples acting independently or jointly with other variables could predispose them to opt for a particular family size. They further discovered that one's educational level has an effect on his decision to adopt a particular family size. This entails access to relevant information and the capacity to process same, including family size preference. In a study by Egenti, Chineke, Merenu, Egwuatu & Adogu (2016), they observed that those who married between the ages of 15- 29 years preferred to have an average of 4-6 children, while those who married after the age of 30 years preferred an average family size of 0-3 children, this shows that women who married earlier tends to desire more children than those who married at older age; and a such has no fewer knowledge of contraceptive use. Unlike those who poses both knowledge and history of contraceptive use.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Rational choice theory:**

Rational choice theory also known as choice theory or rational action theory, is a dominant theory in sociology, political science, philosophy and economic. It was propagated by James Coleman in 1990, it is used in understanding individual behaviour and in modeling social and economic phenomenon or actions (Charles, 2014). When faced with several choices of action, people usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome.

As imposed by the theory, couples make decisions on whether to use contraceptives or not, the number of children to have, and this is majorly decided by the husbands. To rural dwsellers, large family size is to have a stronger work force or labour, because children are seen as those that will help their parents when they are old. Couples decide or prefer having male children than female children because they maintain and continue the family line and this encourages parents to have many children.

Since structures and norms directly or indirectly influence our decision, our singular choices are based on the rules and laws binding that action (Charles, 2014). Therefore, parents look forward to having many children because society believed that a large family enhances a man's prestige, through it; his name becomes known to many people, who accordingly respect him and listen to him.

However, this perspective experiences a major drawback in that it sees human beings as always rationally making choices, which in the long run might be implicating and do not seem to benefit individual in anyway.

### **Intergenerational wealth flow theory:**

The theory of intergenerational wealth flow was propounded by Caldwell (1976). The theory assumes that there is uninterrupted connection among the family organization and fertility (Caldwell. 1976). The wealth flow theory was adopted in this study as suggests two major forms of family organization, which has a direction of wealth drifts between generations. In rural communities, clear wealth flows are usually patterned skyward from younger ones to older generations, and a person's welfare are dominated by collective interests. Family organization in most advanced societies is structured in conditions of descendant flow of riches where parents are supposed to see to the support and economic wellbeing of their children.

The wealth flow theory presupposes that in all societies the choices on fertility should have economically cogent responses to the flow of wealth in the family. Societies with clear skyward wealth flows, has as its major economic intention the need to have many surviving children as possible (within the challenges made obligating by environmental science), as each child born in the family positively increase parent's riches, provide security at old age and also general wellness. In societies with sliding flow of wealth, they prefer not to have children or small family size acceptable by psychological nature as its economically rational decision. The alteration from high to low fertility calls for an alteration in family structures i.e. from upward to downward wealth flows. This modification in the structure of the family is as a result of the value placed on individual satisfaction and achievement.

## **METHODS AND MATERIAL**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted the survey design, which was carried out through the administration of questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) on selected respondents in the study area comprising of ten (10) autonomous communities in the study area. The study population comprises all male and female who are of child bearing age in five (5) autonomous communities (Amaoku, Amakwu, Isiama, Umunyere and Amaigwu).

### **Population of the study**

The study population comprises all married male and female who are of child bearing age in five (5) autonomous communities in Alayi. The communities are Amaoku, Amakwu, Isiama, Umunyere and Amaigwu. These are major representative locations of rural dwellers. Besides, socio-cultural practices of various forms are notable among individuals of these communities. The population of Alayi according to the 2006 population census, stood at 16,381. Therefore the total population of these enclaves (Amaoku, Amakwu, Isiama, Umunyere and Amaigwu) is 3,273.

