

View From Egypt Religious and Cultural Background and its Impact on the Reaction to Male Infertility in the Arab Countries

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Introduction

Traditionally in the Arab countries the male is considered the stronger and the wiser gender. Females are supposed to follow. However, females are appreciated for their role in the family; keeping it stable and taking care of its members. The wife is responsible for the social activities and to maintain strong family ties with the greater family (parents-in-law, aunts, uncles, cousins ...etc.). She is considered the Boss in her home as regards the internal affairs. The husband is considered the decision-maker in the economic and to a limited degree some external relationships. The wife shares in some of these decisions together with the husband but usually through him. Some wives are manipulative in this respect and thus maintain their power indirectly in this relationship. Husbands may in some instances appreciate this role. The wife is highly respected in her home for the duties she makes. Recently in the last 5 or 6 decades, the women started to take increasing role in the community. They are joining the work force at increasing rates. In Egypt it is estimated that women participate in about 30% of the elicited economic activities. This sums up to about 7 million females in different activities; services, trade.. etc.

Islam has appreciated the female immensely. The right to accept the husband, the right to be treated right during marriage, the right to be divorced if she is abused to any extent during the marital relationship (incl. Not accepting her quality of life with the husband), clear orders for the husband to appreciate and respect his wife, avoid abuse and to grant her divorce whenever she hate to live with him and after the families fail to get things right between them. The husband may under certain circumstances have more than one wife simultaneously. This is not without limitations as Islam does not encourage that. Rules are that the first wife accepts this marriage and only if the first wife is hopelessly sterile or is fatally sick. The most important thing is that the husband should continue to support the first wife and her/his children in a comfortable home and continues to pay the home and school expenses all through.

Male Infertility

Childlessness is usually accepted in the Arab culture as due to the wife's health problem. As per traditional teaching, the infertility specialist should ask for a semen analysis in the early couple visits. It is not uncommon for the wife, accompanied by her mother, sister or close relative or friend to come for the first visit. However, it is not uncommon that the wife mentions that the husband refuses to make any medical visits let alone tests as there is no way that he is the cause of the problem and that the wife should seek the help. He makes even interfere with any procedural interference with his wife. Of course this is more if the husband was married before and has children.

In cases of male factor infertility, the first reaction is immense shock and alarm that disrupts temporarily the life of the husband. He is hit in his very male ego. When he recovers he passes in a phase of denial. The husband cannot even discuss his problem with his family or friends, as this will make him less of a male in their eyes. He keeps it to himself and starts to be introvert. At this stage this affects his work and social life especially among friends with children. He starts to be aggressive with his wife, as he will never be looked at as the weaker partner in this relationship. He is now concerned about his image in the close and remote family members and friends and is always under threat that his wife is going to disclose his weakness although strictly preventing her from mentioning it to any soul. This is independent of culture and education and is mainly influenced by tradition, background and upbringing. Male infertility may be mixed up with impotent. This is a nightmare. This is a taboo that will never be accepted by Arab husbands. Potency is part of the male self-esteem and integrity. He starts now to be jealous of his wife suspecting that she is having extra-marital relationship or even admiring other men. Quarrels are at its peak heat now. In the Southern area (Saeed-

Upper Egypt-Aswan) this problem is intensely magnified. In these and to a less extent in other areas of Egypt the wife is usually expected to put the blame on herself for being sterile than to disclose her husband problem. If she does she is a traitor and will always be blamed. The wife has no choice in that. In some instances the husband may be so shocked that I have faced cases of fraud. The husband will ask a brother or very close friend to give his semen for analysis and give this report to the deceived wife to be presented to the doctor. Some of them will remarry blaming the wife for being sterile before accepting the fact.

These two stages (shock and denial) usually stay for varied period of time before the husband recovers. The urge for being a father usually guides the husband for acceptance especially that now male treatment options (e.g. ICSI) proved successful.

Different stands

In case of male infertility, the wife is expected to be understanding, supportive and accepting and does not imply in any way the role of the victim in this relationship. She is expecting to endure medical procedures and be helpful or else she is not loving as expected to be. However, if she does, she is appreciated overtly or silently from her husband. If the trials succeed this cooperation helps her status in the relationship which usually becomes stronger.

On the other side, if the wife is the cause of infertility, the husband's understanding varies. Some are very supportive and helpful and loving to their wives. They help soothe and ease her concerns being a lesser female. They will live through the experience and will sell all what he owns to finance the medical expenses (most couples are not covered by the insurance for infertility if they ever have one). If everything fails they accept the fact, respect the wife and accept this as God's will. Others endure for sometime but will soon be impatient. He feels that he is a victim in this relationship and soon should be a father. Now comes the role of his parents (mothers especially) and sisters. "You should remarry" "You are getting old. You should live till your children grow up" "we want to see our grandchildren before we die" . etc. All these pressures may or may not succeed. He will not divorce his wife. He may secretly or overtly remarry a younger wife. Islam grants the first and second wife to know about the situation of remarriage. The first wife may choose to keep married or ask for a divorce and usually is granted. It is not uncommon especially in the Arabian Countries for the wife to choose a younger wife for her husband if she proves infertile. This new wife would share the home with her put in semi-separate premises.

Social Pressures

The social community considers every couple to be parents. The usual introductory conversation involves children affairs; schools, sickness, sports, .etc. It is considered awkward and embarrassing for both parties if they discover that this couple is infertile. Care in conversation and a different stand now ensues for these couples. In work the wife is subjected to common talk among other wives about children problems. A conversation that she cannot share in and will feel excluded. Usually infertile couples claim that they are postponing having children till they are economically more stable. This may be true but unacceptable. Married couples are expected to have children within the first 2 years max. After this grace period infertile couples start to have problems.

Religion Stand Point

Islam urges people to seek medical advice and treatment. This includes all diseases including infertility and even contraception. If all treatment modalities prove unsuccessful this is accepted as God's Will and should be respected. In the old ages, and for economic reasons (and ego reasons as well), a man always wishes for a son and not a daughter. This makes him a better and more powerful male. If he gets a female, this is usually blamed on the wife. Sometimes they remarry to get male offspring. It has been stated in Quran that God's Will determines having male or female. Couples should accept and be content about God's Gift as it is. As mentioned, females are to be praised exactly as males.

However, in Islam the matter of ancestry is of major importance. Surrogate mothers, gamete donation, embryo donations are not allowed in Islam. A child should have well known parents. A child carries his father's name.

If a man is to remarry, he should give all his wives the same rights. Marital, companionship, treatment, economic, children privileges, separate homes...etc. Otherwise he should not remarry.