### **Sample and Sampling Procedure**

Taro Yamane's formula was adopted to determine the sample size at 356, from the total population of these enclaves (Amaoku, Amakwu, Isiama, Umunyere and Amaigwu) which stood at 3,273. The communities that constituted the sample were drawn through proportional stratified sampling technique, while the respondents (married men and women) were purposively selected out of the two (2) major clans (Akolifu and Amankalu) that made up Alayi community, five (5) autonomous communities constituted the sample. The numbers of autonomous communities in the two (2) clans were stratified using their locations. It was observed

that the population was not equal and as such, the sample was drawn according to the number in the population. This was necessary in order to obtain an adequate representative sample of married men and women in the various autonomous communities drawn for this study.

**Instrument of Data Collection**

Data was collected with a structured administered questionnaire and focus group discussion. Two major research instruments used to derive both quantitative and qualitative data for the study. These are questionnaire and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Questionnaire was one of the instruments of data collection. The purpose of the survey investigated respondents’ socio-cultural practices prevalent in making decisions associated to fertility among rural people in the study area. The items in the questionnaire were measured using Likert scale comprising 4 (four) sections with 20 items. The sections in the questionnaire covered: Socio demographic variables of respondents, Male child preference and fertility behaviour, women marginalization and fertility behaviour, Adoption of large family size and fertility behaviour. Hence, three hundred and fifty-six (356) copies of questionnaire were administered on 356 households (married male or female alone) as they comprise population for the study.

Also, FGD was the second instrument of data collection. The reason for adopting FGDs as a method of data collection for this study is that it

establishes rapport with the subjects and provides a cooperative atmosphere in which truthful information can be obtained. FGDs were conducted in 4 communities purposively selected.

**Method of data analysis**

The retrieved copies of questionnaire were subjected to numerical strength using likert scale rating. Descriptive analysis was used to interpret data on the socio demographic characteristics of respondents. Frequencies were performed to know how many people answered each question, while descriptive tool comprising tables, percentages were used to present the result. The chi-square analysis was used to test the hypotheses raised for the study. Qualitative data (FGDs) on the other hand was transcribed and sorted, and the contents properly analyzed.

**DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**Data presentation**

Out of 356 questionnaires, 327 were duly completed, while 29 were invalid. Table 4.1 shows details of socio demographic data of the respondents. 60.5% and 39.5% of the 327 were males and females respectively. About 19.3% of the respondents were 18-22 years, 15.9% were 23-27 years, 25.4% were 28-32 years, and 18.0% were 33-37 years, while 21.4% were above 38 years of age. The respondents were predominantly Christians at 79.8%, 20.2% were traditional worshippers, Atheist or Muslims.

**Table 1: Personal characteristics of the respondents (n=327)**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	198	60.5
Female	129	39.5
Total	327	100.00
<b>Age (years)</b>		
18-22	63	19.3
23-27	52	15.9
28-32	83	25.4
33-37	59	18.0
Above 38	70	21.4
Total	327	100.00
<b>Religion</b>		
Christianity	261	79.8
African Traditional Religion	48	14.7
Others	18	5.5
Total	327	100.00
<b>Educational level</b>		
No formal education	184	56.2
Primary education	79	24.1
Secondary education	43	13.1

Tertiary education	21	6.4
Total	327	100.00
<b>Occupation</b>		
Farmer	193	59.0
Trader	73	22.3
Craft man	22	6.7
Civil servants	39	11.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2019.

The data in Table 1 also show a high level of illiteracy (80.3%) among respondents this could be the reason for high value for tradition and custom, as well as failure of birth control measure among respondents in the study area. Finally, respondents are basically farmers (59.0%), 22.3% being traders, 6.7% being craft men, while only about 11.9% of the respondents were civil servant (which is relatively small), and may not depend on additional manpower

(children) for greater output as compared to farmers, trader and craft men.

**Test of hypotheses**

**Hypotheses one:**

Ho: Male child preference does not significantly influence fertility behaviour of Alayi people.

Hi: Male child preferences significantly influence fertility behaviour of Alayi people.

**Table 2: Chi-square (X<sup>2</sup>) analysis of the relationship between male child preference and fertility behaviour in the study area**

Items	Prominence of variables		
	Agreed	Disagreed	Total
6	288(260)	39(67)	327
7	261(260)	66(67)	327
8	293(260)	34(67)	327
9	217(260)	110(67)	327
10	240(260)	87(67)	327
<b>Total</b>	<b>1299</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>1635</b>

$X^2=81.02; df=4$

Since the calculated  $x^2$  (81.02) is greater than the critical value of 9.49 at 0.05 level of significance with 4 degree of freedom, it implies that male child preference significantly influences the fertility behaviour of Alayi people. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The results affirm that cultural attitudes towards reproduction (male child preference) significantly increase the craving

to have more children, thereby leading to large family size in the study area.

**Hypotheses two:**

Ho: Women marginalization does not significantly influence fertility behaviour of Alayi people.

Hi: Women marginalization significantly influences fertility behaviour of Alayi people.

**Table 3: Chi-square (X<sup>2</sup>) analysis of the relationship between women marginalization and fertility behaviour in the study area**

Items	Prominence of variables		
	Agreed	Disagreed	Total
11	171(151)	156(176)	327
12	136(151)	191(176)	327
13	122(151)	205(176)	327
14	143(151)	184(176)	327
15	184(151)	143(176)	327
<b>Total</b>	<b>756</b>	<b>879</b>	<b>1635</b>

$X^2=32.48; df=4$

Since the calculated  $x^2$  (32.48) is greater than the critical value of 9.49 at 0.05 level of significance with 4 degree of freedom, it implies that women marginalization significantly influence the

fertility behaviour of Alayi people. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The results affirm that gender system that gives women little autonomous (women marginalization) significantly



affects women’s right to reproductive decision (fertility behaviour), thereby giving men the absolute power to make decisions on reproduction matters in the family. Given that rural men are pro-natal, hence, they maintain large number of children.

**Hypotheses three:**

Ho: Adoption of large family size does not significantly influence fertility behaviour of Alayi people.

Hi: Adoption of large family size significantly influences fertility behaviour of Alayi people.

**Table 4: Chi-square(X<sup>2</sup>) analysis of the relationship between adoption of large family size and fertility behaviour in the study area**

Items	Prominence of variables		
	Agreed	Disagreed	Total
16	192(189)	135(138)	327
17	201(189)	126(138)	327
18	169(189)	158(138)	327
19	211(189)	116(138)	327
20	173(189)	154(138)	327
<b>Total</b>	<b>946</b>	<b>689</b>	<b>1635</b>

$X^2=16.01, df=4$

Since the calculated  $x^2$  (16.01) is greater than the critical value of 9.49 at 0.05 level of significance with 4 degree of freedom, it implies that adoption of large family size significantly influences the behaviour of Alayi people. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The results affirm that the adoption of large family size influences fertility behaviour of Alayi people.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The first hypothesis was tested using chi-square analysis and the result of this analysis was significant in the components of male child preference. This finding is in line with a study by Adhikari (2010) that culture and traditional belief and practice are significantly related to decisions on fertility or child bearing. Also, findings as reported in a study by Etukudo (2002) shows that culturally, because of the help children render to their parents and families, there is high value for children (especially male children) among the rural people. In addition, couples with large number of male children were given preference and respected. The Alayi people also believed that children do not only stand as inheritance to their descendants but will remedy their parent economic and social needs at old age.

The result of the second hypothesis was significant in the components of gender system that gives women little autonomous in reproductive decision. The result showed that women marginalization significantly affects women’s right to reproductive decision, thereby giving men the absolute power to make decision on reproduction matters in the family. Findings in the study by Smith (2009) showed no evidence that gender stratification affects couple’s reproductive agreement about stopping procreation, the result rather suggests that men in highly gender stratified

societies usually influence their wives use of contraceptives. The patriarchical family structure have relegated female to the background of having no say on decision that affects them. Hence, men have been empowered to exercise absolute dominance in almost every matter affecting the family even when women are concerned. This tally with the result of the finding in the study by Caldwell (2001); Kritz and Makinwa – Adebuyo, (2001) that man and his lineages make decisions on reproduction and family size.

The result of the third hypothesis was significant in the component of large family size. Result of the tested hypothesis showed that adoption of large family size significantly influences the fertility behaviour of Alayi people. Thus, kinship ties in reproductive decision significantly affects a couples right to decide the numbers of children they are to have (SSRHRN, 2001).

Findings in a study by Smith (2009), further supports this finding in that corporate kin group particularly unilineal ones, generate strong motives for high fertility. And in societies where there is strong emphasis on the male line of descent, barrenness in women or even the failure to produce a son may lead to repudiation of a wife. Parents look forward to having large family size because society believed that a large family enhances a man’s prestige, through it, his name became known to many people, who accordingly respects and listens to him. It is also considered that a man with many children could obtain justice. He would be feared, so that people would not take his wealth or other property away by force.

**Result of focus group discussion (FGDS)**

The summary (as shown in Table 5) of the FGD as it presents investigation on the socio-cultural

practices and behaviour that are considered when making decisions concerning fertility in the study area. The results of the FGDs generally confirm the

result of the hypotheses tested and this shows a strong relationship among the various variables raised and tested.

**Table 5: Report of FGDs on socio cultural practices and fertility behavior**

Socio-cultural practices	FGD1	FGD2	FGD3	FGD4
Male child preference	++	+	++	++
Children will preserve the family lineage	+	++	++	++
Giving women autonomy in the family	-	+	++	-
Women taking part in fertility decision	+	-	+	+
Relatives taking part in family decision	++	++	+	+

Source: Field survey, 2019 (Key: ++ where the opinion was strongly emphasized, + where the opinion was lightly expressed; Where the opinion was not expressed).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Trend of investigations on fertility behavior determinants within the past four decades has considerably concentrated on socio-cultural factors (economic factors not excluded) that disturb the approach of individual or couples towards family size. These socio-cultural factors if understood in various context, will promote clear-cut policies as well as programmes that can foster a shift from large to small family norms in Alayi community.

It was therefore evident that fertility behaviour among Alayi people was a function of some dominant variables. The extent to which they manifested relies on some practices such as socio-cultural practices with its attendant's attitude. Thus, for proper investigation of fertility behavior of Alayi people, the extent to which these variables were at play had to be determined.

From the findings in this study, the recommendations are as follows:

- i. There should be a shift in the traditional beliefs and attitudes in which people consider many children with preferences to sons as sources of prestige and synonymous with wealth.
- ii. Women should be given the medium to partake in reproductive decisions, since they are greatly saddled with the responsibility of child bearing and care giving.
- iii. Couples should agree on the number of children to have without the extended family member's interference. The extended family must not partake in the decision-making process of couples, if given such an opportunity, they might end up scattering homes.
- iv. Age of entry into marriage unions should be checkmated by parents and stakeholder to prevent these women from falling victims of circumstances. The increasing entrance of women under the age of eighteen years is worrisome.

- v. Family planning programme in existence should be revived and extended to make certain that couples and other individuals should have access to effective contraceptive method at a reasonable price.
- vi. Efforts should also be made in getting the women who approve the use of contraceptive to practice and to get those who do not approve to do so and even practice.
- vii. There should be an appeal for the shift in the traditional beliefs and attitudes in which people consider many children with preferences to sons as sources of prestige and synonymous with wealth.
- viii. Women should be given the medium to partake in reproductive decisions, since they are greatly saddled with the responsibility of child bearing and care giving.
- ix. The extended family must not partake in the decision-making process of couples, if given such an opportunity, they might end up scattering homes. Couples should be allowed to agree on the number of children to have without extended family members' interference.

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